



Climate and Conservation



Editorial

David Thistlethwaite

Bad news for the economy is, in some respects, good news for the environment. We understand that, but we do not easily know what to do about it, because the old ways of excessive, debt-fuelled consumption are apparently the very thing needed to return us to prosperity and full-employment. We need to pray for our leaders that a new economics, that works for people and environment, will emerge through these troubled times, and that those who have godly wisdom will lead boldly.

Bad news, over the last few weeks, has come in like a tide. Seemingly impregnable defences of the financial system have come close to collapse. Many of Christ's parables refer to a time when what seems secure will suddenly vanish. When the Son of Man comes, it will be 'as in the days of Noah' (Luke 17:26), when normal life was carrying on and it seemed that God was distant and would never do anything to stop the onslaught of evil and save his people. That final event may or may not be imminent, but there will be a time when every false foundation will crumble, and only that which is founded on the rock of Christ's ways will stand.

A shake-down in economics prepares us for changed thinking and behaviour. May we commend to you January's Redcliffe Conference, when together we will tackle the world's most pressing issue: how to feed and develop the hungry nations, without further destroying the earth.

John Ray Initiative and Redcliffe College
Joint Conference 2009

JUST LIVING:

The quest for fairness in a finite world

Saturday January 17th 9.30-4.30

Redcliffe College, Gloucester

Dr Andrew Steer, Dewi Hughes, Peter Price-Thomas

Chairman: Christopher Jones

£38 including lunch 01452 308097

Jamaica Climate Change symposium

Dr Bruce Callander, Workshop and Symposium statement coordinator (sponsored by JRI)

Over the course of five days around fifty participants - mainly students - from 16 countries met at the Runaway Bay Heart Hotel on the north coast of Jamaica to learn more of the impacts of climate change, to better understand God's love and care for his creation and to encourage each other to practical action to respond to this global crisis. IFES led the organizing group and in partnership with a range of other organizations including JRI, Tearfund and A Rocha International - to name only a few - sponsored the attendance of most of the participants.

The daily programme included Bible studies by leading Christian environmentalists and technical talks and case studies from subject experts and fellow participants. Many of the latter described from first hand experience the stark reality of the impacts of climate change and other environmental stresses on communities, from islands slowly disappearing under the sea in the South Pacific to declining bee populations - crucial to sustain the productivity of natural and commercial vegetation - in West Africa. Workshops on a wide range of applied topics allowed participants to sift, challenge and assimilate to their own circumstances the material presented in the talks.

A fundamental principle of the workshop was that there should be enduring outcomes, and this objective is being pursued through three mechanisms: Personal Action Plans, an agreed Symposium Statement, and the continuation of the conference website (<http://ifessocc.wordpress.com>) to support ongoing information exchange and access to resources. The Personal Action Plans contain targets for one, four and twelve months and I have accepted responsibility for encouraging participants to pursue their targets and to share their progress with others. The Symposium Statement, containing six Affirmations and six Covenants was agreed by consensus of all participants and has been submitted to the IFES governing body for their endorsement. All material presented at the workshop, and conference photos, can be viewed and downloaded from the conference website.

Was it a success? Only time will tell, but post-workshop evaluations indicated that a very high proportion (>85%) of participants believed that as a result of the workshop they were better informed about God's relationship to creation, the impacts of climate change especially on the poor, and adaptation and mitigation measures they could take. Over 90% believed that spending time with people from a wide range of countries was key to their learning and that the Symposium had enlarged their network of contacts able to support them in implementing their Action Plan.

Bristol Conservation Conference, October

The following articles are summaries of talks that were going to be given at the *Conservation, What, Why and for Whom?* conference at Trinity College Bristol, which had to be cancelled due to low bookings. The material is so good that we are sharing it in this form.

Introduction: Conservation of what and for whom? John Bimson, Trinity College

In April my wife and I spent a week on a small island off the West Coast of Scotland. For me (a keen birdwatcher) one of the highlights was the unexpected discovery that we shared the island with a pair of sea eagles (or white-tailed eagles). These huge birds (larger than golden eagles) were native to Scotland until 1918 when the last one was shot on Skye. Since 1975 they have been reintroduced through the release of young birds from Norway, and over 40 nesting pairs are now established along the West Coast. But a downside has emerged, with crofters on the western highlands saying they could lose their livelihoods because the eagles are taking their lambs. Their claims are contested by the RSPB, but the dispute prompted Magnus Linklater (writing in *The Times*, 24 September 2008) to criticize the



reintroduction of sea eagles and other birds of prey as 'an expensive luxury' with 'no obvious benefit beyond the frisson it gives to environmental agencies and passing tourists'.

