

Why should Christians care about biodiversity?

There are scientific, ethical and explicitly theological reasons to care about diversity. A Christian cannot afford to ignore scientific evidence; we have been given reasoning minds to use in order to promote God's purposes on earth. The escalating scientific evidence for biodiversity loss is not just a statistic, it is about the lives of real creatures who are suffering to the point of extinction. Even if we cannot appreciate so easily why we might care about such creatures, their loss is our loss as our lives are dependent on their flourishing. Take, for example, the tiny microplankton living in the oceans. They produce oxygen. Their demise would lead in an obvious way to stress on capacity for life (apart from microbes that don't breathe air). Similar entanglements apply in the Amazonian rain forest in a way that indigenous peoples still recognise and live out.

There is a pain and tragedy in that loss that can trigger a deep sense of mourning, and in secular terms, may be expressed as ecological anxiety. Preserving that biodiversity as far as possible is an ethical priority, for the creatures concerned, but also for future generations.

The Earth System stability also depends on biodiversity for its functionality, hence, ignoring biodiversity is ultimately self-destructive and human life, and all of life, depends on a healthy, functional earth.

Part of a divinely ordained purpose for humanity is the clear mandate and responsibility to care for creation that is integral to what it means to be made in the image of God. So, just as God created the earth and declared it good, so Christians are given the task of becoming more like God in exercising our powers responsibly and fostering the good of creatures in that creation.

We could also go further and add that in evolutionary terms we carry the body of those myriad creatures with us in our human history, so our lives have been caught up with these others. To allow their loss is, in a sense, to wound ourselves.

When scientists tell us that through our human activities there is a tragic loss in species, something of the beauty and goodness of creation is lost too. And also something of what it means to be made in the image of God.

What are the theological and Scriptural roots that speak to Christian concern for the myriad of creatures in the rainforests, oceans and throughout the Earth?

We could go deeper theologically and say that not only is this about the goodness of creation, or about our responsibility as made in the image of God, but it is also about creation as a whole mirroring something of the Trinity, a trace of the Trinity, as Thomas Aquinas claimed. In as much as creation reflects who God is, it becomes sacramental, showing us something of the beauty and wonder of a God who Christians affirm is Creator as well as redeemer.

Further, the care of God for creation is signified by God becoming integral to that creation in the incarnation of Jesus Christ.

Theologians speak of this as deep incarnation. So, when we see loss of biodiversity, or disproportionate suffering, especially that caused by human activities, there is a sense in which we are seeing one of the wounds of Christ crucified.

From the perspective of scripture, the most obvious texts relate to that of Genesis, so, understanding more clearly the meaning of being made in the image of God, *imago Dei* in Genesis 1.28; and Romans 8.22-24 is important too, how is it that the whole of creation groans in travail? Surely through the tragic loss of species.

Further, Colossians 1.15-20 speaks to the way Christ is reflected in the creation through a wisdom poem that brings the scope of Christ's influence into the cosmic realm, and not just the human realm. 'For by him were all things created, in heaven and on earth'. 'in him all things hold together'. So, when some of those things are lost, there is Christ's suffering made visible. Salvation is not to be understood in a narrow way, but encompassing the whole of the created order.

What are the differences in how Christian denominations understand this, and where do they converge?

My own sense is that there is a strong overlap between Christian denominations in this particular area of concern, though biodiversity is often less acknowledged among Roman Catholic scholars due to the focus on ethical issues of poverty and justice, rather than an explicit care for other creatures. As one might expect, it also depends on method. Catholics will be more drawn to traditional sources, including, for example, texts from Athanasius, Thomas Aquinas, Basil of Caesarea, and other sources which highlight the goodness of the created world.

Catholic social teaching is also very important, including the most recent encyclicals, beginning to gain prominence in the work of Pope John Paul II, who spoke clearly of the need for ecological conversion. Attention to biodiversity in his case came through a desire to find the presence of God in all things in prayerful contemplation. He was also concerned with the way destruction was multi-layered, so that habits that affected human communities had a knock-on effect on ecological communities.

And the view that everything is interconnected perhaps reaches its peak in the work of Pope Francis, whose encyclical *Laudato Si'* begins with praise for creation, tracing the biblical and traditional sources to support this claim, but also situated clearly in the context of loss. His attention to biodiversity loss could have been more extensive, but Roman Catholic traditions will usually focus in on the importance of human dignity and preservation of human life, but now within a broader ecological framework.

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