

The quiet Christian witness of A Rocha Canada

## **The evangelical group teaches farming, provides hospitality to newly arrived refugees, and watches the local salmon.**

by [Jason Byassee](#) in the [April 25, 2018](#) issue



Children learning to care for the environment through A Rocha Canada. Photo by Brooke Mcallister.

If *The Handmaid's Tale* were Margaret Atwood's only novel, we might assume that she thinks religion is the opiate of the right-wing masses. That dystopian 1985 novel—made into a blockbuster series on Hulu last year—is about a future version of the United States in which fundamentalist Christians have instituted a militarized, patriarchal theocracy.

But Atwood's 2009 book *The Year of the Flood* offers another kind of dystopian vision in which the religious figures are the heroes. In the novel, a group of Christians known as God's Gardeners rejects the power of biotech corporations and survives a mass extinction event brought on by global warming and DNA tampering. The Gardeners are a quasi-monastic community that sings hymns to moles and nematodes and regards Dian Fossey and E. O. Wilson as saints.

When Atwood appeared on a Canadian TV show in 2009 to promote her book, the host subsequently introduced to viewers what he called the "real God's Gardeners"—Leah and Markku Kostamo. The Kostamos are founders of a group called A Rocha Canada and have helped lead a Christian community based on a farm in Surrey, British Columbia, that teaches people about the environmental, protects the local watershed, and tries to live in harmony with each other and the land.

Leah Kostamo and Atwood have since made several joint appearances in an effort to show a face of Christianity that is very different from the one imagined in *The Handmaid's Tale*.

Kostamo invited Atwood to speak at A Rocha's annual fundraising gala, where the two chatted on stage like old friends. At one point Atwood broke into song, singing one of the hymns of her fictitious God's Gardeners (who suddenly didn't seem so fictitious in a room full of evangelical ecologists): "And so for God's small creatures / Beneath the field and wood, / Let us today give joyful thanks / For God has found them good."

Atwood is not a professing Christian; she claims the "agnostic" label eagerly. But she grew up among United Church of Canada liberals and wrote essays as a schoolgirl in the 1940s on the virtues of temperance. She wants good religion to exist and thinks A Rocha embodies that. God's Gardeners are not a mere literary device, Atwood quips. "They exist."

The roots of A Rocha lie in the evangelical Christian world. The Kostamos studied at evangelical Regent College in Vancouver. Markku is a child of Finnish missionaries to Nepal; Leah worked for Campus Crusade for Christ in Washington and Idaho. While church groups have been mostly open to A Rocha's message of creation care, there have been some that have been wary. Leah tells of a summer family camp that invited her to speak and then received emails of concern from people who said they

were interested in learning about Jesus, not about the environment. Nevertheless, some evangelical zeal seems necessary in the face of ecocatastrophe. As Atwood comments, “You cannot save what you don’t love.”

A Rocha traces its beginnings to Peter and Miranda Harris, who left parish ministry in the Church of England in the 1980s to go to the mission field. Their mission was not the usual kind: it focused on birdwatching in southern Portugal. In his book *Under the Bright Wings*, Peter Harris comments, “There had never been a bird observatory at the service of the gospel before, but why not?”

The usual funders of overseas mission were perplexed, but the Harrises managed to save a delicate marsh area from being drained and turned into parking lot. They studied birds migrating between Europe and Africa and hosted Christians and many others who were—or became—interested in birds. People would often ask the Harrises to talk about “the Christian side” of their work—as if the scientific study and aesthetic appreciation of birds were not in themselves worship.

The foreword to Harris’s book was written by John Stott, the late great expository preacher at All Souls Church in London, a towering figure in the evangelical world—and a lifelong birding enthusiast. He threw his evangelical credentials behind the Harrises, pointing out that one of Jesus’ very few imperatives was his directive to “study the birds.”

The Harrises called their study center “the rock,” or a *rocha* in Portuguese. It’s a reference to the property’s original name, *quinta de a rocha*, or “farm on the rock,” as well as to its christological foundation. Now an international Christian conservation organization operating in some 20 countries, A Rocha refutes any blanket judgment that evangelicals don’t care about the environment.

Leah came under the influence of the Harrises when they spent a sabbatical teaching at Regent in the 1990s. She tells the origin story of A Rocha Canada in *Planted: A Story of Creation, Calling, and Community*. With some financial backing from a Baptist congregation in Vancouver, A Rocha established a conservation center in British Columbia, and they got to work tending to the watershed of the Little Campbell River, where thousands of chinook and coho salmon spawn every year.

When I visited the farm, Leah explained to me the way salmon spawn: The male lies on his side and digs a hole. The female lays eggs in the hole, and the male fertilizes

them. Then both of them die. It's not a very efficient way to reproduce, but as Harris says in *Under the Bright Wings*, birdwatching is not very efficient either. And neither is the God who saves humans by taking flesh among an oppressed people in an obscure part of the world. There may be more efficient ways of doing conservation than through a Christian community. But A Rocha seeks to match its work to the patient ways of a God who counts the sparrows and hairs on people's heads.

"We've seen four coho so far," Leah said, adding hopefully, "Thousands more are coming." Ever the educator, Leah explained that more than 190 species depend on the salmon for survival. In *Planted* she quotes a line from John Muir: if you pick up any part of creation, you'll find that it's connected to everything else.

