

# Ecological Stewardship as Applied Spirituality: A Bahá'í Perspective

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## *Abstract*

Community-based environmental stewardship is the name given to the emerging practice of habitat restoration, land conservation, resource management, and park and community garden creation. This essay explores the significance and the spiritual dimensions of environmental stewardship, and its relationship to the Bahá'í teachings.

## *Résumé*

L'intendance environnementale axée sur la collectivité est le terme utilisé pour décrire la pratique émergente de la restauration des habitats, de la conservation des terres, de la gestion des ressources et de la création de parcs et de jardins communautaires. Cet essai explore l'importance et les dimensions spirituelles de l'intendance environnementale et leur rapport avec les écrits bahá'ís.

## *Resumen*

La administración ambiental con base en la comunidad es el nombre dado a la práctica que emerge de la restauración del hábitat, conservación de la tierra, gerencia de recurso, y creación de parques y jardines en la comunidad. Este ensayo explora el significado y las dimensiones espirituales de la administración ambiental y su relación a las enseñanzas de la Fe Bahá'í.

## INTRODUCTION

Community-based environmental stewardship is an emerging practice with many facets, including habitat restoration, land conservation, and

resource management, as well as park and community garden creation. An evolutionary outgrowth of the environmental movement born in the late sixties, the ecological stewardship movement has been moving away from a model that focuses primarily on the regulation of human actions and the protection of nature toward a collaborative and incentives-based model, driven by a conscious exploration of the active and positive roles people can play in renewing and caring for the environment. The current perspective has its roots in the “land ethic,” succinctly expounded by the father of the land conservation movement, Aldo Leopold, over fifty years ago in *A Sand County Almanac*, a work which sets forth the basic principles of an ethical relationship between humans and nature. Those principles can be summarized in two sentences: “A thing is right when it tends to preserve the integrity, stability, and beauty of the biotic community. It is wrong when it tends otherwise” (224–25). This statement provides a measure for the value of human intervention in the care and management of natural resources.<sup>1</sup>

While the activities that comprise community-based environmental stewardship take place on both large and small scale and in many types of environments, they share the feature of restoring the bonds between people and their life-places, and suggest a way of manifesting at home our resurgent impulse to care for the planet. They also engender a spiritual process by their tendency to unify people, promote reciprocity, and renew self and society.

In this paper I will explore the significance of these invisible connections and the spiritual dimensions of ecological stewardship with reference to the Bahá'í teachings and how they relate to environmental stewardship and its underlying principles. Throughout the United States, and especially in the San Francisco Bay Area, there are numerous examples of cooperative citizen group activities that reflect facets of environmental stewardship: the restoration of urban creeks and wetlands by volunteers; the saving of special places through local action and conservancies; the construction of community gardens, “edible” schoolyards, and park projects; and the monitoring of wildlife and plants in streams by both adults and children within their neighborhoods. Each of these actions offers a

kind of sacramental relationship to nature, a means for grounding spirituality and making real an experience of God that is at once universal and tangible—a vehicle for spiritual encounter, rather than worship.

#### DISSOCIATION FROM EARTH AS A GLOBAL MALADY

The rapid urbanization of the landscapes we inhabit has left many of us feeling unbalanced, uneasy, and increasingly antisocial, not knowing how to treat one another humanely. Our mobility and abstraction from the sources of our sustenance—the bounty and beauty of the earth—have contributed to dysfunctional relationships on many levels, beginning with ecosystems we have degraded and reverberating through human personal and social relationships, including family and governmental breakdown and dysfunctional organizations at every level of society. The proceedings of the United Nations Earth Summit, which took place in Johannesburg, South Africa, in August 2002 attest to the scope of our global predicament.<sup>2</sup> They also underscore the extent of denial about the crisis, as so little progress toward a more environmentally sustainable future has been made since the earlier conference in Rio de Janeiro in 1992. The failure of the industrialized nations to recognize and successfully grapple with these problems collectively expresses the enormity of our exile from nature and our obliviousness to the serious consequences of inaction.

