

# CHAPTER 55

## A CHRISTIAN VIEW OF BIODIVERSITY

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Most people are distressed by the widespread destruction of species of living things. There is a deep sense that this is a serious loss to the planet. The major problem does not arise from direct approval of the destruction of species and of the simplification of the environment. It arises from the lack of awareness of the consequences of our actions and from the primacy of other concerns. In the pursuit of economic gain, most people do not want to be bothered by questions about biodiversity.

This volume, and the activities of many of its authors, are designed to heighten awareness of what we are doing to our biosphere. The correct assumption is that heightened awareness and intensified attention are the primary needs. People will act more appropriately if they are reminded again and again of the effects of their actions.

The authors of this section have a different role. We were asked to reflect on *why* biodiversity is important. It is not necessary to answer this question for people to recognize its importance. Nevertheless, good answers to our question are urgent, because the intuitive sense of importance is gradually weakened if its justification is not articulated. Also, there are ways of viewing the world that make concern about endangered species appear to be an esoteric or sentimental matter. Indeed, this type of world view is dominant in much of our society. We can all remember many of the disparaging comments that were made about concerns that a species of snail darter interfered with the building of a dam. Staying power in defense of biodiversity probably depends on a world view that grounds it more deeply than sentiment, however natural and healthy that sentiment may be.

The most obvious way to argue for biodiversity is to show how it benefits human beings. In the foregoing sections, much evidence was given for the risk to the

human future that would be presented by a drastic simplification of various ecosystems. Hence there is a strong argument that for the sake of the future of our own species, we need to be concerned with biodiversity.

On the other hand, this argument is limited. Human beings have survived the disappearance of thousands of species with relatively little practical loss. If the only reason for preserving a particular species of insect or fish is its value to us, there will be many occasions when other needs will seem far more pressing. Furthermore, our sense of the importance of biodiversity is in fact not adequately reflected in the practical anthropocentric arguments. We *feel* that other species should have their place, even if they do not benefit us. Can we explain or justify this feeling?

One argument, a valid one I believe, is that all living things have intrinsic value. Not only are they of instrumental value to one another and to us, they also have value in and of themselves. They are of value for themselves. Hence, our destruction of other living things, while inevitable, should never be taken lightly. The reasons for destruction may be good ones—our need for food, for example. But we should not underestimate the cost to others. We should tread lightly on the Earth rather than bulldoze away all inconvenient objects.

Whereas this argument is a good one in itself, it does not go very far to explain the specific value of biodiversity. It does explain why we should avoid unnecessary destruction of living things, but it does not explain why a variety of such things is better than a monoculture. If by destroying the biodiversity of a prairie we can bring about the monoculture of a wheat field, and if the total number of insects and animals that are supported is not fewer, then there would seem to be no loss. The value of members of the lost species is made up by the value of more members of the species that is preserved.

Another argument, also valid in my opinion, is based on relations. The human species is not apart from others but is instead intricately and intimately related to the remainder of the web of life. When we experience the whole biosphere in this way, we experience destruction of any of its species as a diminution of ourselves.

The sense of relatedness has two dimensions. One dimension is genetic. We are kin to other living things. We have a common ancestry that has impressed itself in common genetic elements. The same sensibility that gives us a special sense of responsibility toward other human beings who are related to us can operate to give us a sense of responsibility for the other species to which we are also related.

The second dimension is ontological. We are increasingly realizing that individual entities, including individual human beings, do not exist apart from relations with other beings. We are constituted by our relations. Of course, many of our most important relations are with other human beings. But by no means all. We are related to the whole world of inanimate and animate things. We are part of them, and they are part of us. To feel this relationship with other things is not sentimentality but reality.

Although this is all true, it still does not go far enough to explain our sense of the importance of biodiversity. It does strongly support the sense of the intrinsic value of other living things. It cuts against the widespread Western dualism that places human beings above and outside nature. It works against the dominant

Western ethics that has taught us that only human welfare really matters. It reintegrates us into the web of life and thereby heightens our sense of its importance for us. But it does not tell us specifically why biodiversity has its own inherent value.

The category that comes to mind when we reflect on the value of diversity is aesthetics. At least in traditional art we have thought that the complexity of forms that could be brought into unity and harmony correlated with the greatness of a piece of art. Today, some qualifications would be required, but the general principle still holds. The same applies to experience generally. There is a richness of experience that correlates with the manifold contents that jointly make their contributions.

