

THE ENVIRONMENT

Bald Eagles and Babies

The case for compassionate conservationism. by John E. Silvius

LIMITED ENERGY SUPPLY and impending higher fuel prices have emerged as early tests of George W. Bush's leadership. His proposal to increase energy supplies by extracting oil from the Alaska National Wildlife Refuge has angered many who want to preserve this beautiful natural area. These plans and Bush's withdrawal of U.S. support for the Kyoto Accord, which would limit emissions of greenhouse gases, don't surprise environmentalists, who opposed his election because of what they consider his disregard for the environment. Indeed, political or economic conservatives generally have difficulty gaining the confidence and support of environmentalists, even if conservatives propose resource extraction in an "environmentally friendly manner."

Many moral conservatives believe the philosophies of free market and limited government have a biblical basis. At the same time, these philosophies have led many industries to act irresponsibly, resulting in unnecessary destruction of landscapes, habitats, water, and air. The problem, however, is not conservative politics and economics *per se*. Rather, the problem is the conservatives' failure to articulate and implement an environmental ethic that controls human behavior.

Moral conservatives are successfully articulating a biblical worldview regarding sexual abstinence before marriage, sanctity of life, and the importance of moral teaching in our schools. Consistent with this, they must also articulate the case for a compassionate conservationism, an environmental ethic rooted in a biblical worldview. Such an ethic would redefine *environmentalists* as those who are concerned about the environment of *all of life*. Thus they would care about the environment of the bald eagle chick, especially when the egg crushes under the weight of the mother because the eggshell has been weakened by pesticides in the food chain. But they would also seek protection of the unborn baby from all threats, whether they be humanly introduced toxins and abortifacients or environmental pollutants that the baby

might encounter through the mother.

A compassionate conservationist would listen carefully to the environmentalist concerned for bald eagles and their habitats, but would also explain that the Creator of heaven and earth is not only concerned for every sparrow that falls (Matt. 10:29) but also every unborn baby: He sees even in the womb (Ps. 139).

Does compassionate conservationism extend to the point of giving "equal rights" to human and nonhuman creatures alike? Genesis says that God gave humans "dominion" over the created world (1:28). This dominion is not license to abuse animals and animals' habitats but is characterized by "tilling" (or serving) and "keeping" (or preserving the ongoing fruitfulness of) the Earth (2:15). Here, we discover the biblical roots of true conservationism: As we serve creation, creation serves us (i.e. *conservation*, or "serving with" creation).

Sin in the garden (Gen. 3)—human rejection of God's authority and abuse of the fruit of the garden—led to God's judgment. But the responsibility of stewardship remains and can be exercised only by people with servant hearts who recognize that God is the owner and that we are the keepers of creation. People who live as God's stewards find fulfillment in

Responsible stewards are
freed from anxiety about
whether we are running
out of resources.

their Creator and are released from the grip of materialism that for too long has left its footprints on scarred landscapes carelessly ravaged to support the wants and needs of humans whose god is this world. Responsible stewards are freed from endless anxiety

and arguments about whether we are running out of resources. Instead, they work to please the Creator by proper stewardship of resources out of love and faithfulness to God. They practice compassionate conservation.

With enlightened support of citizens who understand and practice compassionate conservation, President Bush and other national, state, and local officials can lead in developing environmental policies that are consistent and comprehensive. Such policies would respect both the habitats of God's creatures and the resource needs of people, because the policies emphasize true stewardship of what belongs not to us but to God. They promote respect and concern for all environments in creation—the habitats of creatures, the environment of our homes and schools, and even the cradle of life, the environment of the womb. ❶

John E. Silvius is professor of biology at Cedarville (Ohio) University and author of *Biology: Principles and Perspectives*.

Opinions expressed in Speaking Out do not necessarily reflect the views of CHRISTIANITY TODAY.