

# INTERFAITH RAINFOREST INITIATIVE

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**Editor's Note:** See additional quotes below. For press materials and background information, visit the online pressroom: <http://www.burness.com/pressrooms/oslo-interfaith-event-on-tropical-rainforests/?preview=true>; Password: Oslo

## **New Hope for World's Tropical Forests as Christian, Muslim, Jewish, Hindu, Buddhist, Daoist Leaders Join Indigenous Forest Guardians to Launch Global Effort to End Deforestation**

### ***Norway's King Harald V attends unveiling of interfaith rainforest initiative, created by global coalition to fight escalating threats to endangered forests in Africa, Southeast Asia and Latin America—vital to slowing climate change***

OSLO (19 June, 2017)—Religious and indigenous leaders from all corners of the globe launched today an unprecedented initiative they say will bring needed moral attention and spiritual commitment to bear on global efforts to end deforestation and protect the tropical rainforests—forests that are fundamental to human life, the planet's health and reducing the emissions fueling climate change. It marks the first time religious leaders from a broad spectrum of faiths will work hand-in-hand with Indigenous Peoples, the world's leading rainforest guardians, to call upon and activate billions of people of faith worldwide to stand up for rainforests. The gathering was held in the presence of His Majesty King Harald V of Norway.

Tropical rainforests in South America, sub-Saharan Africa and Asia are falling rapidly due to a range of forces, including palm oil plantations, cattle, soy and crop production, and rapacious and often illegal mining and logging operations. The losses amount to an area the size of Austria each year.

Citing the spiritual, environmental, social and economic benefits the world's tropical rainforests provide, the partners of the multi-faith initiative emphasize humanity's shared ethical and moral responsibility to protect them. They are committed to taking concrete, collective action to protect, restore and sustainably manage those forests. The world's religious and spiritual communities have long sheltered and protected forests—from the rainforest-dwelling Ashaninka in Peru and Brazil to [Buddhist monks ordaining trees in Thailand](#). Yet, the broad-scale, global mobilization of faith communities to protect the tropical forests—so essential to planetary survival—is groundbreaking.

With their capacity to store billions of tons of carbon, the preservation of tropical rainforests is widely viewed as fundamental to halting climate change. Many climate experts note that forests are the only proven approach for capturing and storing large amounts of carbon. Thus, staving off their destruction could keep carbon emissions at bay, buying time for the world to transition to a

low carbon energy future, and also playing an indispensable role in reaching global carbon neutrality in the second half of this century.

Tropical rainforests also provide food, water and income to 1.6 billion people. They contain most of the planet's land-borne biodiversity and help regulate rainfall and temperature globally, regionally and locally.

Religious and indigenous leaders from 21 countries will have discussions with forest advocates, climate scientists and human rights experts in Oslo on June 19-21 to develop goals and actions, along with milestones to mark their progress. They expect to follow up with an action plan and a global interfaith rainforest summit in 2018.

The group was convened by Norway's International Climate and Forest Initiative (NICFI), Rainforest Foundation Norway (RFN) and the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), in cooperation with the Forum on Religion and Ecology at Yale University, GreenFaith, the Parliament of the World's Religions, Religions for Peace, REIL Network and the World Council of Churches.

"A decade ago, Norway decided to make reducing tropical deforestation one of its top international priorities," said Vidar Helgesen, Minister of Climate and Environment (Norway). "In that decade—the scientific case, the economic case, and the geopolitical case for ending deforestation has only grown. However, more is needed. There is a dimension to this fight that will require a global, tectonic shift in values. It is not the realm of policy, commerce or science, but of spirit, faith and moral conviction."

Norway has invested nearly US\$3 billion so far over the past decade to support developing countries to reduce deforestation and forest degradation, and has committed to stay the course with similarly high levels of ambition through 2030.

"Tropical forests are indispensable to the future sustainability of the planet," said Achim Steiner, Administrator, UN Development Programme. "The world's religious and faith communities have a unique capacity to raise awareness and understanding of our responsibility to protect these vital ecosystems - and thus an important voice in a growing coalition of governments, companies, indigenous peoples' groups and NGOs that have committed to ending deforestation by 2030."

"Our goal—working in concert with the spiritual and indigenous leaders gathered here—is to define a shared action plan to create a popular movement for expanded political will and on-the-ground action to protect rainforests," said Bishop Emeritus Gunnar Stålsett, Honorary President of Religions for Peace. "The scope of this initiative is global. But we are also putting special focus on religious and indigenous leaders, networks and institutions in countries with the most significant tropical rainforests."