Much of our negative reaction to the destruction of species seems to stem from this sense that there are possibilities of experience forever lost. We are aware that some of our environments have already been simplified in ways that have impoverished our experience, and we are disturbed at the prospect that such impoverishment continues. Some of the experiences that were possible for us will not be available to our children. We rightly feel this as a loss that we should try to prevent, even at considerable cost in more practical realms of life.

This, too, is a strong and valid argument that goes far to reflect the feelings that are engendered by our awareness of the simplification of the biosphere. Yet it still fails to deal with our total concern. There are myriad species that have lived and died unknown by humans. It is true that their disappearance sets limits on what future generations can experience. But often in ordinary human experience, the ones that are lost do not differ sufficiently from others that remain to affect any but the most perceptive human beings. Judged simply by their potential contribution to the richness of human experience, many species seem to be of limited importance.

There is a deeper sense on our part that even when we are not ourselves able to benefit even aesthetically from the presence of other species, they are still making a contribution to the whole that is irreplaceable. Indeed, in one sense, this is self-evident. Surely the whole is diminished in some way by the loss of any of its parts!

The problem is that it is not so easy to locate this loss. We often try to locate it in human experience of the whole, but we have already seen that this is too limited a locus. It seems to be the whole-as-such that is impoverished. Yet this makes sense only if we can speak of the whole as having its own unity, its own perspective, its own experience.

We theists believe that just such unity, perspective, and experience does characterize the whole. From our point of view, the sense of the importance of biodiversity reflects an often unconscious recognition that the whole is indeed much more than the sum of its parts. Human beings sense that every creature, and especially every species, makes its contribution to the richness of the inclusive or divine experience.

It is this inclusive experience that provides the norm by which all of us are truly evaluated and judged. God knows us better than we know ourselves, and it is this knowledge of us that is the truth about us. For God, I am of no more worth than

my neighbor, and hence when I treat my neighbor as a mere means to my own advantage I act wrongly. For God, no one nation is inherently of more worth than others. Hence, we act wrongly when we seek our own national advantage at the expense of other peoples. For God, every species has value. We do wrong when we treat other species as if they existed only for our sake and as if they could be destroyed with impunity when it is convenient for us to do so.

It would be going too far to say that the value of biodiversity is explicitly taught in the Bible. What we mean by this term presupposes much scientific knowledge that is not reflected in the Jewish and Christian scriptures. Nevertheless, the rudiments of the idea are present, and the extension of Biblical teaching into our own time strongly supports the concerns of biodiversity.

Consider the first chapter of Genesis. This account of creation has had profound effects on Western culture. There are features of this story that have been used to justify a mode of human relation to other creatures that has been profoundly destructive. But let us look at the story again.

One point that is striking in this account is that when God created the various plants and animals, God saw that they were good. There is no suggestion here that they were good because they would be useful to human beings. They were good in themselves and thus contributed to the divine satisfaction. Specifically, the story says that God blessed them and told them to be fruitful and to multiply, each according to its kind.

Now it is true that human beings are presented in a special light. *We are* one species among others, but we are also more than that. We are that species that is made in the image of God, and this is closely related to the assertion that God has given us dominion over other living things.

The resulting sense of rightful dominion has been important to the readers of the Bible, and this sense can be reaffirmed today. However, there is no question but that the story has been interpreted to mean that human beings are free to use and destroy other living things at will; and this interpretation needs to be strongly rejected.

Human beings are placed in a position in relation to other creatures much like that of God in relation to the whole of creation. God has dominion over all. We have dominion over the other creatures. God exercises dominion for the sake of those over whom the dominion is exercised. Similarly, the political ruler of Israel is to rule for the sake of those who are governed. A king who uses his power to amass riches for himself at the expense of the suffering of the ruled is a despot, not one who exercises rightful dominion. There is no justification here to suppose that human dominion over other creatures is a sanction of selfish exploitation. The meaning of the dominion given to us is much better expressed in servanthood and stewardship than in exploitation.

This book's content expresses a profoundly biblical view of the relation of human beings to the other species who with us constitute the biodiversity of the world. It recognizes that we human beings do exercise a determinative power over other creatures. Whether hundreds of thousands of species survive depends on the decisions of humans. It would be pointless to deny that we exercise dominion. But

unlike so many who have asserted their dominion, we are acknowledging that with power comes responsibility—specifically, responsibility to God. To wipe out unnecessarily whole species of those creatures over whom we exercise stewardship is to betray that stewardship and to impoverish the experience of God. It is a crime against our Creator.