

WHY BIODIVERSITY MATTERS



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.

The beauty, complexity and often sheer oddity of wild nature have a powerful appeal – as the viewing figures for wildlife programmes show.

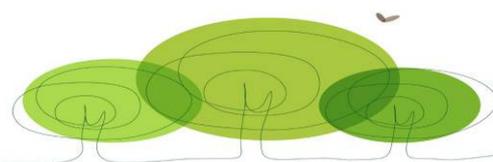
However, why does it matter? Can we go deeper than the liquid eyes of a baby seal, the waddle and beak of a puffin, or the porcelain beauty of an orchid? Today, with media attention on Climate Change, there's a danger we ignore the disastrous changes affecting the millions of species with which we share this planet. According to the U.N., 34,000 plant and 5,200 animal species face extinction, whilst species are disappearing at 50-100 times the natural rate, and rising. Peter Harris, founder and Director of A Rocha International says: "We need to be clear that there is now no shortage of solid science, and no lack of research consensus, about the environmental crisis which is overtaking the earth, God's handiwork."

So why does biodiversity matter? For A Rocha, it's a critical question, and one we're often asked:

- "Why care for animals when there are so many starving people?"
- "Surely souls are more important than seals?"
- "Extinction's always taken place - why worry about a few frogs?"

For conservation organisations there are many good reasons. 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.



These reasons are vital, compelling, and timely. They remind us that the earth is not a convenience store, but a finely-balanced network of interdependent relationships. However, these reasons are ultimately about self-interest: “Biodiversity matters because we need it.”

As a Christian organisation, A Rocha needs to go beyond self-interest. Key A Rocha leaders suggest four further reasons why biodiversity matters.

1. Biodiversity Matters because of the Poor

From her Kenyan perspective, Dr. Stella Simuyu (who works for IUCN - the World Conservation Union- and is an A Rocha International Trustee) reminds us that: “The rural poor depend directly on the natural resource base. This is where their pharmacy is, this is where their supermarket is, this is in fact their fuel station, their power company, their water company. What would happen to you if these things were removed from your local neighbourhood? Therefore we really cannot afford not to invest in environmental conservation.” If, as Christians we share God’s commitment to the poor, we must protect biodiversity.

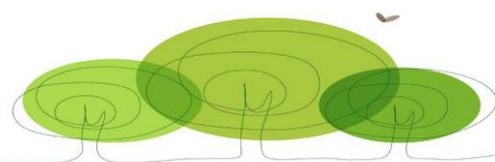
2. Biodiversity Matters to God

Peter Harris, Founder & President of A Rocha International 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)

The value of the non-human creation goes deeper than its value to people. 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. 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.

3. God has entrusted Biodiversity to our care

Even if humans aren’t affected when a species becomes extinct, we are answerable to God. Caring for biodiversity - the birds, the animals, the fish and their habitats - is not optional – it is God’s first command and central to being made in his image (Genesis 1.26-28). It is part of our worship of Jesus, “by whom and for whom all things were made” (Colossians 1.15). It is integral to our mission – praying and seeking God’s Kingdom “**on earth** as in heaven”.



4. Biodiversity Tells us about God, and about ourselves

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. Every time we allow creatures to become extinct by greed or carelessness, we remove something unique of God's self-revelation in creation. As John Stott, one of A Rocha's Council of Reference, 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." Today, as habitats and species suffer around the world, Sir. Ghillean Prance (Chairman of A Rocha International) 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.

Today, many conservationists are searching for a deeper basis for their work. The question "why?" has never been more relevant. A Rocha's projects attempt to demonstrate a Christian response which neither worships biodiversity, nor treats it as value-free. God's creation is, after all, God's, not ours. We are both a very small part of it, and also – amazingly – entrusted with its care. Protecting biodiversity is a high calling indeed.

Rev. Dave Bookless (updated from A Rocha UK magazine article, Autumn 2006)

