

# A Rocha

How to Start  
Your Own Project



**A ROCHA**  
*Christians in Conservation*

---

## A Rocha: Christians in Conservation

The suggestions offered in this booklet are meant for any group wishing to start a conservation effort in their own community—regardless of whether or not the group wishes to associate with A Rocha. We're not out to build an empire, just the Kingdom. Our vision is like that of Nehemiah: to help people build sections of the wall where they live and then connect those sections to something larger, something greater: an international movement of Christians caring for God's creation.

Around the world, many people have seen the value in connecting their efforts to those of like-minded believers by associating with A Rocha. In doing so, they find fellowship, community, support, ideas, friendship, practical solutions, expert advice and opportunities to engage in meaningful work. They find a sense of belonging when often their churches have looked down on their commitment to environmental care and their environmental friends have looked down on their faith. They find strength and credibility in connecting to an internationally known and respected organization. Above all, they find satisfaction in putting their hands, head and heart to the task of helping restore God's creation.

For those who choose it, association with A Rocha can take several forms. Some efforts operate as A Rocha projects, others as independent A Rocha Affiliates, still others as simply friends serving a common cause. Some have staff. Most rely solely on volunteers. Each will vary according to local needs and desires—from tending community gardens and cleaning the neighborhood park to restoring streams, meadows and forests. Yet, each integrates and balances the needs of people with those of the rest of creation. Each combines hands-on conservation work with education. Each adheres to our five core commitments:

- **Christian:** Underlying all we do is our biblical faith in the living God, who made the world, loves it and entrusts it to the care of human society.
- **Conservation:** We carry out research, conduct projects and run education programs for the conservation and restoration of nature and the well being of people.
- **Community:** We work in local communities where we live, work and worship.
- **Cross-cultural:** We draw on the insights and skills of people from diverse cultures, both locally and around the world.
- **Cooperation:** We work in partnership with a wide variety of organizations and individuals who share our concerns.

And if our record is any indicator, the approach works. A Rocha, which means “the Rock” in Portugal where we started in 1983, is now at work in 19 countries on five continents. In those places, forests, streams and marshes are being restored; species are being discovered and protected; people are being fed, educated and employed; and the love of Christ is being shared. Talk (and its frequent companion divisiveness) is being replaced by love in action that helps heal people and land alike.

Despite these “results”, however, A Rocha and our approach remain unique. Among secular environmental groups, A Rocha stands out as a visible expression of God's love for all of creation. In fact, we are the only Christian organization in the International Union for the Conservation of Nature—an alliance of more than 1,000 conservation organizations. Among “creation-care” organizations, which focus primarily on lifestyle change and political advocacy, A Rocha stands out for our scientific research, hands-on conservation and community development projects and educational programs.

Seeing the value in the A Rocha approach, Christians in communities across the country are coming together to adopt their watersheds, lead creation care camps, clean local streams, plant church gardens, work with endangered species and more. And getting started has never been easier!

## **After You Change the Last Light Bulb: Starting a Community Conservation Effort**

Across the USA, Christians are awakening to the need and biblical call to care for God's wondrous yet beleaguered creation. Though some controversies remain and a few naysayers continue to, well, say "nay," many believers are going green—or at least green-ish. We're recycling and putting up clotheslines. We're taking shorter showers, eating more locally grown food and putting fewer miles on the car and more on the bicycle (or for the really crunchy, the Birkenstocks). We're even sipping our fellowship-hall coffee out of ceramic mugs instead of Styrofoam cups. All to the good and all to God's glory. But is that enough? Is there something more or something different we as God's appointed stewards ought to be doing?

For some, the answers to those questions may well be "yes" and "no". "Yes, that's enough. And no, I don't need to do something more or different."

For others, those answers just don't feel right. If you're one of those others (and the fact that you're reading this booklet suggests that you are), keep reading. This booklet is written to help you take your care of creation out of the house and out of the church and into the streets, fields and streams in your community to seek its peace and prosperity, to be an agent of shalom to all God's creatures, to help you figure out what to do after you've changed the last light bulb!<sup>1</sup>

### **First, a Question**

Look around your community and ask yourself one question: what if there was no Christian presence here? Obviously, the churches would be gone, along with worship services and Sunday School classes. But so too, would be several schools. Habitat for Humanity would be missing. As might the food pantry and homeless shelter, the clinic and hospital, the pregnancy center and adoption service. What about the counseling center? Or hospice? Not to mention day care and senior care programs? Yes, taking the Christian presence out of a community would leave huge holes, not just in the so-called "safety net" that cares for those in need, but also in the very life and wellbeing of the community—the relationships fostered and the blessings to both those who are served as well as those who serve. And of course, there would be no Gospel witness—in word or deed.

