The National Religious Partnership for the Environment (NRPE) works within mainline church and temple organizations in the United States, and with other environmental groups, to promote environmental causes and issues in church and temple teaching, management practices, and public policy. It argues primarily for religious stewardship of the environment.

This new movement began as part of the counterculture movement in the 1960s and early 1970s. Professor Lynn White’s 1967 paper on ecology and Christianity, “The Historical Roots of Our Ecological Crisis,” an important reading for college classes in environmental ethics, was a starting point cited by many involved. Others tried to integrate ideas from eastern thinking, particularly Zen Buddhism. Early leaders in this movement included California State Senator Tom Hayden, Dr. James Parks Morton (now-retired Dean of St. John the Divine Cathedral (Episcopalian), New York City), Catholic priest Thomas Berry, evangelist professor of biology, Dr. Calvin DeWitt. These figures and others pressured religious authorities to take up environmental issues and tried to get ordinary Americans to think religiously about environmental issues in the 1970s and 1980s.

In January 1990 a much-reported 1990 exchange of “official” letters, between clerics and scientists on the global ecological “crisis” was organized by James Parks Morton, his assistant at the time, Paul Gorman, and, surprisingly, the outspoken atheist scientist Carl Sagan. The letter exchange did not start the NRPE, as has often been reported. But it did mark a turning point after which discussions were more conclusive.
NRPE emerged to coordinate official religious environmentalism in the US during the years 1991-1993. Much of the credit goes to Gorman, then a staff member working for Morton at the Cathedral of St. John the Divine, now director of the organization. NRPE has four component groups, the National Council of Churches’ Eco-Justice Working Group (EJWC), the eco-justice program at the United States Catholic Conference (USCC), the Evangelical Environmental Network (EEN), and the Coalition on the Environment and Jewish Life (COEJL). Agreements exist to coordinate the work of these groups, with the NRPE taking the lead on fundraising and research, disseminating money on an equal basis to each component group. Funding came from liberal foundations such as Ford and Pew.

Projects ran by the four groups but designed and funded by NRPE disseminated information to congregations beginning in the mid 1990s, drawing on Judeo-Christian teachings on justice, social ethics, charity, and the creation to address the global environmental crisis. The overarching ethical and theological idea was stewardship of God’s creation. In mainline denominations such teaching carried extra authority resulting from deliberation and agreement within church, temple, or seminary organizations. In many, such as the USCC, there was also authority stemming from the proclamations of church leaders – Pope John Paul II; the respective NCC synods, presbyteries, and general meetings; and the four Jewish rabbinical seminaries. Official recognition would be difficult for the EEN, which aims to influence the evangelical-fundamentalist religious bloc. Evangelical and fundamentalist Christianity in America comprises smaller church organizations and individual churches without any particularly national group that could offer official endorsement. The ENN made up for this with advocacy and public
relations, particularly in regard to their *Evangelical Declaration on the Care of the Creation*, supported by Billy Graham’s magazine *Christianity Today*. Also noteworthy was a widely reported 1996 EEN congressional lobbying action in support of the Endangered Species Act reauthorization, for which conservatives, particularly nominally fundamentalist Republican representatives and Senators, were unprepared. The ESA was successfully reauthorized, due in some small part to this effort.

All four NRPE member groups have held educational meetings and conferences, reinforcing the effect of their information packets on congregational leaders and clerics with face-to-face discussion of the various issues involved. Among the issues discussed has been the problems of a proper Judeo-Christian response to climate change, ozone depletion, loss of species, natural resource policy, development policy for the South, and so on. Thousands of small environmental groups and many local projects have been started by individual churches as a result.

A conservative backlash, led by vociferous elements of what was known as the “Wise Use” movement, has attempted to de-legitimize the movement, specifically targeting the new organizations in the press. Their efforts have included some derogatory language; many can be dismissed as polemical and provocative. One exception might be a more principled opposition that is found within the evangelical-fundamentalist community itself, led by professors at evangelical-fundamentalist colleges and universities. This opposition from “Wise Users” and academics is marginalized to the libertarian right and the evangelical-fundamentalist bloc and has little or no penetration within mainstream US churches and temples. Recent news articles, however, suggest some influence within the George W. Bush presidential administration and in Congress.
How far can the new US religious environmental movement led by NRPE really go? Some of the answers to this question obviously require the use of quantitative political science or opinion poll technique, work that has not been attempted by this or any other author at the time of writing. A movement that successfully recruits American church and temple congregations would be a considerable addition to the environmental movement, but there is little evidence to suggest that this recruitment has or will take place. NRPE is not an arm of secular environmentalism, but rather an entirely different kind of movement, perhaps, its leaders argue, more analogous to 19th century church concerns with slavery, or 20th century concerns with civil rights and the war in Vietnam. The movements for abolition, civil rights, and to end the Vietnam War were elevated to public prominence by direct action, the work of more extreme activists, before mainstream religions were willing to get involved.

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Further Reading