In the words of businessman-economist Paul Hawken (9), the failure of global leadership, the evident absence of will to address the need for sustainability and environmental quality, and the neglect of natural capital have led the family of nations into a deeper extremity in our tenancy on the planet. This predicament is demonstrated by the increasing pace of global warming and pollution and the catastrophic loss of habitats and biological diversity worldwide. Trends show that twenty-five percent of all species will be under threat of extinction within the next quarter-century—a rate not seen since the end of the era of dinosaurs (Kellert 35–36). Human beings today are a dissociated people, living in an increasingly wounded landscape.

As difficult as it may seem, we are called upon to first see and acknowledge what we have collectively wrought, then to mourn the losses of our natural heritage, and finally to take remedial—and by implication, redemptive—action.

#### THE IMPERATIVE OF RESTORATION

The way out of this global predicament is by going through it: by clearing up our misunderstandings and taking responsibility in a consultative manner, something that requires not only collective action, but also new habits of the heart. In essence, it means shifting from a material to a spiritual focus on life. It is clear that our environmental problems are expressions of a fundamentally spiritual, rather than physical, crisis. They are rooted in the loss of the societal regard for nature as sacred, for nature as healer and embodiment of the Divine. As expressed in the Statement on Nature, the Bahá'í teachings speak to this perspective: “[T]he major threats to our world environment . . . are manifestations of a world-encompassing sickness of the human spirit, a sickness that is marked by an overemphasis on material things and a self-centeredness that inhibits our ability to work together as a global community” (Bahá'í International Community, point 6).

Traditional societies tended to regard humans as stewards of the Creation, just as ecologically oriented people are once again encouraging humanity to be wise stewards of planetary resources. Whether such traditional societies are Native American, preliterate tribal peoples from New Guinea, aboriginals in Australia, African pygmies or Masai, or Sami from northern Scandinavia, the common understanding among them was that their people should be caretakers of their home environment, as they regarded it to be alive with spirit and the power of the Creator. The myths, stories, and songs of these animistic peoples reflected a reverence or awe regarding nature, imbuing it with a sacred power that had to be acknowledged and propitiated, so that humans could live in balance with nature and ensure the promise of food and continued fertility of the earth (Eisenberg 3–66).

Ancient societies almost universally saw themselves in their mythology not as the center of the universe but simply a part of a greater cosmology. This is particularly evident in the native American worldview, which often cast the humans or “two-leggeds” as embedded in a family of other plant and animal peoples, yet having a special role of caring for the creation through prayer and ceremony, using fire as a land management practice, and practicing a kind of wild horticulture through selectively culling roots and shoots to encourage the growth of desirable plants.<sup>3</sup>

Likewise, as in the Judeo-Christian tradition, which held that God revealed two books, nature and scripture,<sup>4</sup> many traditional peoples, particularly native Americans, regarded nature as a sacred “text” of laws, values, and lessons for living. This divine book of nature was to be “read” by cultivating humility, by listening, observing, and responding affirmatively to nature’s signs, as well as by communing with the divine forces through prayer and sacrifice—via fasting, ceremony, and cleansing practices, such as the sweat lodge. Nature or earth in its entirety is thus imbued with spirit, knowledge, and sacredness.<sup>5</sup>

The Bahá’í Faith offers an analogous perspective, with many passages in the Bahá’í Sacred Writings recognizing the sanctity of nature as an embodiment of the attributes of God. For example, Bahá’u’lláh writes that “[u]pon the inmost reality of each and every created thing He hath shed the light of one of His names, and made it a recipient of the glory of one of His attributes” (*Gleanings* 65). In another seminal passage, He says that

Nature in its essence is the embodiment of My Name, the Maker, the Creator. Its manifestations are diversified by varying causes, and in this diversity there are signs for men of discernment. Nature is God’s Will and is its expression in and through the contingent world. It is a dispensation of Providence ordained by the Ordainer, the All-Wise. . . . It is endowed with a power whose reality men of learning fail to grasp. (*Tablets of Bahá’u’lláh* 142)