Sadly, just such a hole exists in most communities today—a hole left by Christians failing to fully embrace the biblical mandate to care for God's creation.

The reasons for this hole are many. Apparent political divisions, economic tradeoffs and differences over the cause and severity of challenges and the choice of solutions make environmental stewardship controversial for many people—particularly it seems for Christians. Bad theology that twists God's charge to steward the Earth into a license to exploit and despoil it only complicates matters. None of which relieves us of our responsibility to care for the planet on which we live. As God's people, we are to lovingly steward ALL that God created—human and non human alike.

And since there's no better place to do that than right where you live, and no better time to do it than right now, A Rocha wants to help you get started—right where you live, right now!

---

<sup>1</sup> With great thanks to Eden Vigil's Lowell Bliss for posing the question: "What do we do after we've changed the last light bulb?"

## Starting and Sustaining an Effort

**1. Understand This:** While it isn't necessary to be a theologian to care for God's creation, the "why" is as important as the "how". Both distinguish God-centered approaches from secular ones. Thus, a few basic concepts are essential. For those wishing to delve deeper into the theology of creation care, a list of helpful resources is in the appendix.

***It is worship.*** Caring for the Earth is a right and worshipful response to God in recognition that all things have been created through Jesus and for him, that in him all things hold together, and that through his death on the cross all things are redeemed. It is worship of God the Creator, not his creation.

***It is relationship.*** Caring for God's creation is a way of lovingly relating to God, to our selves, to our neighbors and to all of nature. It is a way of living.

***While it serves other purposes, it is right to do regardless.*** Stewarding the Earth is directly connected to other biblical commands—caring for the poor, loving our neighbors and sharing the Gospel. But it is not strictly utilitarian. God values his creation simply because he made it. We should do no less.

***It requires both passion and grace.*** As with any other aspect of Kingdom living, caring for creation is by turns gratifying and frustrating. There are blessings and there are challenges. None of us is perfect. We all have blind spots. We must not become pharisaical. And we must not let our passion for creation or for our projects outrun our grace for people—those we work with, those we seek to influence, and even those who seem to stand in our way.

***It is a "get to", not just a "have to".*** If we are open to them, the blessings that come from relating rightly to God, self, neighbors and all of creation far outweigh the sacrifices and inconveniences involved. With gratitude and obedience comes joy.

***This is not a program.*** Showing God's love to all creation—human and non-human alike—is not a series of tasks or boxes to check. It cannot be summed up, nor packaged. It can only be lived—as worship, in relationship, with both passion and grace, because we get to.

**2. Bathe it in Prayer:** With these understandings and perhaps a bit more from the recommended reading, the next step is to pray and pray some more. The ACTS model may be helpful—Adoration, Confession (yes, confession, we haven't exactly lived up to the stewardship mandate), Thanksgiving, and Supplication. Resist the temptation to go straight to supplication. It's good to ask for vision and wisdom, opportunities and partners, volunteers and funding, but it's better to ask in the context of praise, confession and thanksgiving.

*Tips for doing this:*

• *Meditate on Scripture (e.g., Genesis 1-2; Job 38-39; Ezekiel 34:18; Matthew 10:29; Colossians 1:15-20; Revelation 11:18).*

• *Pray Psalm 104 or 147.*

• *Pray as you read/watch news reports of environmental issues and talk with organizations engaged in those issues locally.*

**3. Build Community:** It may only take one person (you) to get things rolling in your neighborhood, church, school or city, but it will take many—an entire team, really--to keep it all going. That's why it

is absolutely critical to build a strong team of people who will work together to create and pursue the vision of local creation care—leaders, workers, volunteers, partners, funders, and more.