The dispute highlights the questions in my title. Was it right to turn the clock back 60 years by reintroducing these magnificent birds? Who benefits? What of 'The Great Crane Project', which aims to re-establish the common crane as a British breeding species after an absence of about four centuries? What of campaigns to see beavers and even wolves reintroduced to the British countryside?

And what of the British countryside itself? Apart from small remnants of Caledonian pine forest, it is entirely shaped by human activity. Without a human population it would revert to something like the 'climax wildwood' which blanketed Britain after the end of the last ice age. By about 4000 BC this 'covered all the British Isles except for small areas of natural moorland and grassland... and for coastal dunes and salt marshes.' (O. Rackham, *The History of the Countryside*, 1986, p. 68.) Human settlement since the Neolithic period has enhanced our islands' biodiversity by

creating a wider variety of habitats. But what was created by our actions needs constant management to keep it that way. The UK's nature reserves are plots of carefully managed (and to that extent artificial) wilderness.

The biodiversity we once encouraged by changing the landscape is now threatened by continuing development. So how do we decide at what point, and in which places, to stop the clock? And on what grounds do we decide to turn the clock back by recreating lost habitats and reintroducing vanished species?

Climate change (which will continue for at least the rest of the century, even if we could stop all greenhouse gas emissions tomorrow), places these questions in a new perspective. Several species of animals, plants and birds are extending their ranges northwards. Little egrets first bred in the UK in 1996, and we now have around 160 breeding pairs. Cattle egrets seem likely to follow their example after breeding here for the first time in 2008. The role of climate change in these particular arrivals is uncertain, but they provide a taste of the population shifts that are bound to happen in a warming world. Given the inevitability of continued global warming and other human-induced changes, conservation bodies here and in the USA now recognize the need for adaptation strategies alongside conservation (e.g. S. Oosthoek, 'Nature 2.0', *New Scientist* 5 July 2008, pp. 32-35).

Is there a biblical-theological perspective on all this? Ps 104 is (among other things) a celebration of biodiversity and of God's care and provision for all creatures. It also shows that this diversity is an aspect of God's glory and something in which he takes delight: 'May the glory of the Lord endure forever; may the Lord rejoice in his works' (v. 31). In this sense all creatures have intrinsic value. But the earth was also made for human flourishing, and while some parts of the Bible resist an anthropocentric view of the world (e.g. Ps 104; Job 38-39), others celebrate the unique status and value of human beings (e.g. Gen 1; Ps 8).

In a broad sense there is no conflict between the aims of 'nature conservation' and the well-being of human societies (at a basic level we humans depend on 'ecosystem services', and ecosystems are more resilient when there is greater biodiversity). But in specific cases, as with the alleged depredations of sea eagles, or the competing needs of human living space and wildlife habitats, conflict comes to the fore and is not easy to resolve.

I enjoyed the frisson of watching my first sea eagles. I even sanctified the first sighting by muttering 'O Lord, how manifold are your works!' (or something similar). But if they do turn out to be threatening the livelihood of crofters, I might start to wonder whether their reintroduction was wise.

How natural is nature?

This article derives from an email interview of **Dr Andrew Gosler** by David Thistlethwaite about his ideas for the conference on 'how natural is nature?'

Ecology teaches us that nature 'works'. Quite independently of us, myriad processes and interactions of species sustain life in being. Many of the things we do in respect of nature, however, do not work. They destroy its life-sustaining powers and we end up with less, rather than more. Hence 'nature' is not just a thing, a



Dr Andrew Gosler

system; it also represents a value. It is a way of working, of sustaining life, which we can either accept and work with, or deny (and perish).

So when we ask if nature is natural, we are not just asking if it has been altered from some pristine state. We mean something deeper, which is whether it embodies the 'goodness' of its creation, the way it was made to function.

It is quite clear that the nature we enjoy in Europe and North America is not nature in that original sense. It has been profoundly altered by agriculture, industry and urbanisation. It is nature struggling with a mentality which is alien to its normal working; which limits and controls it to make it fruitful for human purposes, but so often misses its mark in relation to the whole.

Can we identify a way of working with nature that is 'natural', in relation to the values we find embodied in nature? We do not have to remind ourselves that we start from where we are, most of us living very far from the earth, no nearer to producing our own food than reading about the lives of producers on our Fair Trade products. What can we do to get from here to where we need to be?

The first thing is to get our thinking straight. In history there has been a way of living sustainably in relation to nature, that fitted in with its processes rather than destroying them. There is just sufficient of Hunter-Gatherer culture left in the world to teach us that there is wisdom embodied in nature still accessible to all. No doubt this culture is not ideal; but in the situation we are in it still has much to teach. It shows that you eat enough, but no more than the land will sustain; you do not accrue for the sake of it; you do not own so as to restrict the livelihoods of others. All this is very challenging to the assumptions of the modern age; for example, the idea that 'agriculture' means exploiting the capacities of the land to make money.