Over the past twenty years, this outlook of reading and caring for nature has reemerged, albeit in a more self-conscious and more secular

form, in our own culture as the art and science of ecological stewardship. It represents a departure from the long-held worldview that our species is in dominion over the earth, and replaces it with one that regards us as partners with nature—not as the covetous, but rather as the conscious species. This approach calls on us to be the conscience of creation, and to take conscious responsibility not only for protecting the environment but for restoring its health— climatically, biologically, and atmospherically. The stewardship ethic represents a natural evolution of the environmental movement and of our species as a whole. Its precepts have been philosophically prefigured by Bahá'í principles, particularly the concept that the earth is a sacred Garden entrusted to humanity to retain and restore as humanity perfects its spiritual identity. 'Abdu'l-Bahá illuminates this objective:

The Lord of all mankind hath fashioned this human realm to be a Garden of Eden, an earthly paradise. If, as it must, it findeth the way to harmony and peace, to love and mutual trust, it will become a true abode of bliss, a place of manifold blessings and unending delights. Therein shall be revealed the excellence of humankind, therein shall the rays of the Sun of Truth shine forth on every hand. (*Selections* 288)

Ecological stewardship means cultivating a direct and custodial relationship with the creation, a sympathy for all creatures, a leading with the heart rather than with the intellect or appetites. It enables us to be stewards and healers, first of ourselves and then of the Earth. 'Abdu'l-Bahá speaks to this shift when He advises us that “it is not only their fellow human beings that the beloved of God must treat with mercy and compassion, rather must they show forth the utmost loving-kindness to every living creature” (*Selections* 167). This evolving attitude requires a radical degree of humility and detachment. Stewardship elicits an essential ingredient of spirituality, that of reciprocity with the creation, by honoring its gifts to us and giving back, not out of charity, but from a sense of duty. This reciprocity can take the form of responsibility for the landscapes we

live in or care about, through such projects as habitat restoration, land conservation, and community gardening.

Bahá'u'lláh calls on us to honor nature and, thus, to put His words into action. Ecological stewardship connotes renewal of our relationship with nature, which, by extension, means cultivating a physical relationship with the Divine. There is a kind of reflexivity in this intention toward renewal, since by attempting to restore the functional health of ecosystems and the health of our cities, through park and garden creation, we are engendering progress in restoring our humanity and capacity for caretaking.

The words *health* and *healing* come from the Old English word *healan*, meaning *to make whole*. The health of any organism must be considered in the context of the health of the whole, that is, its setting. Co-evolutionary science suggests that ecosystems and human cultural responses are simply alternate points in a seamless web of being.<sup>6</sup> There is no separate existence. John Muir expressed this eloquently in his famous line, “When we pick up anything in the universe, we find it connected to everything else” (32). Shoghi Effendi reflected on these same strands of infinite connections and reciprocity when he wrote, through his secretary:

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. The one acts upon the other and every abiding change in the life of man is the result of these mutual reactions. (In *Compilation of Compilations* 1:84)

#### THE SPIRIT OF STEWARDSHIP ENGENDERS A SENSE OF COMMUNITY

Those engaged in habitat restoration, land conservation, or gardening are often passionate about, and dedicated to, their craft. It is a passion honed through increasing understanding and experience. Some of those who participate more than once in these activities become fervent advocates for the recovery of natural processes close to home. And the closer to home the project, the more likely this is to happen. Changes in human values

come about far more readily through direct experience and through the senses than through rational persuasion.

*Community* and *community identity* are terms that elicit tremendous confusion, due to their many abstract connotations. These terms are particularly suggestive of the degree to which the communities in our culture have become artificial, having no clear source or evident value—online chat-room “communities,” the spectator “communities” of sports fans, the false “community” created by TV, and so on. What community-based restoration work brings is a grounded sense of community through shared action to restore a specific place, and the possibility of making the places in which we live a primary medium or organizing principle for our personal identities, alongside the usual divisions of ethnicity, career, hobbies, and so forth. I believe this is one of the most vital and real, if underutilized, arenas for community building, and one that our society craves, as an antidote to the increasing trends of isolation, uprootedness, and change that are signatures of our culture. Ecological stewardship answers a vital human need for place and a sense of belonging that is going unmet and unrealized.

