



**Faith and  
the Land:  
Conversations  
about  
Spirituality and  
Wilderness**

**April 10, 2008  
Provo, Utah**

## Introduction:

On April 10, 2008, 40 members of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints came together for an evening of dynamic and creative conversation about "Faith and the Land" -- how spirituality and the natural world connect. The evening was hosted by George Handley, a Brigham Young University professor and Utah Humanities Council Public Square scholar, and Deeda Seed, Grassroots Outreach Director for the Southern Utah Wilderness Alliance (SUWA). It was held in the beautiful home of Charlotte England in Provo, Utah.

The evening of dialogue was part of a larger initiative sponsored by SUWA that brings people together within and across different faith traditions to talk about why our state's wild land heritage is important spiritually to Utah citizens. The initiative is based on the belief that Utahns from all religious traditions, as well as Utahns of no particular faith tradition, value Utah's wild lands as places of spiritual inspiration, connection, renewal and solace. It is also based on the belief that coming together to share what is important to us individually and collectively will reveal collective wisdom that can guide our stewardship of the lands we love.



Below are highlights of the conversation.



## What does "wilderness" mean to you spiritually?

- Wilderness renews my faith.
- Wilderness is a place where my faith is built up.
- Wild places allow me to escape from a mechanistic world view into a more spiritual perspective.
- When I spend time in wild places, I feel more connected to an enduring eternal quality.
- I see the depth and complexity of God in nature.
- The beauty of nature shows us who God is.

-Wilderness is a place of revelation and enlightenment. Throughout human history, it has been a place to go and experience the spiritual. Many of the world's great religious leaders went into the wild to meditate, pray, find inspiration – Christ, the Prophets, Yogis.

-Some people are terrified to go to the wilderness, maybe because it is a place where we experience something so much larger than ourselves, where we are reminded that we are not all ways lords of the earth.

-The experience of wilderness helps us understand our ancestors.

-The desert helps me to remember how to be strong in life, how to survive in arid places.

-Wilderness is a place where we can be our best selves.

-There is a lack of pretension in nature. Things just are. Time spent in nature allows us to be our authentic selves.

-Wilderness reminds us to focus on being as well as doing.

-Wilderness is in us. I experience it as I walk.

-Wilderness is a place I experience life differently.

-Wilderness reminds me how it feels different outside than inside.

-Nature inspires new metaphors for life.

-Wilderness is a place where we can teach reverence to our children.

-Wilderness is a classroom: we learn interconnection and are reminded of our responsibility to be loving and caring to other beings. If we destroy wild places, we destroy the classroom God has created for us to learn these lessons.

-Time spent together in wild places enhances family relations.

-Wilderness helps us to rethink how we treat land that is not "wild."

-I believe we need to step back from making a distinction between "wild lands" and "lands." It sets up a duality that allows us to treat one as sacred and the other as secular. I feel that nature in my backyard is also sacred.

-Natural areas in our own neighborhoods and city parks provide important segues to more wild places.

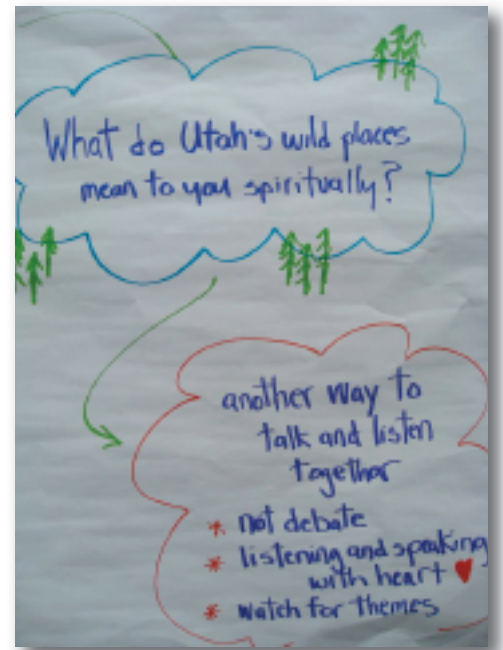
-Beauty and many spiritual treasures are found in the emptiness of natural places.

-Wilderness heals the wounds of adolescence.

