

What about Wildlife - Noah & Biodiversity

(This sermon outline is adapted from one written for 'Creation Time 2009' and has appeared on the website of Churches Together in Britain & Ireland)

Readings:

Genesis 9:1-17

Psalm 104:1-31 (see PowerPoint presentation in this pack)

(Matthew 10:28-30 if a Gospel is required).



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.

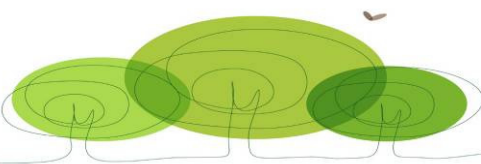
We need to reflect on our achievements to safeguard biodiversity and focus on the urgent challenges ahead. Now is the time to act.

1. Introduction

This year, 2010, has been declared the 'International Year of Biodiversity' by the United Nations. Biodiversity simply means the variety of life on Earth – this includes all animals and plants, and also includes us – we're all part of biodiversity.

Today, however, biodiversity is under threat. Wildlife is declining all over the world under the twin pressures of growing human consumption and growing human population. But which should come first, people or wildlife? Let's begin by looking at a case study.

On the edge of Bangalore – one of India's fastest growing cities – people are facing a big dilemma. As in many other places, rapid population growth and urbanisation have put a huge pressure on wildlife. Bangalore is now a global centre for high-tech



industries. As the city has grown it has sprawled right up to the edge of a protected forest area – Bannerghatta National Park – where there are still populations of wild elephants. Human-elephant conflict has now become a huge issue – wild elephants leave the forest to raid crops or to follow migratory routes that are now disrupted by buildings and roads. Sometimes elephants get killed, and sometimes people get killed or their livelihoods destroyed. That’s what causes a dilemma which we are now seeing all over the world: which should come first – people or wildlife?

Generally, Christians have sided with people – helping poor villagers whose lives and livelihoods are threatened, even if it is at the expense of wildlife-protection. After all, it’s sometimes argued, doesn’t God always support the poor? Yet perhaps that is not the whole biblical picture. After all, who made the elephants?

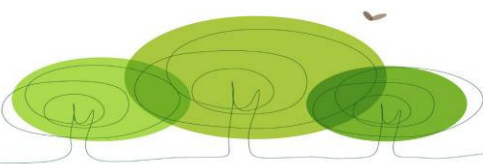
In Bangalore, one Christian organisation – A Rocha India (www.arocha.org/india) – has been wrestling with the dilemma of human-elephant conflict and trying to find ways of protecting both. If God cares about both poor people and the rest of his creation, surely we should too? A Rocha India has worked to research the extent of the problem – looking at where and when elephants are on the move and in what numbers. Perhaps this is the only occasion where counting piles of elephant dung has been an expression of Christian mission! Having learned the extent of the issue, A Rocha India has been working to find suitable methods of keeping people and elephants apart at key times of the year – such as when crops are coming to fruition.

In the experience of A Rocha India, the dilemma of whether people or planet should come first is a false one. God is creator and sustainer both of people and of wildlife. Surely God cares both for people and planet – for the human and the non-human – and we should too? We should seek wherever possible to find win-win solutions – ways that balance the needs of human beings and other species.

From the familiar biblical story of Noah, we can learn some important things to guide us today as we seek to tackle the big issues of Climate Change and environmental destruction without harming human well-being.

2. We’re all in the same boat

Noah’s Ark can be seen as a picture of planet earth today – a planet where all of us are squashed together, often competing for space and resources, yet also a planet where God has made enough for all if we recognise our interdependence. God has made a world where the welfare of each species is dependent on the welfare of many other – where complex ecosystems interact. As 21st century human beings we sometimes deceive ourselves that we can make it on our own, but we can’t. We are as dependent on healthy ecosystems as the smallest plant or insect ... or as the poorest subsistence farmer in a developing country.



To take one example, in recent years there has been a lot of publicity about rapid declines in honey-bee populations. The causes are complex and uncertain: in some parts of the world previously unknown viruses have killed 90%+ of bee populations, in other places it appears that neuro-toxin pesticides, or direct environmental pollution seem to be responsible. Whatever the causes – and to what extent human beings are directly responsible – we are now realising how closely our welfare is tied to the humble honey-bee. It is estimated that 70% of all crops are pollinated by bees, and in the unlikely but scary event that they became extinct, it is estimated that many ecosystems would collapse – and some people claim humanity would be threatened with extinction too. Whether or not that is scaremongering, it illustrates just how closely our welfare is tied to that of other parts of God’s creation. Without bees there would certainly be no land flowing with milk and honey. In God’s creation, all our relationships within the whole of creation, are essential.

