

The Biodiversity Challenge: Being the Image of God

Readings

Genesis 1:24-28 and / or Genesis 9:8-17

Romans 8:18-22 (or 18-27)

Background



2010 has been declared the International Year of Biodiversity (IYB) by the United Nations. The website www.biodiversityislife.net has masses of useful information.

Biodiversity is the variety of life on Earth. It is essential for sustaining the natural living systems or ecosystems that provide us with food, fuel, health, wealth, and other vital services. Humans are part of this biodiversity too and have the power to protect or destroy it. Currently, our activities are destroying biodiversity at alarming rates. These losses are irreversible, impoverish us all and damage the life support systems we rely on. But we can prevent them.

We need to reflect on our achievements to safeguard biodiversity and focus on the urgent challenges ahead. Now is the time to act.

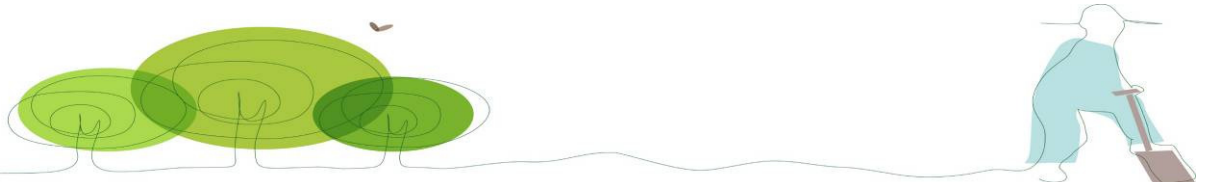
Show clips / pictures of creation's diversity (e.g. part of the BBC Planet Earth series).

Suggestion: verses from Genesis 1 or Psalm 104 read out with words displayed on the screen as the film / pictures are shown.

1. Biodiversity reflects God's Character

Isn't wildlife wonderful? The beauty, complexity and sheer oddity of wild nature have a powerful appeal – as the viewing figures for Animal Planet and other wildlife programmes show.

As Genesis 1 tells us, the Creation reveals God's character and how he sees what he has made – it shows he is good and that he makes good things. Creation is "that which breathes through God", a material entity in which the Creator "moves and lives" 'revealing' His character ([Acts 14:17](#), [Rom. 1:20](#) and [Heb. 11:3](#)) and 'declaring His glory' ([Psalm 19:1](#)). [Isaiah 41:19-20](#), [Psalm 104](#), [Luke 12:22-31](#), [Romans 1:20](#) are



amongst many passages where we're reminded that we learn about God's character and our human nature when we study wildlife.

Furthermore, the value of the non-human creation goes deeper than its value to people. In Genesis 9 we hear about how God tells Noah to save the earth's biodiversity in order "to keep their various kinds alive throughout the earth" ([Genesis 7:3](#)), implying their value is not tied to their usefulness to Noah. When God sends the rainbow as a sign of his Covenant promise, it is a promise that includes more than Noah and his descendants. Time and again in Genesis 9, God repeats that his covenant is with 'every living creature on earth', with 'the earth' ([v.13](#)) and with 'all life on earth' ([v.17](#)).

Later, God asks Job, "Who cuts a channel for the torrents of rain ... to water a land where no man lives, a desert with no one in it?" ([Job 38:25-26](#)). God's purposes within creation are beyond the understanding and even the importance of humanity. And St. Paul reminds us in Colossians 1, that Jesus' saving work was "to reconcile to himself all things, whether things on earth or things in heaven, by making peace through his blood shed on the cross" ([Colossians 1.20](#)). 'All things' includes the non-human creation; reconciled - brought back into relationship - to God through Christ's saving work. It seems from the Biblical account that God unequivocally loves all creation for its own sake, not for our sake... "God so loved the **world** that he gave his only son..."

Romans 8 reveals that God has a future purpose for creation as well! According to St. Paul, the creation itself is waiting to enter the same freedom that we now have through Jesus.

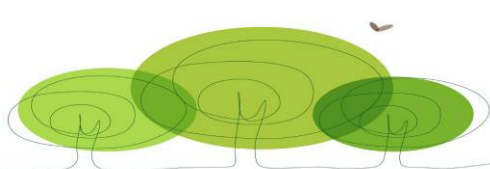
Somehow, our salvation theology as Christians has got too small. It has focused largely on God's saving plans for me and people like me, and forgotten that God might have a bigger picture. Genesis 1 reminds us that God sees creation as good in itself, the story of Noah reminds us that God is concerned with biodiversity conservation, and Romans 8 confirms that God has future plans for the whole creation too.