There are at least two paths to building this team, this community. You can adopt the “if we build it, they will come” strategy—starting a project, then hoping others will buy in. This approach can succeed when and where an obvious need exists around which people can be recruited. Alternatively, you can take a “community first” rather than a “project first” approach. Build the relationships, the community. Then, as a community, pray, investigate, vision, plan and implement. This approach often minimizes the potential for early missteps and maximizes the potential for buy-in, commitment, resources and more. Either way can work. With prayer and wise counsel, discern which is better in your context.

One last word on this: Coming in from the outside to start and lead an effort rarely works. Having history, knowledge and connections in the community are extremely helpful, if not absolutely essential.

*Tips for doing this:*

- *Talk it up to help identify others who feel called or are at least open.*
- *Host a local food potluck to discuss.*
- *Give a presentation, lead a class or start a book group at church (resources in Appendix).*
- *Write about creation care for your church newsletter.*
- *Volunteer with other environmental groups and develop relationships with the people there.*
- *Invite representatives of local environmental groups to come and talk about their work at a gathering in your home, school or church.*

**4. Ask and Listen:** “Plans fail for lack of counsel, but with many advisers they succeed.” (Proverbs 15:22) We all need wise counsel. Local pastors, school officials, business people, government officials, representatives from environmental organizations and more make helpful advisors. Asking them what they think about caring for the Earth, what they see as local needs, whether and how they might like to get involved, can go a long way toward charting a course for action and generating buy-in for it.

*Tips for doing this:*

- *Work with the team to generate a list of people to interview.*
- *Create a list of probing, open-ended questions. Yes/no questions aren't much help. Rather, ask what they think about caring for the Earth. Ask them how they interpret the biblical call to steward God's creation. Ask what they see as local needs, challenges and possibilities.*
- *Make interview appointments. Allow at least half an hour, more if you can get it.*
- *Two people are better than one at conducting the interviews—one to ask questions, one to take detailed notes.*

**5. Develop a Plan:** The basic process for agreeing on a plan of action is relatively straightforward. Gather the group. Pray. Ensure that everyone has the same or at least compatible expectations of the planning exercise. Consider the results of the interviews. Discuss. Agree on a few SMART goals—Specific, Measurable, Achievable, Realistic, Timely. Take stock of resources available to pursue those goals. Devise steps/tasks to achieve the goals. Assign responsibility for those steps/

tasks. Agree on deadlines. Write it all down. Realize that it's not set in stone and will need to be evaluated and revised over time. Have dinner together and celebrate a job well done.

This straightforward process can be added to, modified and refined using the many resources freely available on the Internet to help with the planning process (<http://foundationcenter.org/pnd/tsn/tsn.jhtml?id=60800001>).

A word about measuring: while many of the results of such an effort are hard if not impossible to quantify, others are not. Keeping track of accomplishments—from numbers of volunteers involved to tons of food grown to the dollar value of in-kind donations received—is incredibly helpful in sustaining the efforts. For one thing, it shows all involved that you are making progress. For another, it shows those not involved that the effort is worth joining. Finally, pictures and videos are a fantastic way to tell your story. Make sure and capture every event on film...err, chip.

*Tips for doing this:*

- *Prepare and distribute helpful materials in advance—schedule, issue summaries, interview results, resources available, potential partners, etc.*
- *Assign a facilitator and a note taker (depending on the group, the facilitator may or may not be a participant in the discussion).*
- *Agree upfront to basic ground rules.*
- *Take it seriously, but not too seriously. Have fun.*

**6. Sustain the Effort:** Starting the effort is one thing. Sustaining it is another. Both take work. But sustaining it takes more. To help lessen the work or at least make it more enjoyable, remember the Why and How from Step 1.

Why are you doing the work? What's the point? If your answer is to save the forest or the stream, or to change people's minds about caring for the creation, you may well be disappointed. What happens if/when you don't achieve the goals? Will you be demoralized? Will you be able to keep going? A better and more biblical rationale for the work is simply this: joyful obedience. We care for God's creation because God tells us to and because there is joy in obeying God's Word--joy that doesn't depend on the results of our efforts. After all, God is in charge of the results.

