

The State of the Planet

This series of three studies aims to help people develop a Christian response to contemporary environmental problems. It will challenge and inform small groups who want to think through the issues together.

It is based on a BBC series presented by David Attenborough, *The State of the Planet*, available as a single video cassette BBCV 7097. This series of programmes is not only attractively presented, but authoritative, containing contributions from some of the leading experts in the field.

Their conclusions are alarming. All the more so because this is not wild scare-mongering by an extremist group. This is the considered view of scientific opinion. In these programmes respected secular scientists state the need for an ethical, even spiritual, response if humanity is to do something effective about the problems emerging in the natural world. Virtually all the quotations in this booklet come from the programmes.

These studies aim to take these ideas further and look at the insights Christian faith can bring to bear on environmental issues.

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“I think it would be a grave injustice to speak of the human species as in some sense evil, even though we are destroying the environment so efficiently at the present time. Basically that was not our intention, and it never was. It was very natural and it was necessary for the ancestral human being to throw everything they had against the wilderness in an attempt to conquer it and then utilise it. The nature of humankind is to expand its population, to gain security, to control, to alter. For millions of years that paid off without undue damage. But then what happened was, as we developed a modern industrial capacity, and then the technoscientific capacity to eliminate entire habitats quickly and efficiently, we succeeded too well and at long last we broke nature. And now, almost too late, we are waking up to the fact that we have overdone it and that we are destroying the very foundation of the environment on which humanity was built.”

Ed Wilson, Harvard University, USA.

Study 1

The State of the Planet: Is there a crisis?

David Attenborough's TV programmes have become something of an international institution. Skilful filmmakers bring incredible images into our homes, but the real appeal of natural history programmes is our wonder of the natural world. The natural world seems to strike something within us, which becomes ever more vivid as we experience it in reality.

This attitude of wonder and simple pleasure in the natural world is reflected in the Bible. Right at the very start, the writer of Genesis paints an amazing picture of creation, saying that each aspect of the world, from sky and stars to plants and people, is 'good' (Genesis chapter 1, verses 4, 12, 19, 21, 25, 31).

It doesn't stop with Genesis either. Many Psalms celebrate creation. Psalm 104 is a particularly clear example. We can also see it in the story of Job. While in despair and trying to make sense of his loss of family, possessions and health and suffering, God silences his questioning by showing him the wonders of creation (Job 38 - 42). In a similar way, Jesus deliberately spends time in the wilderness and sees beauty in the wildflowers rather than the work of human hands (Luke, 12:27, Matthew 6:28 - 29).

A network of relationships

In Christian history, those identified as 'saints' have often shown great sensitivity to nature as well as their fellow human beings. St. Francis and Celtic saints like St Cuthbert are well-known examples of godly men who had a simple, close to nature lifestyle.

Christianity, however, is condemned by many in the green movement, who see it as having a damaging influence on the environment. At the same time, some Christians are deeply sceptical of the environmental movement.

One frequently quoted piece of evidence against a Christian green ethic is the command to our first parents to 'fill the earth and subdue it' (Genesis 1:28). How should we interpret this? Does this mean we should be thrilled at increasing populations? Well, to start with, 'filling' is not the same as over-filling. We should also remember that it is only in the last 100 years, that over-populating the world has become a real prospect. For most of human history a large family was a good way of ensuring the land was worked efficiently and the old were looked after properly.

Similarly, to 'subdue' the natural world does not mean to 'damage' or 'destroy'. There seems little wrong with subduing an area so that it will grow enough crops to support a family, or providing materials to build a house. We have a responsibility to tend natural resources in response to God's provision for us and for the good of all creation. Our actions should be marked by our loving care for the garden in which God placed us, in the same way that ancient Israel saw the ideal of sovereignty as that exercised by the shepherd rulers – David, Solomon and the servant-king, our Lord Himself.

In giving us "dominion", God appointed us as His stewards or care-takers, and will hold us accountable for the way we discharge our responsibility, just like the husband-men and talent-holders in Jesus' parables (Mat. 25:14-30, Luke. 20:9-16).

It is clear that the Bible sees people as different from other animals. We alone are made in God's image (Genesis 1:26). In Genesis 2, the first man is portrayed as having the breath of God in him (Genesis 2: 7), though he is made from the 'dust of the earth'. We are part of the earth; but a unique part, apart from the earth.

The 'State of the Planet' makes clear however, that we are also unique in terms of our destructive potential, although we alone can change our behaviour in response to moral beliefs and challenges. People with or without religious belief can (and do) recognise and accept that we have a role as Stewards.

