

Speech by Dr Kusum Vyas of the Living Planet Foundation on Monday 2 Nov, 2009:

I have seen and I have experienced the tragedy of environmental degradation and its impact on the livelihood of Kenyans.

Parts of Nairobi, which once was a place of indescribable beauty, were in decay. The streets were stagnant puddles of reeking garbage & swarming with flies.

I saw the poor people in the slums walking miles in search of clean water. What they found was usually not very clean. The firewood to cook their meager meals came from forests, including those in Nairobi's National Park.

An inspiration to help came to me from other prominent environmentalists who were risking their lives to save the environment. I was also inspired by my own Hindu faith which perceives life not only in human beings, but also in plants, birds, and animals. This vision of oneness of life gives me a worshipful attitude towards the environment.

I know we can't bring back the herds of elephants or the forests that we have lost forever. But together we can save what is left of our precious environment.

I am now trying to save the sea turtles, the dugongs and the sacred Ram Sethu bridge of the Gulf of Mannar Biosphere currently threatened by a proposed ship canal.

It is imperative that we act quickly or else soon the only sea turtles left will be the toy turtles - colorful but lifeless - ultimately showing us all that saving our environment amounts to saving ourselves.

I am proud to be part of the Hindu long-term plan, which has been appropriately named the Bhumi Project. This is a wonderful opportunity to share with the rest of the world the ancient wisdom and ecological vision inherent in the Hindu religion.

Bhumi is the Sanskrit word for 'Mother Earth'. Thousands of years ago, Hindu sages realized that preservation of the environment and ecological balance was necessary for the survival of humanity. They recognized that Earth has the same relationship with us as a mother with her child. The sages addressed Earth as Mother Earth and personified her as the goddess Bhumi.

Hindu scriptures are replete with spiritual and poetic references to Mother Earth where the environment is alive and teems with life, where trees, mountains and rocks become shrines and the river is respected as a source and support of physical and spiritual life.

There are many specific teachings on environmental matters contained in the sacred writings of the Vedas, Upanishads and Vedanta. A couple of examples are:

"Do not cut trees, because they remove pollution." (Rig Veda, 6:48:17)

“Do not disturb the sky and do not pollute the atmosphere.” (Yajur Veda, 5:43)

The Bhumi Project gives us the opportunity to propagate positive actions or good Karma, based on principles of Dharma that will yield positive results in the future. Some of the highlights of our plans are:

- Development of a Hindu labeling scheme
- Promotion of a non violent (ahimsa) lifestyle
- Encourage Hindu temples to develop gardens on their land
- Development of cruelty-free dairies based on Hindu principles of animal husbandry
- Provide resources to Hindu temples on how to make celebrations and festivals environmentally friendly
- To network with current major international conservation projects – for instance, the cleaning and restoration of the River Ganges in India
- The production of an Energy Efficiency Pack for Hindu temples and households
- The development of a range of training courses for Hindu priests and devotees on best environmental practice
- To research and share stories from the Hindu tradition which relate to the environment.

I know that as I speak today, there are many Gods, all bearing different names, watching over us with compassionate eyes – with all that Divine present here; I know we can and we will make a difference.

End.