2. But what is the situation now? Biodiversity loss:

Biodiversity - literally the variety of life on earth - underpins the functioning of all ecosystems and is hence is a vital part of all life on earth. We couldn't live for one hour without it. For instance, biodiversity...

- Is our chief source of food, fuel and fibre. Without it we starve.
- Regulates the planet's atmosphere. Without it we choke.
- Gives cultural, aesthetic and inspirational value to people. Without it we wither.
- Contains immense, yet little known, medical resources. Without it we die.
- Is essential for pollination, pest-control, waste-disposal, pollution control, agriculture, energy-production, clean water ... the list is virtually endless.

However, it is estimated that the current species extinction rate is between 1,000 and



10,000 times higher than it would naturally be. Approximately 40% of all species examined on planet earth are in danger of extinction, including 24% of mammals, 37% of fishes, and 86% of mosses.

The main drivers of this loss are:

- Converting natural areas to farming and urban development,
- Introducing invasive alien species,
- Polluting or over-exploiting resources including water and soils,
- And harvesting wild plants and animals at unsustainable levels.

Of course Climate Change is also predicted to be a growing cause of biodiversity loss too, as habitats and ecosystems change too rapidly for species to adapt or move elsewhere.

Here are some more facts about biodiversity loss (taken from the website of IUCN – the International Union for the Conservation of Nature – which is the global network of all governmental, academic and charitable wildlife conservation bodies):

- 17,291 species out of 47,677 so far assessed are threatened with extinction.
- Of the world's 5,490 known mammals, 79 are already Extinct or Extinct in the Wild, with 188 Critically Endangered, 449 Endangered and 505 Vulnerable.
- 1,895 of the planet's 6,285 amphibians are in danger of extinction, making them the most threatened group of species known to date.
- More than 70,000 plant species are used in traditional and modern medicine.
- Coral reefs provide food, storm protection, jobs, recreation and other income sources for more than 500 million people worldwide yet 70% of coral reefs are threatened or destroyed.
- Biodiversity is essential to global food security and nutrition and also serves as a safety net to poor households during times of crisis.
- Diversity of genes within species, e.g. as represented by livestock breeds or strains of plants, is also important for agriculture and food security. Increased diversity reduces risk from diseases and increases our potential to adapt to changing climate.

Suggestions: You can find more detail on these useful links:

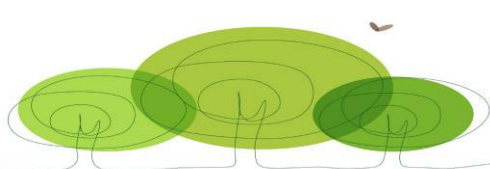
<http://www.iucn.org/what/tpas/biodiversity/>

<http://www.iucnredlist.org>

All the evidence we see makes it impossible to ignore the fact that we have a biodiversity crisis on our hands!

And it is a matter of extreme urgency how will we respond, because every time we allow creatures to become extinct by greed or carelessness, it is a serious offence to God. As John Stott, has written, “**Despoiling the earth is blasphemy, and not just an error of judgement, a mistake. It is a sin against God as well as man.**”

There is no doubt we are all guilty of this in some way because to live in our present culture inevitably means that we are part of the destruction of creation in some way – to just boil your kettle for tea in the morning for example, has an environmental



impact through the carbon emissions generated. A purchase of a loaf of bread using grain from a monoculture farm may reduce biodiversity through the fertilizers and pesticides usually used on by such farms.

However, it is not only a human responsibility to care for creation; it is actually part of how and why we are made as human beings, in God's image.

3. What Does It Mean To Be Made In God's Image (The imago Dei)?

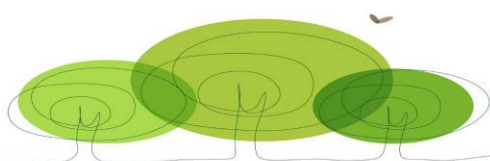
Christians have often been criticized for a lack of environmental concern and some academics have even gone so far as to blame Christian theology for the current environmental crisis (see Prof. Lynn White, 'The Historical Roots of our Ecological Crisis'). Although this claim has been largely disproved, it is undoubtedly true that the Church has been more focused on 'saving souls' than on 'saving seals', and has often seen these two actions as opposed to each other and unconnected. Indeed the Genesis 1 command to rule over creation has sometimes been used to legitimate a disregard for the creation and to justify the destruction of it for human purposes. Professor N.T. (Tom) Wright has been very helpful in challenging the theology that has undergirded these views and has plotted a far more biblical vision which sees the whole creation as part of God's redemptive purposes. (see for instance 'Surprised by Hope')

Looking more closely at the Genesis 1 text, it is crucial to recognize that humankind is commanded to 'rule over' creation not because we are human, but because we are made in the image of God (the 'imago Dei'). On the one hand, to rule over creation can only be done by those bearing the image of God. On the other hand, nobody can truly bear the image of God without reflecting his character in ruling over creation. These two statements about humankind cannot be separated from each other. In short, being 'rulers' of creation is not just a responsibility that God has given us. It is essential to fully bearing God's image.