Principles for behaviour

Christians should always remember that, while we have a special degree of authority within creation, we are accountable to God. We have been appointed as God's stewards. A steward is not the owner of a property but a servant who is given control of it. Our job is to take care of creation and to be answerable to our master.

Stewardship is used within the 'State of the Planet' series to indicate that we hold the world in trust for future generations. Bob May, President of the Royal Society and formerly UK Government Chief Scientist said "There is a key or ethical argument – an argument of stewardship, an argument of handing on a world as rich as the one we inherited." The concept was echoed by Ed Wilson of Harvard University: "It is an extraordinary gift that our generation has received – this natural heritage. To destroy it just seems fundamentally wrong, especially if you think what we are doing to future generations."

Care for future generations is included within the Christian understanding of stewardship, but Christians interpret the idea in a wider and more personal sense.

The Bible not only tells human beings that they have a unique responsibility, it also contains plenty of practical instructions about how to use natural resources. Laws governing the use of the land are set out in Leviticus and Deuteronomy. The biblical writer envisaged that every seventh year, the land would not be tilled and planted and that people would rely on what grew naturally. This would have beneficial effects on soil conservation and help retain soil fertility in the absence of artificial fertilisers. The Sabbath principle is a warning not to try and extract the last drop from people, animals or natural resources.

The nature of the crisis

The first episode of the State of the Planet, shows powerfully how far things have gone wrong. The rate at which species are becoming extinct as a consequence of human activity is staggering. "The past mass extinctions took place over many thousands of years," says Attenborough, "According to some predictions, the present one could happen in a hundred. It will take a great deal of willpower and economic strength if we are to reduce this extinction rate."

The problem is all around us and we are all part of the problem. Recognising this can be the first step in becoming an active part in the solution – in responding to God's call to serve as Stewards of his creation.

For group discussion

Watch the first episode of 'State of the Planet' perhaps before meeting as a group. This will give everyone a basic understanding of the issues. The programme lasts 50 minutes.

After watching the video consider these questions:

- What impression did the 'State of the Planet' make on you?
- Can you think of other significant key environmental issues?
- How often do you think about these issues?

Read Genesis 1:1 - 2:3

This is a famous passage. It often causes controversy because of the so-called 'evolution versus creation' debate. This is unfortunate because it distracts from the very important messages contained in the passage. For our purposes today it does not matter whether we view it as a literal account or a poetic picture of creation. Try to work out what the text is saying about the world and what that implies about what our attitude to it should be:

1. What does Genesis 1 have to say about God's attitudes to creation and mankind's place in it and duties towards it?
2. What is the ultimate reason for the existence of the universe in verse 1?
3. How many times does God say that an aspect of creation is 'good'? If the world is good, why don't Christians see it as a good?
4. Why do you think the sun and moon are not named in verses 14 - 18, but described as 'lights'? (clue: many ancient religions regarded them as deities and worshipped them).
5. We now know that human beings have much in common with the rest of the living world. For example, we share 98% of the code sequence in our DNA with the great apes and 50% with worms. The same DNA is used in plants and animals. The Bible says that only humans are "in God's image". What does this mean?
6. Can we say that the non-human creation was made only to provide resources for people? Do we have the right to do whatever we like to it?

Study 2

The State of the Planet: Why is there a crisis?

Human beings have created derelict industrial sites, open-cast mines, scrap yards and polluted rivers and beaches. Our current actions are producing greater and more rapid changes than ever before. In the second episode of the series David Attenborough asks, "Why is there a crisis?"

Attenborough identifies five human activities that he holds responsible for the damage:

1. Over-harvesting
Forests, fish stocks, fossil fuels
2. Introductions of alien species
Animals in new regions. Disease-causing pathogens moved to uninfected areas or species.
3. Habitat destruction
Clearing forests and swamps displaces and eliminates many creatures
4. Islandization
Pockets of remaining natural habitat are often too small for the animals and plants that inhabit them, resulting in continuing extinctions.
5. Pollution
Land, sea and air are all effected.

Loosing sight of our Creator

Attenborough's analysis of the situation is similar to that of Professor of Environmental Studies Calvin DeWitt¹, of the University of Wisconsin-Madison, in America. He sees seven mechanisms that God provided to keep the world working properly, and contrasts these with seven key ways that this world is being damaged.

