

The Research Ambassador Program

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www.ResearchAmbassador.com



National Science Foundation
<http://www.nsf.gov>
Informal Science Education Program: NSF
0322214



National Geographic Society
Conservation Trust program
<http://www.nationalgeographic.com/conservation/index.html>



The International Canopy Network
<http://www.evergreen.edu/ican>



The Evergreen State College
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**THE
RESEARCH AMBASSADOR
PROGRAM
TREES AND
SPIRITUALITY**



An outreach project by researchers to communicate science to public audiences.

**RESEARCH SCENARIO No. 4
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RESEARCH AMBASSADOR

Why trees and spirituality?

Although many churchgoers are interested and active in environmental issues, places of worship are not typical outlets for environmental scientists. If scientists can link their understanding of nature to something that is valued by a religion, then the place of worship itself can become an active venue for dissemination of ecological research. To enhance awareness and a sense of stewardship for trees and forests, Research Ambassadors engaged people directly at their places of worship.



What issues were presented to spiritual communities?

Trees have broad spiritual and symbolic importance because they are linked closely to spiritual concepts. Trees are seen as symbols or manifestations of divine knowledge, eternal life or life renewal. Their form, with ground-bound roots and foliage that reaches skyward, reminds us of the connection between earth and the heavens. Trees epitomize the practice of prayer and meditation because of their stillness and silence.

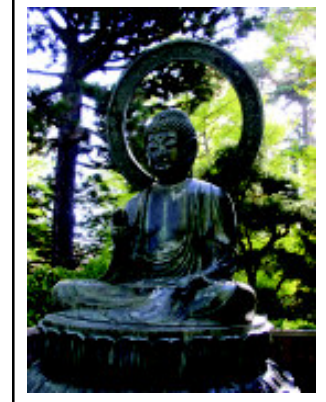
WHAT IS THE RESEARCH AMBASSADOR PROGRAM?

A major problem facing our society is the widening gap between humans and nature, exacerbated by the lack of connections among science, scientists and society. The Research Ambassador Program helps bridge those gaps by providing academic scientists with rewards and incentives to do direct outreach to the public.

TREES AND SPIRITUALITY

Background content

A quantitative analysis of sacred writings supported this intuitive sense. For example, 328 references to “tree” and “forest” were found in the Old Testament. Although less than 5% of references applied to what modern conservation biologists would call ecosystem services, trees were inextricably tied to the basic physical, aesthetic and spiritual needs of humans. References to trees were also extracted from the holy texts of other religions, such as the Koran, the Bhagavad-Gita, and the Talmud, summaries of which were presented in all of the places of worship where sermons were presented.



What were the outcomes?

Research Ambassadors were welcomed into places of worship of many faiths, and the sermons were met with respect and deep interest. The discussions that followed the sermons revealed the sense of connection people have with trees within the religious context. Several of these encounters resulted in longer-term communication, such as writing newsletter articles by church staff, or inclusion of church members into email bulletin boards of scientists, and vice versa.

The Research Ambassador Program, established in 2003, has recruited scientists from many disciplines in academia and trained them to do outreach, especially in non-traditional venues such as churches, prisons, skateboard parks and hospitals. Researchers link their research to the interest of an existing profession, trade or interest group, and give talks or write popular articles about their research as it relates to that public audience. Rewards for scientists include a financial honorarium, a letter of thanks from a high-ranking official and contacts to do outreach in the local community.