



## **Faith based Conservation Values Education.**

Our Conservation Values Education has been inspired by the vision of those who founded UNAFAS, of ‘Biosynergy<sup>1</sup>’ and the results of 8 years of work with TGF’s Wildlife Protector’s Fund<sup>2</sup> - the latter using an action research model with school, community, and church groups developing, delivering, testing and revising grass roots conservation education in Cameroon. The resulting programmes have been popular with a wide range of youth, educators and parents, and we now have a cadre of Cameroonian educators who teach, ‘train trainers’, and work with ministry and church school educators. We engage our program participants with facilitated storytelling that draws on traditional Cameroonian folktales, cultural myths (totems, taboos) and value systems<sup>3, 4</sup>, as well as with stories imported from other countries and cultures<sup>5</sup>.

The approach of CVP, that invites interactive, emotional, and spiritual involvement with the natural world has resulted increasingly, in forums discussing the relationship between Conservation and Faith. Those involved feel that learning to conserve all God’s creation – to understand and appreciate the natural environment<sup>6</sup> and to live in harmony with it<sup>7,8</sup> – are vital aspects of Christian education. Numerous separate developments have occurred, as responses to these discussions. We have held follow-up seminars and working sessions on faith-based conservation values in a variety of religious settings. Representatives of one Methodist congregation have organised a series of eight regular, structured seminars with CVP, in order to help them construct conservation values ‘curriculum’ for their Sunday school. One of our teachers worked for three years with a seminary and numerous Catholic priests in order to bring conservation values education to their local churches. One seminary student researched and wrote his thesis on “Conservation and the Church”. There have been many more innovative projects: some focus on theological issues while others emphasize environmental values; some excel at engaging children and school communities but have not involved local leaders or parents; some work with church authorities and parish leaders primarily. A crucial aim of all these efforts is to facilitate involvement through each group’s prevailing interest: for some the focus is the facilitation of positive behaviours in youth; for others, examination of harmonious religious doctrine overrides. Ultimately all these innovations lead to an ethos of deep and abiding care for the Creation and the natural world.



A worldview that has come to predominate in many contemporary northern, industrialised societies is that nature is a commodity to be exploited. The materialist and utilitarian emphasis is common amongst many factions of Judaism and Christianity in America, often accompanied by a belief that the natural world is corrupting, and will come to an end on Judgement Day – thereby negating any need to maintain nature in a sustainable state. Such value systems tend to interpret ‘dominion’ of humans over creation as a righteous unilateral power.

In contrast, is the ethic of faithful stewardship:

‘In the days in which the old testament was written, a king was said to have dominion over his people, but that meant his first responsibility was to take care of the poor, the elderly, the orphans, and all those who didn’t get a fair chance at life. That was the meaning of dominion. As parents, you have dominion over your children. You have the power of life and death over them, especially when they are young, but you’d never think of killing them. Dominion does not mean domination. Dominion does not include killing. It involves caring for life and especially caring for life that is struggling in some way. Would God create something and then invite us to destroy it (something he repeatedly described as good, and very good)? Our role is that of a caretaker. We rule creation as God rules, out of a sense of love and compassion<sup>9</sup>.’

### ***Faith-based Conservation Values in a Cameroon Context.***

Attitudes and values shaping people’s concepts of nature in Cameroon are still strongly influenced by indigenous belief systems, often in contradiction to imported beliefs of the global religions. In the context of the contrasting interpretations of dominion presented above, it is important to recognize that traditional values (within Cameroon’s >250 distinct ethnic groups) overwhelmingly promote human lifestyles based on harmony and co-existence, not conflict, with nature or anything else. Because indigenous beliefs tend to promote a biosynergistic partnership between human communities and the rest of nature, rather than human rule over nature, the prevailing rural community values in particular are inclined towards stewardship, rather than absolute material exploitation.



Our faith-based partners have asked us to help them clarify in their minds the theological and religious values underlying the more positive view of nature they wish to present to their young parishioners. In essence, they are seeking ways to align their religious doctrine and education with the instinctive indigenous propensity towards harmonious synergy within the natural world. In addition they are looking for relevant teaching and learning activities, information, materials and techniques that will enable them to share the tenets of Christian stewardship of nature within their Sunday schools and across various religious and local communities.

#### References

1. <http://biosynergy.org/docs/encyclopedia-article.pdf>
2. A programme of The Gorilla Foundation [www.koko.org](http://www.koko.org) and The Biosynergy Institute [www.biosynergy.org](http://www.biosynergy.org)
3. <http://www.unafas.org.uk/pages/cvp%20education.htm>
4. <http://www.unafas.org.uk/files/bechati%20perceptions%20of%20wildlife.pdf>
5. <http://bushmeat.net/pdf/csc/change-people-save-gorillas.pdf>
6. <http://www.koko.org/help/africa-update.php?date=2003-11-30#top>
7. <http://bushmeat.net/pdf/tortoisemonkeymen.pdf>
8. Anthony L. Rose, Ph.D. Biosynergy: A personal essay. Pp. 123-129, Encyclopedia of Human-Animal Relationships (M. Bekoff, Ed), Greenwood Press, London, 2007
9. James Pat Williams, Rev. Why should we care for our environment? – A theological reflection, Ants and Acacias – Genesis 1. [www.gbgm-umc.org](http://www.gbgm-umc.org) accessed 14 sept. 2007.