Seven mechanisms that God provided with his creation	Seven ways that creation is being degraded by human activity
Regulation of the earth's energy exchange with the sun – maintains stable climate	Alterations of earth's energy exchange with the sun – green house gasses keep in too much heat resulting in global warming
Biogeochemical cycles and soil-building	Soil erosion and loss of fertility
Ecosystem energy transfer and materials recycling	Deforestation
Water purification systems of the biosphere	Water-quality pollution
Biological and ecological fruitfulness	Species extinction
Global circulations of water and air	Waste generation and global toxification
Human ability to learn from creation and live in accord with its laws	Human and cultural degradation

While Attenborough looks purely at physical systems, DeWitt starts to look below the surface to see a link between human action and the environmental outcome.

¹ DeWitt's description is set out in detail in *the Care of Creation*, edited by R.J. Berry, pp.60-79, IVP, 2000

DeWitt argues that the provisions that God set in place when he created the world are challenged because of:

- human alienation from creation and its testimony. Our life-styles tend to keep us isolated from the awesome power and beauty of creation. Consequently we lose sight of its wonder, and as a result, we have a poorer understanding of the God who made it and the benefit that we can have from a relationship with him.
- disconnection between our actions and their environmental effects. We seldom if ever see our food growing, because it comes from shops. Few people who buy petrol from garages have ever seen an oil production platform or refinery.

We may claim to deplore environmental damage, but by acquiescing in the system makes us accomplices in the crime.

Secular assessments

Attenborough's questions about the Planet's crisis are answered by Harvard biologist Ed Wilson: "My belief is that, given enough education, enough awareness, enough sensitivity to problems presented to them, people have the capacity to do amazing things and change their attitude".

The crisis was also addressed by President of the Royal Society Bob May:

"There has never been a more exciting time to be alive, when we are beginning to actually read the 'Book of Life' itself, and we have the potential to apply that understanding for good stewardship and husbandry of this marvellous world that we are heir to. Or we can just thoughtlessly bend it to creating more bits of garbage to amuse ourselves..."

The snag with Wilson's suggestion is that knowledge does not lead automatically to action. It is the "Enlightenment fallacy" to assume that it does. Moreover, May's argument that we must read the Book of Life needs complementing with a requirement to read also the Book of Words – the Bible. Interestingly, Charles Darwin quoted on the title page of the *Origin of Species* words by Francis Bacon, "Let no man think or maintain that one can search too far or be too well studied in the book of God's words or in the book of God's works [i.e. the 'Book of Life']; but rather let everyone endeavour an endless progress or proficience in both".

May calls us "stewards" and "husbanders". The Bible reminds us that we are stewards in that we look after God's property, so that the whole of his creation and not just humanity, can thrive and worship him (e.g. Ps 24).

We may regard the mis-treatment of nature that Attenborough identifies as simply the inevitable consequences of ignorance and greed. The Bible, however, is clear that failure to be responsible stewards is disobedience to God and liable to his punishment (Lev.26, Dt. 28). DeWitt even links the degradations of creation to Rev 11:18, "The time has come... for destroying those who destroy the earth", a verse which did not make much sense until we began to realise the damage we are doing to the Earth.

David Attenborough concluded, "We now know that we are seriously damaging biodiversity and there is a risk that the world we hand on to our next generation will be less rich, poorer in variety than the one we inherited. Why is it that the activities of our one species, aiming at no more than living in reasonable comfort and avoiding hunger, should cause such devastation on the rest of the natural world?"

For group discussion

Review/replay the last five minutes of the second programme

David Attenborough declares that “we now understand which of humanity’s activities inflict the greatest damage on the diversity of animal and plants of this planet. That knowledge is going to be crucial if we are to meet the great challenge of the next century: how to provide a good living standard for an ever-growing number of human beings without inflicting a grave impoverishment on the planet.”

1. Is Attenborough fair in the environmental causes for concern he identifies? Can you suggest others? Read Job 42:3, Is. 5:8-10, Ezekiel. 34:17-18.
2. If there is an environmental crisis, what should *we* do? Read Psalm 111:2, 2 Peter. 2:5-10, Revelation. 6:6, 9:3-10
3. Does God have anything to do with “nature”? Revisit your discussion after Study 1. Read Job 38:1-18, Mark 4:4-41, Luke. 12:27-30, John 3:16 (the word translated ‘world’ is *cosmos* in the original Greek), Colossians. 1: 15-20.
4. Conservationists often talk about ‘sustainable development’ Is this an idea that Christians should support or does it deflect us from waiting and praying about the Lord coming in glory?
5. Do Christians have any particular responsibilities for the environment, more than non-believers?