The notion that nature has some embodied wisdom which we need to heed is no more challenging than the teaching of Jesus himself, who made a joke of the farmer who put his trust in his huge grain store, and who talked about being 'rich towards God' as the foundation of the 'real' financial system.

It is clear that ever since the Creation, the way of God and the way of the world has been opposed. In the Old Testament, the contrast between Egypt, the land of slavery, and Israel, the place of freedom where debts are cancelled every seven years, stands as a symbol of two systems, one of which is concerned to pile up, and the other to give.

The present message of nature is that the world's system is leading and has led to disaster. Poverty and overpopulation are not unfortunate accidents, but a result of money-based economics and exploitative living.

We have to find a sustainable approach to nature in agriculture, biodiversity and all resource use; and we have to understand that Jesus meant it when he said 'you cannot serve God and Mammon.'

Conquest and conservation: British and American attitudes to nature

Summary of the paper by **Keith Innes** which can be found in full on JRI's web resources pages:

http://www.jri.org.uk/resource/KeithInnes_ConquestConservation.doc

Conquest and Conservation represent two attitudes in our relationship with nature, which we find interwoven throughout history. Both, in a sense, go back to Genesis. After the Fall, land with its 'thorns and thistles', was experienced as needing to be subdued, even as a foe to be conquered. But the idea of land as there to be nurtured and conserved goes back to the original command to Adam. In the history of our actual dealings with the land, the conquest theme appears to dominate; yet, as Keith says, 'there is also an undertow of restraint and care. This contrary flow resists the onward drive of conquest and expansion. It becomes increasingly important as the negative results of unrestrained human greed...become more evident'.

In Britain, the 'subduing of nature' has been very thorough. By the time of Domesday Book, only a fifth of land was still wooded. The clearing of ancient woodlands had begun systematically in Neolithic times with stone axes, and continued in Roman, Saxon and Danish periods. Timber was used for building, fuel, iron-smelting and ships, all the rudiments of civilization, but coppicing began to replace the supply of wood, so it was not all loss.

By the Tudor and Stuart period, a cultural view of nature as there to be tamed, and existing for human use, was well-established. Greek writers such as Aristotle and the Stoics had influenced a reading of the Bible as man-centred, and animals were thought to be for human use, often suffering cruel treatment as a result. For Descartes animals were machines, incapable of feeling. Civilization consisted of order, ruling over everything uncontrolled, and human nature was seen the same way.

The influential philosopher of science, Francis Bacon (1521-1626), stated ominously that 'knowledge is power', but he did write within the Christian tradition and also respected nature, which he said, 'to be commanded, must be obeyed'. His successors gradually tried to overcome all such limits. Alister McGrath states: 'The Enlightenment...began with the entirely praiseworthy intention of civilizing the crudities of nature; it ended up destroying England's pastoral economy, turning the countryside into a vast disease and poverty-ridden urban sprawl'.

The industrial revolution brought huge benefits in health, comfort and enjoyment of life. But its shadow side is also plain to see: as McGrath again writes, in *The Re-enchantment of Nature* 'The roots of our ecological crisis lie in the rise of a self-centred view of reality that has come into the possession of the hardware it needs to achieve its goals'. When the industrial philosophy is applied to agriculture, nature suffers. Karl Marx, observing this, stated dogmatically that 'all progress in capitalist agriculture is progress in the art not only of robbing the labourer but robbing the soil'.



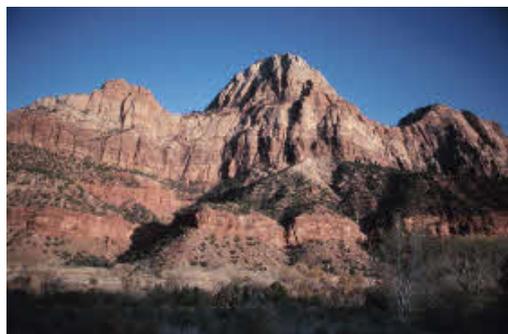
The idea of unrestricted growth implies unrestrained ownership, an idea that is contrary to Old Testament law, which laid down the return of land to its original owner every half-century, and also to the New Testament, where Jesus states 'a man's life does not consist in the abundance of his possessions' (Luke 12:15).