Peace

Solitude

Healing



## How do LDS teachings and beliefs call on us to care take the natural world?

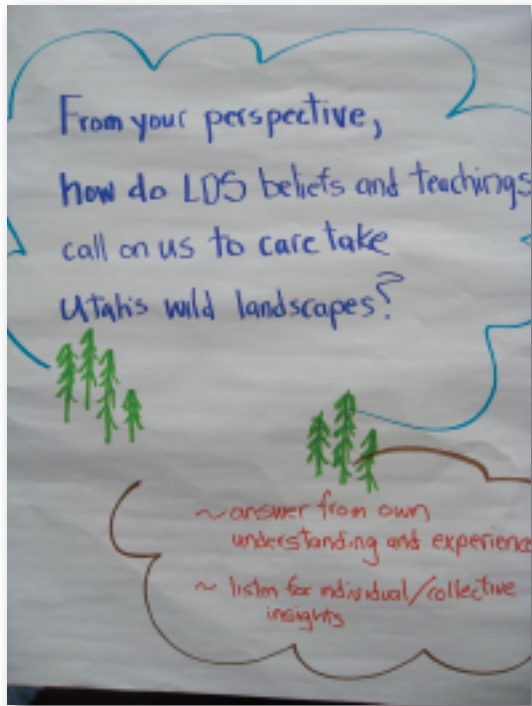
-Mormon doctrines hold that all life has spirit – animals, plants, even the earth. This calls on us to treat creation with reverence.

-Everything in nature testifies to Jesus Christ. So the more we preserve and respect the natural world, the more we can know spirit.

-There are two great commandments in the New Testament: Love God and love your neighbor. You are not practicing "love your neighbor" if you are polluting the environment.

-In Mormon scripture, nature is held as a way to follow God.

-If you dig into the ideas and beliefs in Mormon teachings, you will see that LDS doctrine has perhaps the most to offer



towards an environmental ethic than any other religious doctrine. One of the most important teachings is that spirit exists in all of the creation. Another is the call for stewardship. Stewardship means an accountability to God for all sentient beings, not an accumulation of material wealth. If we view the world as a supermarket, we are failing to live by Mormon doctrine.

-The Mormon pioneers came here to stay. They didn't come to just take and leave, like many of the prospectors and trappers who passed through Utah. Understanding the need for stewardship is part of the Mormon way of life.

-God gave us things in the natural world to be used, but we have an obligation to be responsible in how we use things. We have a responsibility to think about what it means to use things in a more holistic sense. When we think about extraction in a spiritual sense, for example, it gives us reason to use a resource more judiciously.

-The Word of Wisdom counsels us to eat sparingly, to consume the fruit that are in season, to eat no more than is necessary. We need to consider this teaching in today's context.

If all of us commit to eat 20 percent less meat, it is the equivalent of each of us buying a hybrid car, we can use less energy and create less pollution.

-Some people seem to assume that if there's a resource, it is there to be extracted without thought of consequence. But this is "bad stewardship." It is a misunderstanding of LDS teaching. It is neither a holistic or spiritual understanding.

-There is a physicality underlying Mormon teachings that informs an environmental ethic. Mormons honor the natural body as sacred. If we corrupt our bodies or the natural world, we are not honoring God.

-LDS teachings call for care taking nature in how they view the physical world. God has a body. The fullness of joy includes physicality.

-Mormon scripture says that the natural world exists in part to "please the eye, gladden the heart."

-This reminds us of nature's spiritual value.

-An underlying principle of Mormon teaching is to honor the natural body as a sacred, something that one should not corrupt.

-When we dedicate something to God, we want it to be pure and holy, not corrupted.

-Many religions teach that Adam and Eve were cast out of paradise and live on earth as punishment. Mormons do not consider living on earth in the physical world as punishment but an opportunity for redemption. Modern life sometimes seems to rob us from that healing connection. Care taking the natural world provides an opportunity for redemption.

-Traditionally, nature has been associated with women in our culture, and women have been considered subordinate. Some scriptures refer to earth as "Mother." But Mormon teachings do not emphasize dominance over nature but preserving it or





building it up.

-One of the first things Adam and Eve were instructed to do was to name the plants and animals. It is important to recognize how important naming is as a way of honoring something and how it calls on us to take responsibility for its safe-keeping and well-being.