Furthermore, 'imago Dei' - the image of God - can be seen as a verb, not just a noun. It is not so much a statement about our created state – we're created in God's image, full stop, end of story. It is rather about a continual process of 'becoming'; a life-long journey of increasingly imaging God – reflecting his character – in how we rule over and look after God's creation. To put it simply, we 'image God' as we rule over and look after God's creation.

It's also interesting that the word our modern English versions have translated as 'rule' or 'dominion' ('radah' in Hebrew) means the pursuit of 'right relations', and the word for 'subdue' ('kabash' in Hebrew), does not actually authorise trampling down the earth, but rather is much more connected to the sense of the tilling of the soil. There is a lot that can be lost in translation...

So, we are part of the creation that God called 'good', but distinct from it in that we bear God's image. The imago Dei means that we are what some people call 'the servant kings of creation'.



Can you see how this ties in with our desire to be more like Jesus? Jesus, ‘the image of the invisible God, the firstborn over all creation’ ([Colossians 1:15](#)), said that he came ‘not to be served, but to serve’ ([Luke 22:27](#)). And St. Paul encouraged the Philippians that their attitude should be the same as Christ Jesus who ‘took on the status of a slave, becoming human’ ([The Message](#)). As Christians, our desire to follow Jesus should mean becoming more like him and hence caring for all that he has made.

Peter Harris states: “We care for creation because we love the Creator, not simply because we will suffer if we don’t, although it is true we will! The key question is one of right relationships, which are crucial if we are going to find a true motivation for change. It is only a short step from compassion for suffering humanity in an abused creation, to the fully biblical realisation that we need to respond to the suffering of creation itself, which Paul talks of in the language of ‘groaning’.” ([Romans 8](#))

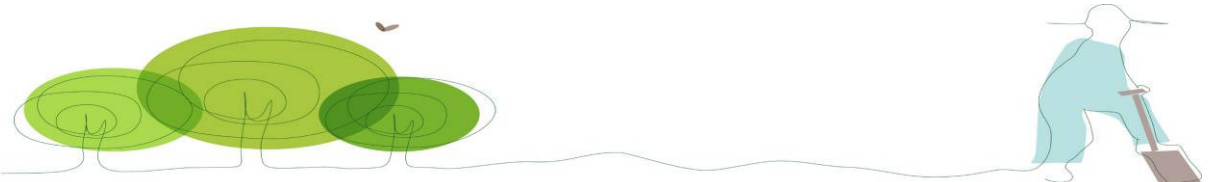
We see in St. Paul’s letter to the Romans that ‘the creation waits in eager expectation for the sons of God to be revealed’ and that the creation itself will be liberated from its bondage to decay and brought into the glorious freedom of the children of God’. The creation is waiting for us to live as God has made us to – to be his image in creation – and then it too will experience the freedom that we have now as a firstfruits!

4. How can we reflect the imago Dei in the Face of Biodiversity Loss?

In the light of our current biodiversity loss and other environmental crises how can we get better at ‘being’ the imago Dei and caring for God’s creation?

At A Rocha UK we suggest that people ‘get inspired, get informed, and get involved’... Here are some suggestions:

- **Get inspired:** Pray and invite God’s inspiration in your life (Repent of the destruction of creation)
- Read the scriptures (which are God-breathed!) and ask God to show you his heart for creation
- Read and listen to stories of other Christians acting around the world to protect creation
- **Get informed:** About how God sees his creation (love the Lord your God with your heart, soul and mind)
- about how the creation is faring across the world, AND in your local area
- about the various biodiversity issues that threaten the creation and their causes.
- **Get involved:** Work together with A Rocha and others locally to change the way you live and actively look after God’s creation in your work, church and other areas of life.



- Choose one species in creation that you will pray for, get informed about and act to protect.
- Campaign for local and national government to act for the benefit of God's creation.

Today, as habitats and species suffer around the world, Sir. Ghillean Prance often quotes Job 12:7: 'But ask the animals, and they will teach you, or the birds of the air, and they will tell you; or speak to the earth, and it will teach you, or let the fish of the sea inform you'. "The environment is telling us it's sick", continues Professor Prance. We would do well to listen more closely.