The genius of A Rocha is that it's a conservation organization built on Christian hope. Strident warnings about the looming ecocatastrophe are often tinged with doom. People feel outgunned by corporations and unheeded by governments. It seems the end is coming whatever we do. In contrast, the work of A Rocha is marked by joy. Its members go about their work of studying species, reporting results, guarding the watershed, and selling shares in community-supported agriculture. Whether others join them or ignore them, these Christians are happy in their own skin. They are "convinced that matter matters to God, who created the stuff and even became the stuff and calls us to steward the stuff on his behalf," Leah writes.

A Rocha Canada struck conservationist gold when a volunteer at the farm discovered a fish called a Salish sucker, an endangered species that hadn't been seen in that watershed since the 1970s. The discovery put A Rocha on the map for biologists and government grant makers. The community has since studied the sucker, enhanced its habitat, and had many sightings of Salish suckers.

Kostamo's account of this event in *Planted* captures the way Christian and ecological commitments are intertwined at A Rocha. An intern had felt God saying to her in prayer one morning that she would see something amazing that day. When she pulled a fish trap from the Little Campbell to show a visiting tour group—the trap was part of a project studying invasive species—she heard God saying, "Here is your surprise." Then she spotted a fish that she did not recognize.

It may seem like nonsense to imagine that God speaks to a twentysomething volunteer about fish. Leah admits that at the time she thought, "What a wacko." But then she thought: What if God is the wacko, for God is the One whose eye is indeed

on every creature, who asks human beings to name the animals for him, who reveals something of the divine character in everything that exists? Who can say that the intern wasn't especially attentive that day because of her prayer and so more inclined to notice a species that others might have thrown back without a thought? In any case, a species was identified in a place where it was thought to have been extirpated, and it is now flourishing under the eye of scientists, whose guests go home inspired to learn the names of the fish in their backyard creek and wondering what undiscovered treasures might hide there.

A Rocha has flourished in Canada in the 18 years since its inception. Its work includes a farm-to-table project in Hamilton, Ontario, a new retreat center about to open in Winnipeg, and an extensive hospitality program for newly arrived refugees across Canada. The A Rocha center in British Columbia has trained some 300 interns who have taken their fish observing and farming skills to dozens of countries around the world.

Could A Rocha flourish in the United States as it has in Canada? The United States has no lack of inspiring environmental writers and activists. But the secret to A Rocha seems to be its ad hoc nature. It can't be replicated by the usual funding mechanisms and strategic plans, said Matt Humphrey, director of theological education for A Rocha. After all, A Rocha started with a charming British couple passionate about birdwatching.

"This isn't something you can readily scale to a national endeavor," Humphrey wrote to me. A Rocha's invitation to people is to live in an incarnational way in their own context. "The kingdom grows in small and unexpected ways, and attempts to program or scale it tend to confuse the leaven and the lump."

An example of the way the movement grows is the teaching career of Loren Wilkinson at Regent College. Every school has professors who inspire their students, but Wilkinson's students are inspired by what happens at a place called Hunterston Farm on Galiano Island in British Columbia. He has invited students for weeklong retreats there that include canoeing, harvesting mollusks, rooting out invasive Scotch broom, and praising God for locally sourced and organically raised food. Wilkinson was an early proponent of evangelical creation care, but his greatest legacy is not his written work so much as the lives of his students.

“We have a little joke that the natural progression from being a Wilkinson disciple is to join staff with A Rocha,” Leah Kostamo said. Most professors if pressed to display the fruit of their labors point to books or to students who have achieved academic or pastoral positions. Wilkinson can point to A Rocha.

One of the most charming portions of Harris’s book is where he distinguishes between evangelism and propaganda. The latter, he says, is “an edited and cleaned up version of the truth, suitable for public consumption.” Pro-environment organizations have been as guilty of propaganda as Christians have, of course. What is the alternative? It’s to be a community observable “at close quarters where such dissimulation would be impossible,” writes Harris. To be a community like that means inviting others to see one’s cracks, fissures, and scars. Harris draws on St. Paul’s description of the apostles’ being “made a spectacle” (1 Cor. 4:9).

Perhaps the most compelling part of Leah Kostamo’s work with A Rocha is her authenticity. She tells me a story of a prominent civic figure in Canada who upon meeting her spoke insistently about being an atheist. “That’s fine, as long as you know we’re Christian,” she responded. The man proceeded to tell of the difficulties in his life, as though he was enjoying a pastoral visit. Like Atwood, this man wanted there to be Christians like the ones he met at A Rocha. It’s the kind of place you’d want your nonbelieving friends to go to if they ever went to church.

Kostamo is forthright about A Rocha’s deficiencies and muted about its achievements. For her, the interconnections between all creatures is an integral part of the gospel, and the gospel means that spending time with an “anxiety-ridden intern is as valuable as spending time with the Salish sucker.”

Eugene Peterson, a longtime supporter of A Rocha, points out that there is no chapel on the A Rocha property. Instead there is a table heaped with local food, from farms tended by interns and friends, communally prepared, and feasted on. A Rocha hosts about ten interns at a time along with three dozen or so staff and often puts on meals for 50 or more people. The meals are what the interns remember, and people are loath to leave them. (“We have to kick them out,” says Kostamo.) In an age marked by crushing loneliness and environmental degradation, that’s not a bad image for the kingdom.

Perhaps A Rocha’s most important contribution is that it exists. It is like a monastery in that respect. The church needs a few committed people so that the rest of the

church can have someone to point to and say, “Look, it’s possible.” A Rocha is a demonstration plot that shows we don’t need to live in ignorance about where our food comes from and where our waste goes. Another way is possible. For the community to work, it needs singers, feasters, scientists, a theologian or two, and lots of lovers. Just a few can be enough to make an agnostic break into song.

*A version of this article appears in the print edition under the title “God's gardeners.”*