The new era in the environmental movement, characterized by partnerships for habitat protection and restoration, has engendered tremendous momentum, resulting in the enhancement and restoration of hundreds of thousands of acres of wetlands, grasslands, and creeks across the United States and Canada over the past decade. Likewise, citizens increasingly care about natural or wild places in and around their cities, protecting and managing them through coalitions and watershed councils, saving them through the creation of land trusts or through public acquisition. This increased sense of care evinces a reemergence of place-centered identity—perhaps not as deeply embedded as in the culture of many aboriginal peoples, but more self-conscious through acts of environmental monitoring and stewardship.

Such actions help us reorient ourselves toward an enlarged sense of self and community, and reverse the tide of “placelessness,” that condition in which the *where* is no longer a conscious factor in people’s sense of identity, only the *who*. They also help people to put down roots, in the spirit of



caring for the place they live in and affirming a sense of belonging to it. These responses counteract the effects of mobility which afflict so many. Until recently, the majority of Americans moved once every three years, whereas the sense of community tends to take root when there is a conscious commitment to a particular place and its rhythms.

Let us now examine the following templates for ecological stewardship—habitat restoration and enhancement, land conservation and resource management, and urban gardening—and how they offer contexts for spirituality.

### THE REFLEXIVITY OF RESTORATION

Restoring streams, wetlands, grasslands, or woodlands is an emerging art and science that owes much of its power and momentum to the effect it has on people's spirit. The planting of riparian trees, the restoring of native grasses to a meadow, the "daylighting" (resurfacing) of a creek in an urban area not only engender a sense of responsibility for the well-being of nature. Such activities frequently have a reciprocal effect on the person engaged in them, leaving them nourished and restored. For some, it represents a kind of redemption. As expressed by one of the leading thinkers in the field, William Jordan, ecological restoration is a metaphorical reentry into the Garden of Eden. Such work imparts a revitalizing sense of kinship with nature, and an understanding that people can be agents of environmental renewal, rather than consumers or despoilers. It allows people to relinquish the guilt and grief that come with an awareness of humanity's destruction of nature.

This reflexive aspect of ecological restoration also correlates with the enlargement and grounding of community values and identity. The more the term *ecological restoration* comes into common usage, and as restoration projects proliferate around the globe, professionals and activists alike are increasingly coming to the realization that something far greater than recovery of habitat is taking place: the rekindling of a immediate relationship between humans and their surrounding habitats. Such relationships have tended to provide the invisible foundations for the diversity of

community mores that we call culture. If we are truly seeking an abundant future and fulfilling human lives, then a natural restoration of our heritage as a human species is integral to this goal.

Herein lies the real meaning of redemption as applied to earth stewardship. The *Oxford American Dictionary* defines it as: “to recover something by payment or by doing something.” The largest part of human social history has been organized around a worldview that makes human satisfaction inseparable from the health and abundance of the immediate landscape. For example, California’s aboriginal peoples—among the most culturally diverse populations the world knew at the time of contact—seem to have maintained a population just below the carrying capacity of their terrain for thousands of years, surely one of the most elegant achievements of our species. As over ninety percent of humanity’s time on the planet has been organized around such traditional worldviews, the dissociation of human settlements from nature, especially over the past thousand years in the West, is a fraction of our evolutionary residence on the planet. As so much of the evolution of *Homo sapiens* has been spent in communion with the local landscape, we may well be genetically imprinted to recover that intimacy. Perhaps recovering it offers a prerequisite for a renewed fullness of being. In light of this, ecological restoration can also be regarded as a kind of active prayer, embodying the Bahá’í principle of “work as worship,” and the experience of the divine attributes.