The second concept relates to how you do the work. If your approach is to grit your teeth and plow ahead, solo if necessary, knocking down all obstacles (and people) that stand in your way, you'll soon find yourself bruised, lonely and likely burned out. Again, the more biblical, more effective and more joyful approach is to do the work graciously in relationship with others. Which, of course, is easier when you remember that you're not in charge of the results; God is.

Remembering and implementing these two key concepts will help you and the rest of the group avoid burnout; attract friends, volunteers, partners and funders; and in so doing sustain the effort.

*Tips for doing this:*

- *Schedule into the work regular times of prayer and worship (with lots of thanksgiving thrown in.)*
- *Meet regularly with those involved—update them on progress, ask them how they're doing and for input on how to better the effort.*
- *See #7 below.*

7. Rest, Give Thanks and Celebrate: As with anything we're passionate about, it's easy to get busy, too busy. Again, biblical principles offer the antidote: rest, thanksgiving and celebration. Take a break; thank God, partners, funders and volunteers; and throw an occasional party!

*Tips for doing this:*

- *Observe a Sabbath.*
- *Write thank you notes. They bless both recipient and writer.*
- *Host a potluck celebration to mark milestones in the project.*

8. Revisit, Revise: Things change. Issues and opportunities arise. Original goals may be achieved and new ones may be identified. Maybe you even get a grant allowing you to expand your efforts! You need to be flexible; the plan you and the group so carefully and prayerfully crafted in Step 5 isn't written in stone. (Unless, perhaps you held the planning session on Mt. Sinai.) None of which is to say that the overall Vision and Mission should be thrown over and swapped out willy-nilly. Only that course corrections are sometimes necessary.

*Tips for doing this:*

- *At least once a year, review and summarize the effort—progress made, lessons learned, change in context, etc.*
- *Check in with partners, volunteers, funders, etc. to get their input.*
- *Take all this to the group as fodder for a planning update session.*

## **A Few Examples**

While each community's context is different and it's critical to take it into account in the process outlined above, a few examples of the work being done in other communities may help prime the pump. For resources on each, see the Appendix and the A Rocha website ([www.arocha-usa.org](http://www.arocha-usa.org)).

**Gardens.** Community gardens are springing up across the country. Churches, schools, neighborhood associations and groups of all kinds are converting lawns, flood plains, vacant lots and even rooftops to provide fresh, often organic, produce. And the benefits of gardening don't stop at the tomatoes. Done properly, community gardens serve to build, well, community. As neighbors work alongside neighbor, relationships develop, friendships bloom and community grows. Likewise, they serve to help heal the creation by providing much-needed food sources for our beleaguered pollinators; reduce overwatering and chemicals; and lessen the damage done by transporting our food thousands of miles. They also offer wonderful educational opportunities for children and adults alike. Finally, gardens are a very non-threatening, non-controversial way for people and churches to engage in creation care. Start with a garden and see what grows—literally and figuratively!

**Watersheds.** Simply put, a watershed is an area of land that drains into a body of water—a creek, stream, river, lake or ocean. Every community is part of a watershed. Everything happens in a watershed from water quality, to bird counts, to the days on which buds burst in spring" to the watershed section. They help define our place. And they tell us how we're doing at protecting the part of the planet where we live. Sadly, few of us know what watershed we live in, if we even understand the concept. Fortunately, that's changing. Many groups and churches have adopted their watersheds and are taking steps to protect them. First and foremost in those efforts in

education—showing people what it means to live in that particular watershed, what the challenges are in protecting it and steps to improve its health. Those steps can include reducing the use of pesticides and fertilizers; reducing irrigation; planting vegetative buffer strips along banks and shores to filter and reduce pollution; marking storm drains to prevent dumping; and more. The opportunities are endless, as are the potential partners.

**Invasives.** Each year, invasive plants, animals and insects cause billions of dollars of damage in the USA alone. They outcompete native species. They ruin habitats and destroy water bodies. They even bring diseases that can affect humans. Controlling them is a huge task, one too big to be left solely to the “professionals.” Seeing this great and growing need, many groups are working—with help and direction from those professionals—to kill and remove invasives and reduce the havoc they wreak.