The initiative is linked to a surge of grassroots action over the last few years in which environmental, climate and indigenous rights issues are being embraced as spiritual imperatives that strike a chord with multiple faiths and traditions. Other [leaders of Evangelical Christian](#) and [Muslim organizations](#), and the [Archbishop of Canterbury](#), have stressed the shared human responsibility to protect the planet. Lending crucial leadership and indispensable momentum to these efforts was the official letter or "encyclical" issued in 2015 by Pope Francis that called on all people of the world to take swift action, [to bring, "the whole human family together to protect our common home."](#) He also noted the unbreakable link between Indigenous Peoples and the environment: "For them land is not a commodity, but rather a gift from God and

from their ancestors who rest there, a sacred space with which they need to interact if they are to maintain their identity and values."

"Tropical rainforests occupy a sacred place in many faiths, religions and spiritual traditions," said Dr. Mary Evelyn Tucker, Director, Forum on Religion and Ecology, Yale University. "Indeed, spiritual reverence for nature and all life can be found across the world's religions, including among Indigenous Peoples and other residents of the world's tropical rainforests. Given what we are hearing from religious and indigenous leaders worldwide, we believe we can create a global movement around this shared vision."

Indigenous Peoples will play a leadership role in the initiative, as their traditional wisdom has evolved in intimate interaction with rainforests. A growing body of scientific evidence has found Indigenous Peoples to be the best guardians of the forests, and confirms that granting strong land rights to Indigenous Peoples and forest communities serves as an effective, inexpensive solution to the deforestation crisis, while delivering social, economic and climate benefits.

"Forest communities around the world have put their lives on the line to care for the planet's tropical forests," said Vicky Tauli-Corpuz, UN Special Rapporteur on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples. "We are nothing without our forests. Our culture, our spirituality, our livelihoods, our incomes and our health are tied to them. In the name of our ancestors and the spirits of the forest, we will continue to protect these forests with our lives until they are safe."

Although the traditional knowledge of Indigenous Peoples is recognized in the Paris Agreement as a potent tool against climate change, these traditional forest peoples have come increasingly under siege from governments, multinational companies and other encroachers eager to chop down forests to make room for infrastructure, palm oil plantations, soy or cattle.

"We would like to direct this emerging interfaith movement to focus on the besieged indigenous communities that have protected these forests for thousands of years," said Lars Løvold, Director, Rainforest Foundation Norway. "The systematic destruction of tropical forests is often accompanied by land grabs and even outright murder. We need to secure the rights of forest peoples, and listen to their voices in national and international policy debates."

Among those attending the Oslo meeting are Argentine Catholic Bishop H.E. Monsignor Marcelo Sánchez Sorondo, Chancellor, Pontifical Academy of Sciences and Pontifical Academy of Social Sciences; Sir Rabbi David Rosen, International Director of Interreligious Affairs at the American Jewish Committee and Director of the Heilbrunn Institute for International Interreligious Understanding; Dr. Din Syamsuddin, Chairman, Center for Dialogue and Cooperation Among Civilizations and Professor of Islamic Political Thought at National Islamic University, Jakarta; Buddhist Abbot Phra Paisal Vongvoravisit, Co-Founder, Sekiya Dhamma; Hindu, Dr. Nanditha Krishna, Founder of The C. P. Ramaswami Aiyar Foundation; Lutheran Bishop Emeritus Gunnar Stålsett, Honorary President, Religions for Peace in Norway; and the Right Reverend Bishop Pierre W. Whalon, Bishop-In-Charge, Convocation of Episcopal Churches in Europe.

Indigenous leaders include Abdon Nababan, Vice Chairperson of the National Council at Indonesia's Aliansi Masyarakat Adat Nusantara/Indigenous Peoples Alliance of the Archipelago (AMAN); Sônia Guajajara, the National Coordinator for the Articulation of Indigenous Peoples of Brazil (AIPB); Julio César López Jamioy, the General Coordinator of La Organización Nacional de los Pueblos Indígenas de la Amazonía Colombiana (OPIAC) in Colombia; Jorge Perez, President, Organización Regional de los Pueblos Indígenas del Oriente (ORPIO) in Peru; and

Joseph Itongwa Mbuti, DRC, an Executive Committee Member of the Indigenous Peoples of Africa Coordinating Committee (IPACC).

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### **About Norway's International Climate and Forest Initiative (NICFI)**

Since its launch in 2007, the Government of Norway's International Climate and Forest Initiative (NICFI) has cooperated with international partners, governments in forest and donor countries and a broad range of non-governmental organizations to reduce tropical deforestation and forest degradation.

