

Tree ordination in Cambodia and in Sri Lanka: A faith-based solution to protect nature.

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Figure 1: Tree ordaining campaigns in Cambodia (BCV) and in Sri Lanka (CEJ)

Two partner organisations and one initiative in common: to save the trees against massive forest destruction through tree ordination. Building Community Voices (BCV) from Cambodia, and the Centre for Environmental Justice (CEJ) from Sri Lanka initiated campaigns that mobilized hundreds of people, by adopting a traditional Buddhist practice, that is tree ordination.

This practice consists of a ceremony where trees are given a “monastic ordination” and wrapped in the iconic saffron cloth worn by Theravada monks (Figure 2), thereby making them sacred and protecting the trees from damage, destruction, and deforestation.

Cutting an ordained tree is a sin, according to Buddhism, that is the predominant religion in both countries. The original purpose of the tree ordination was to preserve religious ancient traditions and to commemorate the forest that helped to preserve and nurture the people as well as encouraging people to participate in forest conservation and protection of biodiversity.

Tree ordination as an ecology movement was initially identified in Thailand in the 1980's, as a response of Buddhist monks to the increased threats to ecology, which over the past few years have gained media attention in different countries for its innovative and inspiring message about the sanctity of the natural world.

As explained by one of the monks in the campaign in Cambodia, the story started back from the birth of the Buddha. Buddha was born under a tree and enlightened under a tree after 49 years of sitting and meditating. Trees, as part of nature, protect all life forms on Earth from disaster and provides non-exhausted livelihood to support human's life, thus they



Figure 2: A monk ordaining a tree in Sri Lanka - CEJ

shall receive our highest respect, he said. So, planting trees represent to communities the protection of their shelter and their religion.

Integrating Buddhist principles with environmental awareness, has proven to be effective against development projects that harm the environment. NGO's have been doing consultations to government officials about environmental issues, and implementing sustainability projects, through the tree ordination campaigns. Buddhist monks have also been working on spreading the word of Buddhism and meditation in rural areas, as well as teaching about sustainable agriculture practices and the need for protecting the environment.



Figure 1: Tree planting in Sri Lanka - CEJ

“We pledge to protect all the large and small trees living in this forest. We know that harming the ordained is a great sin. Instead of elites and officials protecting the forest from commoners, as in ancient times, now it is the commoners who must protect the forest from the encroaching elites and powerful land grabbers. Instead of picking trees to be felled, the villagers now pick trees to be saved.” – CEJ

“Learning how to save trees is one of the most powerful things you can do to help the planet. I love working to protect environment, I am feeling so pound working with Diakonia on environmental mainstreaming area.” – Seang Horn Kheang



Figure 2: Monk ordaining a tree in Cambodia - BCV



Figure 3: Ordained trees in Sri Lanka - CEJ

More detailed information about BCV and CEJ initiatives:

BCV: Hundreds of rights-holders, the representatives from the Provincial Environmental Department, monks, Commune Councilors, Representative from Khnol Commune Administration, Embassy of Sweden Section Office in Phnom Penh, and BCV staff participated in the Tree Ordination in Sre Ampel community forest in Khnol, Khnol Senchey in Teuk Phos district in Kampong Chhnang. The event aimed to promote the protection of the natural forest and Aoral Sanctuary, and to empower the community through awareness raising by linking to Buddhist religion practices. The event was vital because it built a spirit of solidarity among people to protect the trees. These days, trees are facing destruction caused by illegal loggers.

CEJ: The organisation conducted its first massive tree ordination ceremony in Sri Lanka on January 11th, 2014, in Akkara Anuwa and Dimbuldena villages in the Nilgala Forest. Fifty Buddhist monks, over 300 local people, and a range of environmental organizations participated in the event. Other religious leaders from the area also joined the event. CEJ initiated this tree ordination ceremony in order to highlight the massive forest destruction in the Nilgala forest. Later, CEJ conducted tree ordination campaigns in Soragune Forest, Rideemaliyadda, and the Athwelthota area as well. The notion of the ordination of trees as a campaign is a timely ritual to bring back respect and sanctity for nature. Tree ordination builds villages' and nations' commitments to protect trees from unending development. This engaged aspiration has led to the organic development of the tree ordination tradition.