**Monitoring.** Critical to any conservation endeavor is scientific monitoring. Without it, we don’t know exactly what the need is, how best to meet it or whether we have made any progress. Again, this is an area that needn’t be left just to professional scientists. So-called “citizen scientists” are incredibly helpful in protecting the planet by helping to monitor all sorts of things—from water quality to bird counts to the days on which buds burst in spring. All that’s needed is a bit of advice and training, some basic tools and the commitment to go out and observe.

**Education.** No effort at caring for God’s good creation is more important than education. We protect that which we love. We love that which we know. Biblical and scientific learning about the creation and how to protect it are absolutely critical. And community groups can play a huge role—from Vacation Bible Schools to watershed workshops and beyond. And the best environmental educational efforts are built on the backs of actual conservation work. There’s nothing like engaging the hands to inspire the heart and equip the head and vice versa.

### **Addressing a Global Crisis—One Community at a Time**

Around the world, people are starving, forests are dwindling and species are going extinct—in part because we have ignored and at times distorted the call to steward the earth. On top of that, an unbelieving world is watching to see what, if anything, Christians will do to care for the planet and the people we claim God created. We have often failed to live out what we say we believe. The ecological crisis, then, is actually a church crisis. And the size, wealth and global influence of the American church give it the unique ability to lead a response to this crisis.

And while there is much work to be done individually to lessen our consumption and collectively to call for legislative and regulatory changes, some of the most effective work is done working in our own communities to learn about, restore and protect the creation around us. In so doing, we can begin to bring God’s shalom forest by forest, stream by stream, community by community. All of which has profound impacts not only for that forest, stream and community, but also for the entire world. The American church truly can be a world leader—for good or, sadly, for ill. As Rev. Peter Harris, Founder of A Rocha, writes, “No other context for A Rocha is changing faster than the USA one and maybe no other change is destined to have a greater impact on environmental conditions worldwide.”

We invite you join in us in creating that impact—right now, right in your own community.



## **Appendix**

The following resources and more are available free of charge at [www.arocha-usa.org](http://www.arocha-usa.org):

*The Joyful Environmentalists*. Christianity Today interview with Eugene Peterson and Peter Harris.

*Why Every Church Should Plant a Garden and How*. An easy-to-read manual for churches, schools and groups interested in “growing blessings” for their communities.

*The Plot Thickens*. A community gardening manual from A Rocha Canada.

*Campus Garden Toolkit*. Gardening ideas for college campuses from Renewal: Students Caring for Creation.

*Why Every Church Should Adopt Its Watershed and How*. An easy-to-read manual for churches, schools and groups interested in learning about and protecting their watershed. Coming soon.

*Listening to Your Trees: A Guide to Community Tree Inventory*. A template for learning the science, history and theology of trees in your very own neighborhood. Coming soon.

*Creation Care Camp and Sunday School Curricula*. Lesson plans for a variety of settings and ages.

*Creation Care Projects for Kids and Families*. Simple activities to teach you and your family about nature.

*Getting Started: Creation Care Ideas from A Rocha*. 25 ways to help care for God’s creation in the home and in the community.

*Volunteer and Internship Opportunities with A Rocha*. Listings of opportunities in the USA and around the world.

[These and many other books add to the biblical understanding and practice of environmental stewardship:](#)

*Under the Bright Wings*. The beginnings of A Rocha by Rev. Peter Harris.

*Kingfisher’s Fire: A Story of Hope for God’s Earth*. The A Rocha story continued by Rev. Peter Harris.

*Christ Plays in Ten Thousand Places*. A wonderful illustration of God’s presence in His creation by Rev. Eugene Peterson.

*Caring for Creation*. Twelve biblical reflections combined with stories of A Rocha’s work around the world edited by Sarah Tillet.

*Living with Other Creatures: Green Exegesis and Theology*. An in-depth theological analysis by Richard Bauckham.

*The Radical Disciple*. The last book by A Rocha friend and mentor Rev. John Stott.

*Our Father’s World*. An easy-to-read overview of the theology of creation care by Rev. Ed Brown.

*Planet Wise: Dare to Care for God’s World*. Theology and simple living by A Rocha’s Rev. Dave Bookless.



**A ROCHA**  
*Christians in Conservation*

**A Rocha USA**

PO Box 1338 / Fredericksburg, TX 78624

**email** [usa@arocha.com](mailto:usa@arocha.com)

**phone** 830 522 5319