

Toward an Ethical Basis for 'Creation Care'

John E. Silvius, Senior Professor of Biology, Cedarville University

Background: In recent decades, Christians have been gaining a greater awareness and understanding of the bioethical basis for the sanctity of human life, and are now more active in the political and social fabric of our nation to protect the rights of the unborn, the elderly, and the unwanted at any age. At the same time, Christians have been reluctant to attribute moral standing to non-human forms of life on Earth. Many Christians ask, "Of what significance are endangered species or habitats when the lives and destinies of men, women, and children are at stake?" But is an argument that assigns value to human life while diminishing the value of non-human creatures consistent with biblical teaching?

Thesis: The Christian environmental stewardship ethic provides an objective basis for valuing both human life and other creatures composing the life support systems of Earth. Understanding this ethical foundation will enrich our Christian lives, our vocations, and our witness to a culture struggling to define the role of humans on Earth and in the hereafter.

Aims:

1. To examine ways in which our culture assigns *value* to the natural world.
2. To uncover the elements of a more objective and biblical environmental ethic.
3. To consider how we can apply this environmental ethic to our lives and vocations.

Questions to Consider:

1. To *value* something is to establish the basis for estimating its worth. Upon what basis do you (or people in general) tend to value (a) corn or soybean fields, (b) songbirds or other wildlife, (c) Alaska National Wildlife Refuge (ANWR), or (d) a colorful sunset.
2. Van Dyke (2006) presents a "basic value trichotomy" consisting of three "value categories." Two of these categories are as follows:
 - a. Instrumental value – natural objects are valued as goods and services for human well-being
 - b. Aesthetic value – natural objects are valued for their admirable qualities or traits
3. How does your valuing of the objects in question #1. above correspond to these two categories? Do any of the objects in #1. **not** fit into one or the other of these two categories? If not, why?
4. An *ethic* is a system of values that establishes principles of conduct by individuals or groups. Do the two "values categories" in #2., without a Scriptural worldview, provide an objective basis for establishing an objective environmental ethic? Relate to oil extraction in the ANWR.
5. The Scriptures provide guidance for how we are to manage "objects that provide goods and services for our well being." How does the Hebrew word (*abad*) translated "till" or "to serve" (Gen. 2:15), and the Hebrew, *shamar*, meaning "to keep" or "to preserve [the potential of the garden to yield its produce]" provide the basis for each of the following:
 - a. existence of a reciprocal relationship in which "good" is returned for "good?"
 - b. a benevolent treatment or *con-servation* of "the land?" See Deut. 22:6-7; Ezekiel 34:18
 - c. a Scriptural basis for our response to the bounty (instrumental) and beauty (aesthetic) of

creation. See Romans 1: 20-21; Psalm 19: 1-3; I Chron. 29:14

6. Van Dyke (2006) lists *intrinsic value* as the third of his “basic value trichotomy.” Intrinsic value is attributed to natural objects on the basis of their “goodness” in their own right; or for their own purposes apart from any moral or ethical rights or standing granted by humans. How does each of the following passages of Scripture teach that creation has intrinsic value?
 - a. “God blessed them, saying, ‘Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the...earth.’” Gen. 1:22
 - b. Leviathan and other animals have purposes...wait upon God to provide. Psalm 104: 24-27
 - c. High mountains *for* rock badgers; cliffs *for* the conies – Psalm 104: 18
 - d. “The Land” as *subject* of the Sabbath, to receive rest – Leviticus 25: 1-4
7. If you believe there is Scriptural support for the existence of moral/ethical standing on the part of non-human creatures and “the land,” formulate a statement, visual model, or slogan which applies a biblical stewardship ethic toward the question of the value of humans as well as other creatures.
8. How should Christians handle the dual responsibilities of environmental stewardship and the Great Commission? See Colossians 1: 20 and II Corinthians 5:19
9. Apply your discussion of questions 6. and 7. as a basis for considering how a biblical environmental ethic would contribute toward such priorities as (a) community or inner-city ministries, (b) missionary efforts in developing nations, (c) Christian camp programs. Can you suggest other applications?

Selected Resources and Articles:

1. Scripture Passages with Commentary – Evangelical Environmental Network:
<http://www.creationcare.org/resources/scripture.php>
2. Leopold, A. 1949. The Land Ethic. *In A Sand County Almanac*, pp. 201-214. Oxford U. Press, London. [Excerpt provided as PDF at Cedarville University Center for Bioethics Resource Page] http://www.cedarville.edu/centerforbioethics/resources/env_ethics.htm
3. 4. Silviu, J.E. 2001. Bald Eagles and Babies: The case for compassionate conservationism. *Christianity Today*, 45(8): 93. <http://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2001/008/42.93.html>
5. Van Dyke, F. 2006. Cultural Transformation and Conservation: Growth, Influence, and Challenges for the Judeo-Christian Stewardship Environmental Ethic. *Perspectives on Science and Christ. Faith* 58(1): 48-63.
<http://www.asa3.org/ASA/PSCF/2006/PSCF3-06VanDyke.pdf>