Award-winning science and sustainable futures education senior lecturer Dr Caroline Smith refers to Pope John Paul II’s call for “ecological conversion” of 2001, backed by recent speeches by Pope Benedict XVI on the need for sustainable development.

“Pope Benedict clearly sees care for the environment as essential to a lasting and peaceful future for humanity,” Dr Smith said. “Nature, as God’s creation, is not just there for our benefit. It has intrinsic value in its own right.”

Additionally, she sees the emphasis on social justice in ACU National’s Mission as inextricably linked to the need to spread the word on caring for the environment.

“You can’t have social justice without environmental justice,” Dr Smith said. “You have to have a healthy environment for people to have a reasonable quality of life. It’s always the poor who bear the brunt of environmental damage, such as the dumping of rubbish, rising sea levels and degradation associated with extracting and distributing resources.”

ACU National students of primary and secondary education become familiar with *On Holy Ground*, an education resource created by Catholic Earthcare Australia, set up by the Australian Bishops’ Commission for Justice and Service in 2002.
They also learn about the Australian Sustainable Schools Initiative (AuSSI) which takes a whole-school approach to sustainability including curriculum, policy, management of school grounds, teacher education and involving the wider school community.

Dr Smith, who has been with ACU National since 1993, advises the Victorian Department of Education and Early Childhood Development and AuSSI on pre-service teacher education packages, available to all university faculties and schools of education.

Her experiences of environmental education span a lifetime’s passion for the natural world teamed with a growing recognition of its importance on the world stage. “The importance of environmental education was recognised at the UNESCO-UNEP conference in Tbilisi, Georgia, in 1977 and has continued to grow in importance,” she said.

She sees an urgent need for effective and compulsory education to enhance environmental awareness and stewardship locally, nationally and internationally.

“At a recent climate change conference at Australian National University, Imagining the Real: Life on a Greenhouse Earth, it was brought home to me again how rapidly our earth is changing, and how frightening this really is, and how urgent the need to educate people is.”

Dr Smith and colleague Dr Lyn Carter have received 2008 Citations for Outstanding Contributions to Student Learning from the Australian Learning and Teaching Council for leadership in the development and implementation of an Education for Sustainability focus within teacher education and professional learning programs.

Environmental care in Fiji

Environmental Science lecturer Dr Jennifer Taylor is helping protect the environment in Fiji, researching and working collaboratively with Taronga Zoo reptiles manager Dr Peter Harlow, the National Trust of the Fiji Islands and volunteers.

On the small island of Yadua Taba, native vegetation has been threatened by burning, the grazing of goats and invasive weeds. Villagers from a neighbouring larger island and volunteers from the University of the South Pacific and elsewhere have joined in to regenerate the native vegetation, tropical dry forest, one of the most endangered forest types in the Pacific.

“Burning ceased in 1980 and the last goat was removed in 2003,” said Dr Taylor, pictured centre with a volunteer, assistant ranger Yadua Taba, and a critically endangered Fijian crested iguana which relies on native vegetation for survival.

In work which is providing a model for other Fijian conservation projects, the team has trialled and monitored several methods for controlling the invasive weeds, and four of the five worst weed species have now been brought under control.

“We focused on easily implemented weed eradication techniques requiring minimal resources and minimal use of expensive and toxic chemicals,” Dr Taylor said.

The ranger of the island, employed by the National Trust of the Fiji Islands, and other National Trust staff continue the ongoing work of controlling weeds, and of research and monitoring of both the vegetation and of the survival of the Fijian crested iguana.

“Pope Benedict clearly sees care for the environment as essential to a lasting and peaceful future for humanity”

Respecting nature

Alongside the ecology of nature, there exists what can be called a “human” ecology, which in turn demands a “social” ecology. All this means that humanity, if it truly desires peace, must be increasingly conscious of the links between natural ecology, or respect for nature, and human ecology. Experience shows that disregard for the environment always harms human coexistence, and vice versa. It becomes more and more evident that there is an inseparable link between peace with creation and peace among men. Both of these presuppose peace with God.