However, besides that main current of increasingly effective exploitation of nature, there has been in England a persistent undercurrent of care and conservation. The Celtic saints, who should not be seen as Greenpeace supporters before their time, nonetheless revered nature for its display of God's glory. Columban (c.543-615), who is reported to have had squirrels and doves playing in his cowl, said 'if you want to know the creator, understand the created things'. A saying attributed to Ninian of Whithorn states that the supreme aim of the study of nature 'to perceive the eternal word of God reflected in every plant or insect, every bird and animal, and every man and woman.' Celtic church leaders were even opposed, McGrath tells us, to the use of horses for transport! From the fifteenth to the nineteenth century there was a persistent current opposing cruelty to animals or killing for pleasure. John Ray considered a vegetarian diet was preferable; Samuel Pepys was disgusted by animal sports, and in 1789 the utilitarian philosopher Jeremy Bentham said of animals: 'ask neither "can they reason?" nor "can they talk?" but "can they suffer?"'

A gradual revaluing of trees also took place, especially towards the eighteenth century, when woods ceased to be regarded as wild and untamed, and painters and poets saw them positively. In the C17 John Evelyn's book *Sylva* recommended the planting of trees.

Conquest ideas in America

The first European settlers brought to America their



understanding of nature as there to be conquered. As Alexis de Toqueville put it, they saw their mission as to 'march across these wilds, draining

swamps, turning the course of rivers, peopling solitudes, and subduing nature'. Roderick Nash's *Wilderness and the American Mind* points out that the Neolithic revolution, from hunter-gatherer to farmer, was initiated all over again. So the Westward campaign was a heroic struggle for civilization: 'Wherever they encountered wild country they viewed it through utilitarian spectacles: trees became lumber, prairies farms, and canyons the sites of hydro-electric dams'. Only fifty years ago proposals to dam the Colorado river were defended on the grounds of 'subduing the earth'.

However from the beginning the voice of conservation has also been present. A New York arts journal of 1847 refers to 'the axe of civilization' destroying or disfiguring primeval hills, forests and lakes. The ecological movement is particularly indebted to three 'prophets' of conservation: Henry David Thoreau (1817-62), John Muir (1838-1914) and Aldo Leopold (1887-1948). Thoreau defended the rural, which he saw essential for the future of the world, as the

balance point between civilization and wildness. John Muir, who had rejected his Calvinist upbringing, experienced a mystical 'oneness with nature' during a thousand mile wilderness walk, and was instrumental in setting up America's National Parks. Leopold saw land as a 'biotic community', and campaigned for areas of wilderness in America – 'a continuous stretch of country preserved in its natural state, open to lawful hunting and fishing, big enough to absorb a two-weeks pack trip, and kept devoid of roads, artificial trains, cottages, or other works of man'.

Leopold admitted that 'the reduction of the wilderness had been a good thing' but argued that some wilderness should be retained, thus starting to face up to the very modern question 'how much is enough?'

The modern situation

Clearly, human choices in respect of nature will be made in line with a belief about what is good. Sally McFague thinks that the traditional distinction between culture and nature is itself damaging to nature. Max Oelshlaeger (*Caring for Creation*, Yale 1994) describes four dominant categories of thinking about nature: 'resourcism' (nature exists mainly to resource people), preservationism (nature should be preserved, for our benefit), biocentrism (life is at the centre) and ecocentrism (the whole ecosystem comes first, and humanity should be subject to its needs).

A typical 'resourcist' writer is Calvin Beisner, a Christian (and climate-change sceptic!) who sees Adam's task as that of making a 'garden' of the entire world. Rather than Psalm 24:1, 'the earth is the Lord's, and all that is in it', he emphasises Psalm 115:16, 'The heavens are the Lord's heavens, but the earth he has given to human beings', and he heartily commends productivity as a foretaste of the restoration of creation. There are many attempts, on the other side, to give value to nature in counterweight to human needs, including Deep Ecology and Ecofeminism. These, by various strategies, stop short of valuing every virus equally with ourselves, but still face the issue that it is we, humanity, that are doing the valuing. One extreme attempt to give value to nature is the magic practised by neo-pagans protect threatened land (see David Burnett, *Dawning of the Pagan Moon*, Monarch 1991).

The existence of 'eco-paganism' and other New Age moments signals a need for the church to be sincere in its care for the earth. Can we offer a biblically-based spirituality that connects with the concerns of these passionate campaigners? We need to show that there is a better way of effective caring than by attempting to divinize nature, with all its paradoxes and problems. Christian theology, which sees God as present within nature but also above it and speaking through it, answers our need and instinct to value nature. Our task is to embody it in action.

Remember to book now for Jan 17th JUST LIVING Conference at Redcliffe College, Gloucester

THE JOHN RAY INITIATIVE

Connecting science, environment and Christianity
Room QW212, Francis Close Hall, University of Gloucestershire, Swindon Road Cheltenham, GL50 4AZ
01242 714821 admin@jri.org.uk www.jri.org.uk

The John Ray Initiative Ltd is a company limited by guarantee and a Registered Charity. Company Registration No: 3420065; Registered Charity No: 1067614; Registered Office as above.