

Special Panels at “Nature & the Popular  
Imagination”: The Fifth International Conference of  
the International Society for the Study of Religion,  
Nature and Culture

Rachel  
Carson  
Center

**8-11 August 2012, Pepperdine University, Malibu, California, USA**

**Presenters:** Evan Berry (American University), Luke Johnston (Wake Forest University), Christof Mauch (RCC), Jenny Price, Lisa Sideris (RCC/Indiana University), Bron Taylor (RCC/University of Florida), Gretel van Wieren (Michigan State University), Bernard Zaleha (University of California, Santa Cruz)

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The RCC was well represented at the 2012 meeting of the International Society for the Study of Religion, Nature, and Culture (ISSRNC), an organization founded in 2006 by **BRON TAYLOR** (University of Florida), a recent Carson Fellow. The conference, with the theme “Nature and the Popular Imagination,” included two sessions supported by and with RCC affiliated participants. The first of these sessions, titled “Eden and Apocalypse: The Strange and Contradictory Nature of Nature in Malibu,” included presentations by **BRON TAYLOR**, environmental historian **JENNY PRICE**, and RCC Director **CHRISTOF MAUCH**. In his presentation, Taylor examined surfing, both in general but also with specific Malibu references, as a parareligion that exhibits many features common to religion: e.g., a myth of origin, charismatic gurus, pilgrimages to sacred sites, ecstatic experiences at the boundary of danger and catastrophe, and ethical obligations (in this case to defend marine ecosystems). Continuing with the Malibu focus and drawing on research that will be included in his next book, Mauch drew out the ironies that are inherent to Malibu both as a real and imagined paradise as well its status as “America’s natural hazard capital.” Price delved further into the ironies in Malibu (and among the Hollywood elite) with regard to the paradoxical ways many of those considering themselves to be environmentally concerned engage in green consumerism, from the purchase of products such as hybrid cars or enormous (but solar-powered) beach houses. She thus illuminated how “saving the planet” environmentalism—particularly as seen in Malibu—can hinder environmental goals and exacerbate inequality. The following discussion ranged from the need for different role models for environmentalism in America to the problem of the nature/culture distinction in our analyses of environmental problems and responses to them.

The second session provided a forum on “The Greening of Religion Hypothesis,” which was organized by Taylor, and presided over by Mauch. Taylor, **GRETEL van WIEREN**, and **BERNARD ZALEHA**, co-presented a paper pertinent to the hypothesis, advanced by many today, that the so-called “world religions” were becoming more environmentally friendly, and discussed a mixed methods research agenda to assess this hypothesis more critically than has been done heretofore. **LISA SIDERIS** and several other scholars including **EVAN BERRY** and **LUKE JOHNSTON** were invited respondents. This area of inquiry was sparked by the controversial essay by Historian Lynn White Jr., published in *Science* in 1967, which charged Judaism and especially Christianity for promoting an anthropocentric worldview with religious beliefs that contributed decisively to environmental decline. White also concluded that since the roots of the environmental crisis were to a great extent religious, the solution must be as well, which led religious people from diverse traditions to try to invent or deepen their environmentalist dimensions. Taylor envisions an RCC-sponsored project that will, as the fiftieth anniversary of White’s famous essay approaches, endeavor to assess the extent to which conventional and unconventional spiritualities and religions have and will continue to contribute to environmental mobilization.

Both sessions were well attended and the ISSRNC was grateful that the RCC was able to contribute to the interdisciplinary ferment over the role of what people construe as ‘religion’ and ‘spirituality’ in their environment-related cultural productions and behaviors.

— Lisa Sideris and Bron Taylor