### **About Rainforest Foundation Norway**

Rainforest Foundation Norway (RFN) is one of the world's leading organizations in the field of rights-based rainforest protection. We support Indigenous Peoples and traditional populations in the three main rainforest regions of the world: the Amazon, the Congo basin and Southeast Asia. We work to counter drivers of deforestation, influence political, legal and economic framework conditions for rainforest management, and support rights-based sustainable forest management by forest-dependent local communities.

### **About the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP)**

UNDP works in nearly 170 countries and territories, helping to achieve the eradication of poverty, and the reduction of inequalities and exclusion. UNDP focuses on helping countries build and share solutions in three main areas: Sustainable development; democratic governance and peacebuilding; and climate and disaster resilience. In all its activities, UNDP encourages the protection of human rights and the empowerment of women, minorities and the poorest and most vulnerable.

### **ADDITIONAL QUOTES**

"The world's rainforests are a stunning example of the life-sustaining beauty of the planet; they are spectacular, vital to life, and at grave risk. This meeting represents a tremendously important first step forward for faith communities, who must join First Peoples and commit to rainforests' health and restoration."—**Rev. Fletcher Harper, Executive Director, GreenFaith**

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"There is no more devastating picture of what life on Earth faces through the degradation of climate change than what has already been committed upon the sacred, natural world in the rainforests. We believe that a great global shift in these life-ending behaviors can only be achieved through the strongest possible cooperation among all the global communities.

The Parliament of the World's Religions operates by a principle of: 'What we do to the Earth, we do to ourselves.' We are here for this initiative to do what is best, what is right and what is essential, with the treasured teachings on care for creation and all of our siblings on Earth that are found in the world's religious, spiritual and ethical traditions, especially including indigenous traditions, whose special connection to rain forests is so important.

May the cooperation of our moral leaders and faith-based institutions championing this unprecedented effort, joined by the power of the grassroots interfaith activism help us achieve our Sustainable Development Goals and to protect a livable, prosperous planet for all."— **Rev. Dr. Larry Greenfield, Executive Director of the Parliament of the World's Religions**

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"The world's religions, each in its own unique way, ground a moral call to action to protect tropical rainforests. Through multi-religious partnership, the wisdom of each religious tradition can be a resource to help us to cultivate the values and virtues essential for harmonious interactions with each other and our common home, earth."—**Dr. William F. Vendley, Secretary General, Religions for Peace**

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"When the Holy One Blessed be He created the first human, He took him around all the trees of the Garden of Eden and said to him:

See my works, how lovely and praiseworthy they are and everything I have created is for your benefit. Take heed that you do not despoil and destroy my world, for if you despoil it, there is none to fix it after you" (Ecclesiastes Rabbah 7:1)

This ancient rabbinic homily focuses on the trees of the Garden of Eden and thus identifies the forests as the critical constituent and sustainer of Creation.

Above all however, it highlights our human responsibility for our eco-system. To fail to ensure the health and strength of the forests is not only to imperil humanity's future; it is to fail the Divine charge to humanity to protect the Garden of our world (Genesis 1:15)"—**Rabbi David Rosen KSG CBE, International Director of Interreligious Affairs, American Jewish Committee**

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"Islam teaches the principle of unity of existence that implies a triangle of harmony among God, Man and Nature. Nature is sacred; with its own soul. Man and Nature were created in analogical balance. Man must keep that balance through spiritualistic partnership with Nature. Conserving rain forest is indeed a part of keeping that balance for the wellbeing of both Nature and Mankind."—

**Professor Din Syamsuddin, Chairman of Advisory Council of Indonesian Ulama Council and Chairman, Center for Dialogue and Cooperation Among Civilizations**

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"The Norwegian Government is taking a bold step with the Interfaith Rainforest Initiative, bringing together a variety of religious leaders and environmental specialists and activists from across the spectrum. The Anglican Communion, 92 million faithful present in over 166 countries, will, I expect, be heartened and inspired to greater efforts together on behalf of 'this fragile earth, our

island home.”—**The Right Reverend Pierre Whalon, Bishop in charge, Convocation of Episcopal Churches in Europe**

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“Increasingly, the climate issue unites science and religion. No other global challenge has so broadly brought together religious leaders and faith communities on a shared platform for common action. But more can and must be done. Saving the rainforest as a life sustaining lung for the environment and protecting it as habitat for millions is a moral imperative! The tree of life is a powerful religious symbol with renewed significance even as a political message in the 21st century.”—**Bishop Emeritus Gunnar Stålsett, Honorary President of Religions for Peace**