#### PARTNERSHIPS AS PATHS TO STEWARDSHIP

Over the past decade, the process of land conservation and restoration has been guided by the development and application of partnerships among various arrangements of organizations, agencies, and private parties. This has been necessary, since large-scale stewardship efforts involve many roles and landowners (both public and private); the regulatory approval of agencies; funding from foundations and from state and federal grants; the approval and participation of private landowners; and the technical assistance of land trusts, resource conservation districts, universities, and environmental nonprofits, not to mention the sweat

equity of neighbors, students, and other volunteers. In short, land tenure and stewardship involve many stakeholders, whose interests must be heard and reconciled to accomplish projects or agreements regarding particular land.

By the same token, the watershed and resource management endeavors are interdisciplinary. They require an inclusive, synthesizing, and collaborative orientation that calls for a spectrum of community participation and a knitting together of professional expertise among hydrologists, lawyers, planners, engineers, biologists, and geologists. Sharing views and funding sources in the course of developing public-private partnerships is both practical and essential. They also involve the reconciliation of competing positions or the resolution of conflicts over future uses. The consultative and conflict-resolution tools that are required to create and maintain the varied partnerships for a stable land stewardship model are similar to the principles of consultation that are regularly applied in the Administrative Order of the Bahá'í Faith.

Partnerships are essential ingredients in restoration. One working example of such a partnership is the San Francisco Bay Joint Venture (SFBJV). A partnership of twenty-seven public agencies, environmental organizations, the business community, local government, and landowners, it was established to provide a forum for cooperative action to protect and restore wetlands and riparian habitat throughout the San Francisco Bay Estuary. It is part of a family of thirteen habitat joint ventures around North America that have been convened to conserve and restore wetlands for birds. The SFBJV provides a collaborative framework for sharing skills, funding, and information for wetlands conservation, including how to leverage capacities and orchestrate initiatives. Using an ecosystem perspective, the SFBJV works strategically and inclusively to facilitate new relationships and match funding and technical resources for accomplishing such habitat projects as the restoration of tidal marshes.

Partnerships for stewardship represent a kind of *social* ecology that reflects the biological ecology in form and function. With both ecologies, social and biological, everyone or every species has a niche; energy is exchanged through networks of relations, and there is no hierarchy,

rather, a web of life with nodes. In this scheme, nature becomes the teacher, providing an implicit structure for appropriate action on its behalf. An excellent guide to stewardship as a sympathetic response is suggested in the following passage from 'Abdu'l-Bahá, in which He describes the mutuality of the world of being and the qualities which unite all living things:

Were one to observe with an eye that discovereth the realities of all things, it would become clear that the greatest relationship that bindeth the world of being together lieth in the range of created things themselves, and that co-operation, mutual aid and reciprocity are essential characteristics in the unified body of the world of being, inasmuch as all created things are closely related together and each is influenced by the other or deriveth benefit therefrom, either directly or indirectly. (In *Huqúqu'lláh* 23)

#### MUTUAL AID THROUGH COMMUNITY GARDENS AND OTHER COMMONS

The most tangible template for land stewardship is perhaps that of community gardening. The community gardening movement is a powerful and elegant way to build natural communities in our urban areas. It is increasingly evident in the growing number of urban farms, community gardens, and school gardens around the nation. They tap into a universal and spiritual impulse to care for life, in this instance by tending to the lives of plants. I suspect that this urge has helped to make gardening the most popular avocation in the United States. Community gardens are utilized by diverse ethnic communities, and the consequent sharing among gardeners of many nationalities of a range of divergent seeds, recipes, and ideas makes them a particularly valuable social service from a Bahá'í perspective.

Community gardens, like some neighborhood parks, are a *commons* that allows for mutual sustenance and experiential communion among neighbors who have plots in the gardens. They can also offer sustenance to the next generation when they take the form of "edible schoolyards" maintained by students. Their fruit and produce show up on cafeteria menus

and in meals often prepared by the students themselves. For the past decade in Berkeley, California, every primary and middle school in the city has created such an edible schoolyard. Students help establish them—planting, maintaining, and harvesting their vegetables, fruits, and sometimes exotic grains. Tending these gardens, preparing dishes, and baking breads from their harvests have become integral parts of the primary and middle school grades curricula. Edible schoolyards are now becoming established all over California through community-based efforts and state-sponsored grants. They are leading to the emergence of a generation of students who are far more conscious of, and conscientious about, where their food comes from, the inputs required to grow it, and how they can participate in that process.

