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New Perspectives On Old Teachings

Golden Gate National Recreation Area (<https://www.nps.gov/goga/>), Presidio of San Francisco (<https://www.nps.gov/prsf/>)

Finding the Five Pillars of Islam in Nature

By Yakuta Poonawalla, San Francisco Community Programs Manager, Golden Gate National Parks Conservancy



Yakuta with Parks Conservancy President & CEO Chris Lehnertz and Senior Director of Stewardship and Conservation Science Sue Gardner at Eid In The Parks, pre-pandemic. Eid is a festival that marks the end of Ramadan and is celebrated by Muslims across the world.

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April 2021 - I stir the pot of cardamom and saffron laced milk constantly and lovingly, preventing the milk from sticking to the bottom. I'm preparing 'sheer kurma', a sweet dish filled with vermicelli noodles, dates, nuts and raisins. In a few hours, I will be surrounded by our community of volunteers, who have come to celebrate 'Eid' in the parks, a festival that marks the end of Ramadan and is celebrated by Muslims across the world.

As I continue to stir, the sweet and nutty scents of the spices fill up my senses and make me nostalgic. Flashes of memories from my childhood in India come to my mind as I think about all the preparations my team and I still have to do for the program later today.

In my time in the parks, I'm often asked, "What does stewardship mean to me?". On this special day, my reflection takes me back to when I first learned about the five pillars of Islam; faith, prayer, giving alms, fasting, and a pilgrimage to Mecca. I was told to keep these pillars close to my heart, and observe them as I continued my path forward. While in my childhood, these duties were confined to the mosque and my

community, in my adulthood, I started to see these pillars show up in my connection with nature, and the community stewardship programs I now lead in the parks.

Faith

When I think about the expansive habitat restoration work we do, I think of the shared faith that we need to have for the success of these projects. Will the thousands of plants we plant survive? Will the experiments work? Will we be able to bring back the species we have lost?



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Prayer

We all have different forms of prayer. For some, it could mean visiting a mosque or a church, for others it could mean singing or chanting. For me, performing a prayer means being in the natural world, kneeling close to the Earth's surface, caring for the species I share this space with, and earnestly hoping we can all live in harmony.

Giving alms

The natural world gives us in abundance. Every aspect of nature contributes to our sustenance, nourishment and healing. Stewardship is an act of giving to our Earth, rooted in respect and gratitude

for what we receive. How do we take only as much as we need, or even reconsider our needs, and create a practice of returning?

Fasting

The fasting observed by Muslims and many other communities is a true test in patience. No food or water from dawn to dusk. Similarly, restoring our Earth and ourselves will continue to be a practice in patience. It took us ten years to see the fruition of the early habitat restoration efforts at [Lands End](https://www.nps.gov/goga/planyourvisit/landsend.htm) (<https://www.nps.gov/goga/planyourvisit/landsend.htm>) in San Francisco! A seed does not instantly bear fruit, does it?

Pilgrimage to Mecca

Humans have always chosen to undertake pilgrimages for inner transformation. I wonder if vast animal migrations are a form of pilgrimage as well? Each pilgrimage or migration takes one into the unknown in search of resources and safety. I think of my own migration to America. I think of the privileged pilgrimages I've chosen in the form of backpacking trips. I also think of the massive human and animal refugee crisis we are witnessing.

I shift my focus for a moment to the three guiding questions that are on my fridge next to the stove. I read them out loud for inspiration for the 'Eid In The Parks Stewardship Program' later today.

- If nature has been a vehicle through which I see, learn and experience the world, how do I speak the language of nature today to bring others to have the same experiences as me?
- How do I build spaces that center compassion for all beings, irrespective of caste, class, race, gender, or ethnicity?
- How do I create experiences that embody this interconnectedness between humans, nature, culture and spirituality?

I look back at the pot. The milk has thickened and the 'sheer kurma' is ready.

Learn more

While we will not be having an Eid celebration in the parks this year, I invite you to look at these resources to learn about other community leaders, authors and artists bringing culture to nature:

1. [Green Muslims](https://www.greenmuslims.org/) (<https://www.greenmuslims.org/>) - The Parks Conservancy's [Park Stewardship Program](https://www.parksconservancy.org/programs/park-stewardship-program) (<https://www.parksconservancy.org/programs/park-stewardship-program>) partnered with this East Coast based volunteer-driven organization working to connect Muslims to nature and environmental activism. Check out their Green Ramadan calendar that inspires daily environmental actions.
2. [Green Faith](https://greenfaith.org/about/) (<https://greenfaith.org/about/>) is building a worldwide multi-faith climate and environmental movement, and inspiring new ways of connecting with nature.
3. [Poetry by Jai Hamid Bashir](https://www.jaihamidbashir.com/poetry) (<https://www.jaihamidbashir.com/poetry>). I loved her essay titled '[Reading the Quran connects me to nature](https://www.sierraclub.org/sierra/2018-3-may-june/last-words/reading-quran-connects-me-nature)' (<https://www.sierraclub.org/sierra/2018-3-may-june/last-words/reading-quran-connects-me-nature>)' written for the Sierra Magazine.
4. Read [Fatima's Great Outdoors](https://www.brownpeoplecamping.com/) (<https://www.brownpeoplecamping.com/>) by Ambreen Tariq, founder of @BrownPeopleCamping, a social media initiative based on Instagram that utilizes personal narratives and digital storytelling to promote greater diversity in our public lands.
5. Illustrator and Children's Author Meenal Patel's work and book: [Priya Dreams of Marigolds and Masala](https://www.meenalpatelstudio.com/portfolio/priya-dreams-of-marigolds-and-masala) (<https://www.meenalpatelstudio.com/portfolio/priya-dreams-of-marigolds-and-masala>).



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[See more from the Bay Area Nature & Science Blog](https://www.nps.gov/rlc/pacificcoast/blog.htm) (<https://www.nps.gov/rlc/pacificcoast/blog.htm>)



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