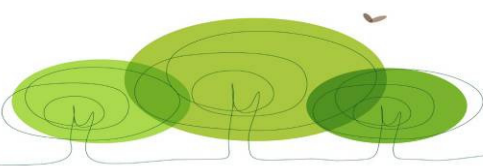
3. God cares about all his creatures

In the story of Noah’s Ark we see that God is equally interested in rescuing the human and the non-human from the threat of disaster. In fact the Ark is largely full of all the other species – with only very few human beings on board! God also makes it clear that the animals, birds and creeping things are not simply included for Noah’s sake, but because they have value in their own right. They are to be included “to keep their various kinds alive throughout the earth” (Genesis 7.3). In other words the God who made every creature and who sustains all life on earth is committed to what today we would call ‘biodiversity conservation’.

Moreover, 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). Somehow, our salvation theology as Christians has got too small. It has focussed largely on God’s saving plans for me and people like me, and forgotten that God might have a bigger picture. Noah reminds us that God has plans that are far bigger than us. As St. Paul reminds us in Colossians 1, 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.

4. Human beings have a job to do

The final thing that Noah reminds us is of how we human beings fit into God’s bigger plans for the whole creation. From God’s perspective we are not simply one randomly evolved species amongst the millions of others. We have been set apart with a particular role and calling within creation. At the time of the great flood God had a plan to save



people and other animals, and he could have implemented that plan by himself. However, he chose to use a human being – the creature made in his image – to fulfil his plans. Noah was the first great conservationist, but in another sense he was also the first great missionary. He was the first person God gave a specific calling and job description to – a mission to fulfil. Noah's mission was very specific – you and I are probably not called to build large wooden boats. Yet the wider picture - looking after God's creation – is something we are all called to. Back in Genesis 1 and 2, the creation accounts show God's very first words to human beings as a call to responsible leadership within creation. In 'The Message' version of Genesis 1.26-27 God says:

"Let us make human beings in our image,
make them reflecting our nature
So they can be responsible for the fish in the sea,
the birds in the air, the cattle,
and, yes, Earth itself,
and every animal that moves on the face of Earth."

This responsibility for creation's welfare is fundamental to who we are as human beings. It is not about having a 'dominion' that results in domination and exploitation. It is rather about reflecting God's image in how we exert our rule and responsibility for creation's well-being. Therefore we can truly say that wildlife conservation is an essential expression of Christian mission. The increasingly well-known and widely adopted 'Five Marks of Mission'¹ explore how following Christ means a full engagement with all that God calls his people into his world to to:

- To proclaim the Good News of the Kingdom
- To teach, baptise and nurture new believers
- To respond to human need by loving service
- To seek to transform unjust structures of society, and last but not least ...
- To strive to safeguard the integrity of creation and sustain and renew the life of the earth

Therefore, to return to where we started, as Christians we must resist the pressure to choose between helping people and helping wildlife. Seeking God's Kingdom on earth as it is in heaven means holding to a vision of all creation working together harmoniously. We must seek lifestyles and policies that both help the world's poor and also protect biodiversity, and resist pressures to drive a wedge between these goals.

Resources:

- Planetwise Pack (DVD & CD-Rom bible studies, sermon outlines etc) available from www.arocha.org.uk/planetwise
- 21M – Church Mission Society DVD on the Five Marks of Mission, available from www.cms-uk.org/21M
- Future Shape – DVD resource produced by Baptist Union, BMS World

¹ <http://www.anglicancommunion.org/ministry/mission/fivemarks.cfm>



Misson, A Rocha - www.bmsworldmission.org/futureshape (also available in Welsh)

Action Suggestions:

- **Personal:** Visit a local nature reserve or park & reflect on God's care for creation and the interdependence of God's creation
- **Church & Community:** Could your Church be involved in a local conservation project (churchyard, school, in partnership with local group)? A Rocha UK (uk@arocha.org) helps churches with this. Your Church could consider A Rocha's Partner Churches Scheme and / or becoming an EcoCongregation (ew.ecocongregation.org)
- **Political:** Deforestation is devastating for biodiversity and a major cause of Climate Change. Ask your MP what their party is doing to tackle deforestation – especially regarding Palm Oil and biofuel production.