-The New Testament says that God is aware of every sparrow that falls. They are objects of His love and awareness. There are far fewer sparrows in the city – and many more in nature. So nature provides us with great opportunity for an awareness of God.

## How might we take this conversation out into our own lives and the community?

-Talk about these ideas with our own families, who will listen, then branch out.

-Expand the dialogue to people who do not usually come to these kinds of events.

-I intend to educate myself more and act more.

-Be a better example. Live some of the things we talked about. For example, I'm going to start recycling, and hope to inspire my neighbors.

-Find creative ways to inspire more environmentally responsible lifestyle, e.g.: give biodegradable soap as birthday gifts.

-Initiate conversations.

-Write about these ideas. Talk about these ideas.

-Blog. Plant a garden.

-I want to do my part to spread this gospel of joy.

-Speak spiritually about nature rather than just politically.

-Speak about the importance of environmental stewardship at General Conference.

-I plan to go outside more. Think more.

-Sidewalk cracks! I am going to think more about the things growing up in the sidewalk cracks I cross as wilderness.

-Learn the names of plants.

-Making time to appreciate nature.

-Remember my own experiences with wildlife. Help others to as well.

-Hearing others experiences with nature is enticing. I will experience sidewalk cracks spiritually!

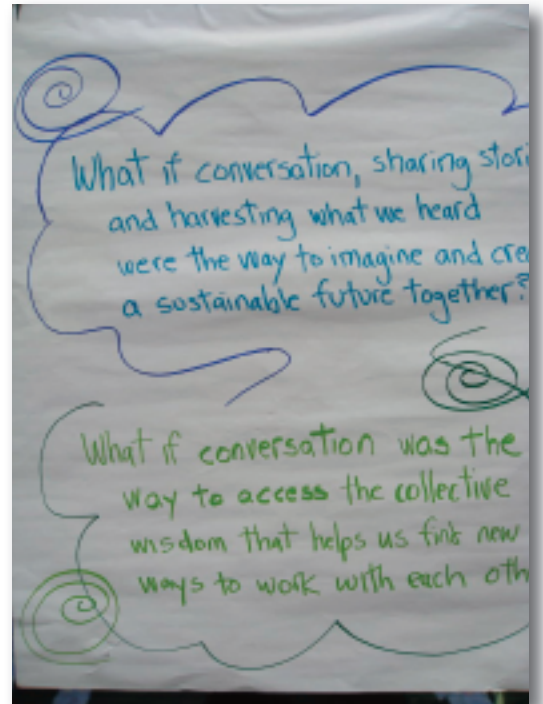
-Gain allies. It is easy to feel strange or abnormal if acting alone.

-Be comfortable integrating. Take cloth bags to the market and not feel odd or self-righteous!

-Listen to others' ideas and the news before we express what we think.

-Dialogue! Find ways to dialogue. Not to preach, but to listen and share.

-Be a better example in my own life.



## A word or phrase about what you are taking away from this evening

Engagement  
Honest  
Sensitivity  
I am more aware.

I always have felt strongly about protecting nature but this evening has left me feeling more aware.

Spiritually connected.  
Confirmation.  
Wild. Sacred.

Doing the environmental thing is not as important as becoming part of something bigger than yourself.

I feel a real sense of holiness. Care taking nature helps me to be more holy.

I feel I can speak more freely about these issues in religious terms.

I have an increased awareness and understanding that caretaking wild lands and the environment really fit into the LDS faith.

I feel a greater appreciation of the sacredness of land.



I've rededicated my desire to be more of a pagan Christian.

Searching  
Remember  
Perpetual awareness.

Blessed for unwearrying diligence.

It's important to consider who we perceive ourselves to be in relation to wilderness.

Listened and listening.  
Dialogue.

Community creativity.

My own feelings and thoughts were deepened and stirred.

It's important that we are sensitive to other people's ideas and viewpoints.

I feel more whole.



Reassured.  
Encouraged.  
Excited.  
Enticing.  
Inspired.

I'm impressed with the number of people here – that so many share these concerns.

I'm excited to pull ideas about environmental stewardship out of our own tradition.

I'm very very excited that the energy experienced in this room can grow.

Momentum  
Motivation

We are a small flame at the tip of a match trying to find the fuel to light the camp stove.

I feel more courage to talk to others.