Part of the spiritual impulse attending community gardening has to do with sustaining a commons. Commons, by definition, are those places that encourage sharing and participation, and that are partially or wholly self-regulating, since they serve all who use them, thus encouraging responsibility. On one level, community gardens are a commons that primarily serves practical subsistence and connection needs, while neighborhood greens and urban creeks or greenways seem to suggest more spiritual purposes in defining and sustaining the identity and well-being of a community. But both provide fertile ground for practicing the spiritual qualities of “cooperation, mutual aid, and reciprocity” mentioned by ‘Abdu’l-Bahá. There is little doubt that one of the most direct ways of educating the next generation in the qualities and the skills inherent in stewardship is to involve them in creating and maintaining community gardens and other commons.

#### INGREDIENTS OF SUCCESSFUL COMMUNITY-BASED ECOLOGICAL STEWARDSHIP

We have examined how ecological stewardship involves recognizing responsibility toward the places in one’s community and cultivating a spirit of reciprocity. We also have seen how its implementation calls for an ongoing set of partnerships that are suggestive of, though not identical

with, the principles of consultation. And finally we have explored how ecological stewardship responds to the need to sustain the environment as a commons, a context for instilling essential qualities of a civil society.

How do we sustain such stewardship? Or, more precisely, what are the characteristics that enable ecological stewardship to be enduring and community based? There are many examples of such homegrown stewardship around the United States. In the San Francisco Bay Area they take the form of numerous “friends-of-creeks” and volunteer-based groups affiliated with parks restoration. Among the preeminent examples is the Habitat Restoration Team, which has over two thousand volunteers removing invasive plants, growing native plants, and restoring and maintaining native habitat in Presidio National Park and in the Golden Gate National Recreation Area in San Francisco and Marin County.

Among the common traits of community-based stewardship are the concepts of mentoring, multiplicity, and consultation, each of which has spiritual dimensions. Let us examine these three principles and their relationship to grass-roots stewardship:

**Mentoring** is the most fundamental principle associated with community-based stewardship, as it calls upon those with expertise to impart it to volunteers—often youth—by serving not so much as teachers as guides. Individuals who are part of environmental nonprofit organizations such as the Audubon Society or the Native Plant Society, or education organizations like the Watershed Project serve as mentors for students who are planting, monitoring, or managing a habitat as part of a field-based school curriculum for environmental education. The mentoring approach suggests the concept of “each one teach one,” that is, where an instructor connects with each of the students through individual hands-on instruction or advice. This approach recasts adults as providers of specialized knowledge rather than authority figures, using the model of experiential learning—the tried-and-true apprentice-master tradition—that is essential to teaching land stewardship.

**Multiplicity** involves addressing a diversity of subjects and needs as

part of a project through the social ecology of partners. Inherent in this concept is recognition of subtle, multiple relationships in biological and organizational communities. Effective land stewardship involves an interactive understanding of the complex of hydrological, biological, soil, geological, and social dynamics. The resulting multifaceted process for renewal and management of resources is one that encourages creative, innovative, and synergistic solutions for re-vegetating, monitoring, and/or managing restored habitats. This principle has much in common with the Bahá'í principle of "unity in diversity," as evoked in 'Abdu'l-Bahá's reflection, "This diversity, this difference is like the naturally created dissimilarity and variety of the limbs and organs of the human body, for each one contributeth to the beauty, efficiency, and perfection of the whole" (*Selections* 304–5).

**Consultation** is the process of cultivating understanding through genuine, participatory, and nonadversarial dialogue among the participants in habitat or community gardening projects. This is a requisite whenever such a project is being planned, not only because of the variety of the participants themselves, but because there are, inevitably, multiple perspectives on how it should be realized. Through consultation, people involved in the process of these projects can learn to reconcile differences among themselves about how to proceed and how they visualize the project's goals or final form. Ultimately, working through the process of consultation helps them to realize how best to integrate the needs of people with the needs of a place and habitat, allowing them to become more responsive to the limitations and conditions of a given environment. This, in turn, helps them to deepen their capacity for and awareness of the requirements of stewardship and transcend personal preferences and attitudes. In the process of this exchange, they become informed of common or proven techniques, and are enabled to embrace a vision of the work that can only be arrived at through conscious and respectful sharing among all members of the particular project team.

