A Brief History of Baha’i Community Involvement in Environmental Issues

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Tree as Metaphor
THREE PERIODS

UPPER CANOPY
(Contemporary Period 2010 on)

TRUNK AND LOWER BRANCHES
(Middle Period 1970’s to about 2010)

ROOTS
(Early Period - Late 1800s to about 1970)

‘Core Activities’ enable Institutions, communities, individuals to increasingly engage in discourses & social action

International Institutional involvement; inspires some action at national and local levels

Examples set by lives of Central Figures & Richard St. Barbe Baker

SOIL: The Teachings -- Spiritual Principles inform Action
The Teachings

Nature = a reflection of the Divine & should be cherished, respected

3 principles of “particular Importance”

All things are interconnected and flourish according to law of reciprocity

The oneness of humanity is the fundamental spiritual and social truth shaping our age.

SOIL: The Teachings
Spiritual Principles inform Action
ROOTS:
Examples set by the Central Figures & Richard St. Barbe Baker

(Early Period – late 1800s-
Baha’u’llah – When asked what would serve Him, called for restoration of the ancient aqueduct to supply water to the people of Acre...
A place to enjoy nature.
The flower pots on the ground mark the location of the bench where Bahá'u'lláh often sat when He visited the garden. The river can be seen in the background.

The Ridvan Garden

In the Ridván Garden. Recent view of the fountain and benches in the Ridván Garden.

“There was no one … who loved trees and water and the country so much as Baha’u’llah.”

(Abdu’l-Baha quoted by Juliet Thompson)
Abdu’l-Baha relieved famine in 1918, by making available stored wheat and grain

Awarded “Knight of the British Empire”
As Guardian, Shoghi Effendi turned often to the mountains of Switzerland to regain health, energy and self-confidence.

"We cannot segregate the human heart from the environment outside us and say that once one of these is reformed everything will be improved. Man is organic with the world. His inner life moulds the environment and is itself also deeply affected by it…" (Letter written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi, 1933)
Shoghi Effendi designed the beautiful gardens in Bahji and on the slopes of Mt. Carmel...
...a standard of excellence later emulated in the terraces and gardens surrounding the Shrine of the Bab
Richard St. Barbe Baker
social ecologist, formed “Men of the Trees” (1922)

- Renowned for his work with tribesmen to restore soil and reforest the land.
- ‘29 Shoghi Effendi became 1st “lifetime member”
- ‘30s launched “Save the Redwoods” campaign
- ‘45–’70 held “World Forestry Charter Gatherings,” often opening with messages from Shoghi Effendi
(Middle Period 1970+)

TRUNK AND LOWER BRANCHES:

International Institutional involvement, inspires some action at national and local levels.
Some Baha’i Institutional initiatives

- Since ’72 – participated in every major UN Conference on sustainability themes, making diverse contributions (papers, workshops, seminars, preparatory events, arts initiatives, etc.)
- Since ’72 – issued multiple statements offering Baha’i perspectives on sustainable development themes
- Since ’87 – took part in several major global interfaith initiatives on environment (NRC and ARC)
- ‘89 – established an Office of the Environment at BIC
- ‘90 published Baha’i compilation, *Conservation of the Earth’s Resources*.
- ’90 -’00 – contributed to the Earth Charter drafting process
- Since ‘93 – participated actively in annual meetings of the UN Commission on Sustainable Development
Some Baha’i Climate-related initiatives

Organized or took part in multiple workshops and seminars on “climate ethics”

Issued publications offering Baha’i views on climate change

Published a resource paper on Climate Change (‘initial considerations’)

Initiated or signed on to several Interfaith statements and declarations

Made 7 Yr. Plan of commitment to generational change (ARC)

Joined Green Pilgrimage Network (2011)

Greening of operations (BWC, Canada, US, Australia)

NSAs (Canada, US, Australia) sent letters to community encouraging integration of climate theme; some took part in various interfaith-related initiatives on climate ethics
Formation of Alliance on Religion and Conservation 1995

World religions pledge concrete action on climate change 2009
'97 Rio+5 Earth Charter Drafting Initiative

'02 WSSD Exhibit – Ubuntu Village

'02 A few of many Delegates and Volunteers WSSD

'11 Canadian NSA testimony at Interfaith Climate Ethics Meeting
• Annual conferences
• Newsletter
• Representation and networking at high-level meetings
• Assisting BIC with experts for delegations and contributing to discourses

www.iefworld.org
Core Activities build capacity of institutions, communities, & individuals to engage in discourses & social action
On Engaging in the Climate Issue…

“The destabilization of the global climate system is in large measure a moral challenge, requiring humanity to develop a greater sense of stewardship and responsibility for the environment, as well as a greater awareness of the interdependence and oneness of all the earth's inhabitants…”

“As you continue your efforts to fulfill the goals of the Five Year Plan, we encourage you to study and reflect on the Bahá'í teachings on the environment and to incorporate greater awareness of the environment in your community life and core activities…”

“Far from distracting from the processes of growth underway in our community, attention to environmental practices that respect the earth and foster the oneness of its inhabitants will serve to support and sustain these processes.”

(Letter NSA US to American Baha’i Community 2010)
“Environmental Stewards: Champions of Justice!”
Workshops and Retreats - USA
Ridvan 1989 Message

“...assisting in endeavours to conserve the environment in ways which blend with the rhythm of life of our community must assume more importance in Bahá'í activities.” (UHJ, Ridvan 1989)

Ridvan 2010 Message

“At the level of the cluster, involvement in public discourse can range from an act as simple as introducing Bahá’í ideas into everyday conversation to more formal activities such as the preparation of articles and attendance at gatherings, dedicated to themes of social concern—climate change and the environment, governance and human rights, to mention a few.”
A Short History of the Involvement of the Baha'i Community on Environmental Issues

Major Conclusions:  

1. The Baha’i Sacred Scriptures provide the foundation, inspiration and guidance to address contemporary environmental issues.

2. Before 1970: Environmental appreciation and concern was reflected in lives of the Central Figures and Richard St. Barbe Baker, “Man of the Trees”.

3. Since 1970: The Baha'i International Community’s engagement in key international environmental discourses often serves as a stimulus for national, local and individual actions.

4. 2010 on: As the ‘core activities’ build capacity and community, Baha’is increasingly reflect environmental awareness, and engage with others in relevant discourses and social action.