This commitment to participatory dialogue in grass-roots land stewardship is related to the Bahá'í perspective on consultation, which works toward transcending the prevailing adversarial paradigm by recognizing that the divine will supersedes that of any individual, that reconciliation of conflicting ideas is only possible when people focus on their commonalities and interconnectedness, and when, in a spirit of candor and detachment, they avoid partisanship and remain open to the discovery of their unity. Such practices will enable participants in complex decision-making situations to bend their disparate interests toward the common good.<sup>7</sup> Bahá'u'lláh frequently drew attention to the indispensability and benefits of consultation for ordering human affairs. His admonition, "Consultation bestoweth greater awareness and transmutheth conjecture into certitude" (in *Compilation of Compilations* 93) certainly applies to the practice of land stewardship.

#### CONCLUSION

For millennia, traditional peoples around the globe have understood implicitly the importance of caring for land and have practiced spiritually based land stewardship. Our contemporary society is just awakening to this set of behaviors in a conscious manner. Fundamental to this realization is that nature is like a divine text, containing profound lessons about the nature of life, lessons that can serve to hone character and teach essential qualities. It is a living library and laboratory for both virtues and challenges. Here phenomena such as weather, special places, or specific species offer unique expressions of divine qualities that are manifested through the limitless variety of evolution: the serenity of the sunset, the steadfastness of elephants, the raw power of thunderstorms, the courage of lions, the playfulness of otters, the primal ineffability of the ocean, the majesty of a snow-clad mountain, or the dazzling beauty of a field of wildflowers. Nature's qualities—its bounty, loftiness, beauty, and might, among others—are frequently alluded to in the Bahá'í Writings as metaphors for divine attributes:



[W]hatever I behold I readily discover that it maketh Thee known unto me, and it remindeth me of Thy signs, and of Thy tokens, and of Thy testimonies. By Thy glory! Every time I lift up mine eyes unto Thy heaven, I call to mind Thy highness and Thy loftiness, and Thine incomparable glory and greatness; and every time I turn my gaze to Thine earth, I am made to recognize the evidences of Thy power and the tokens of Thy bounty. And when I behold the sea, I find that it speaketh to me of Thy majesty, and of the potency of Thy might, and of Thy sovereignty and Thy grandeur. And at whatever time I contemplate the mountains, I am led to discover the ensigns of Thy victory and the standards of Thine omnipotence. (Bahá'u'lláh, *Prayers and Meditations* 272)

To pay close attention to nature provides a sacred context for revealing innumerable attributes and lessons, along with the symmetries of form that reflect connections between the macrocosm and microcosm. If one is attentive in this way, nature is the most universal and unifying *physical* medium for honing character, a receptive heart, a quiet spirit, and an open, observant eye that can lead anyone to a keener appreciation of the divine spark expressed by these facets of nature in our midst. Ecological stewardship, in its many forms, offers a suite of means, through action, to cultivate deeper understanding of nature's roles and value, and a clear path to serve and support our shared inheritance of this earth.

#### NOTES

1. On the evolution and deepening of the environmental movement see Berger; Bernard and Young; Dombeck et al.; Mills; Suzuki; and Thomashow.

2. For further information on and proceedings of this conference, see <<http://www.earthsummit2002.org/es/initiatives/default.html>> and <[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/World\\_Summit\\_on\\_Sustainable\\_Development](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/World_Summit_on_Sustainable_Development)>.

3. See Anderson, chapter 1.

4. This idea seems to be confirmed by the Báb in His references to the two “kingdoms of Creation and Revelation.” See, for example, *Selections* 7, 173.
5. See McLuhan, introduction and chapter 1; Brown, chapters 1–4.
6. See Berry, chapters 1 and 2.
7. See ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, *Secret of Divine Civilization*.

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