Study 3

The State of the Planet: The Future of Life

In these programmes David Attenborough has looked at the future of life from an earthbound perspective. Christians should share his anxiety, but have yet more compelling grounds for concern. The Bible puts the history of the earth into an eternal perspective. It begins with God before he had created the world; it ends with a new heaven and earth restored and recreated by God. It declares that humans are not simply answerable to future generations for their management of nature, but that they are answerable to the one God who created them in his image so that they would manage the earth on his behalf.

For Christians, conservation is not just a sentimental hobby indulged in for the sake of their children and grandchildren, but a divine imperative that binds all generations and for which they will answer at the day of judgement.

Some understand the Christian belief in eternal life and heaven as meaning that this life and everything associated with it does not really matter, because it will be destroyed and superseded when Christ returns. This is to select certain images of judgement and suppose that they give the complete picture. When they are held in balance with other biblical pictures of the future, we get a quite different slant.

Back to the future – a return to Eden

The Bible speaks of both the essential goodness of God's first creation and its continuity with the recreated order that will emerge when Christ returns. Genesis 1 repeatedly declares that each act of creation was good. Then God rests on the seventh day, which Hebrews 4 sees as a picture of God's heavenly rest. In other words, Genesis does not simply describe the original state of the world, but God's ideal for the earth.

The last two chapters of the Bible describe the new heavens and earth as a sort of new Garden of Eden, full of water, life-giving trees, gold and precious stones. In Genesis 2 these features are symbols of the presence of God, while Revelation 21-22 uses them to make much the same point about the goal of history.

This vision of a return to the harmony of Eden in the messianic age is part of the message of the prophets. Isaiah 11:6 looks forward to a time when the wolf shall dwell with the lamb and the leopard shall lie down with the kid. Amos 9:13-14 anticipates a golden era when harvests shall be so bountiful that farmers will not have finished reaping one crop before it is time to sow the next.

But the strongest proof of the continuity between the old and new creations is the New Testament doctrine of the resurrection of the body. The Bible does not teach that only our soul is immortal – that is a hangover from ancient Greek beliefs and religions like Hinduism. The Bible proclaims that at the last day all people will be raised in their bodies like Jesus was at his resurrection. The biblical stories of Christ's resurrection show how the resurrected Jesus was both the same and transformed by the resurrection experience. The same will happen for us.

Paul clarifies the idea by comparing our old and new bodies to seeds and the plants that grow from them: 'It is sown in dishonour, it is raised in glory. It is sown in weakness, it is raised in glory' (1 Corinthians 15:43). Given this, it seems reasonable to conclude that God will similarly preserve and transform the rest of creation.

Life in the present – God's work for us

The Lord's Prayer begins by asking for the return of Christ in the words, 'Thy kingdom come'. But it immediately continues: 'Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread.' Christians thus both hope and pray for God's future intervention but request his action now to sustain our present life. If this is how we pray, we ought to act in a way that matches our prayers.

Just as we pray for our food, yet we have to work for it, so we must try to implement God's will in caring for creation as well as praying about it. The Bible advocates a modest lifestyle and condemns over-consumption. Noah, the first man in the Bible to be called perfect, is an archetypal conservationist bringing pairs of animals, male and female, into the ark to ensure they would survive the flood.

Numerous laws in the Old Testament limit the destruction of plants and animals. You must not take a mother bird from a nest containing eggs or young (Deuteronomy 22: 6). Newly planted fruit trees must not be picked until the fourth year, and fruit trees may not be cut down in war (Leviticus 19:23-24; Deuteronomy 20: 19-20). Every seventh year the ground is to be left fallow and allowed to rest: there is to be no sowing or reaping. (Exodus 23:10-11). The OT food laws had the primary function of reminding the Jews that they were the chosen people, but they also had the effect of limiting the hunting of wild animals, because they could eat so few of them.

More obviously relevant to our situation is the biblical concern with wealth and over-consumption. The average American consumes 40 times as much energy as the typical third-world inhabitant and the average European some 20 times as much. One European uses as much energy as 20 Bangladeshis. By Bible standards even the poorest people in Western societies are rich. But Amos condemns the rich of his time for eating and drinking too much (Amos 6:4-6), Isaiah criticises the women of Jerusalem for their fashionable clothes and beautiful jewellery (Isaiah 4: 18-26), and Jesus repeatedly warns us about the danger of accumulating wealth. In the Sermon on the Mount he says: 'Do not lay up for yourselves treasures on earth'.(Matthew 6:19).

As Christians we may also want to add that real success will only come if there is a change in the human heart. It is for this, as well as for social, economic and political change that we should both work and pray.

For group discussion

- David Attenborough advocates limiting long-distance travel, reducing commercial incentives to over-harvesting, using more sustainable energy supplies, less extravagant consumption and restricting world population growth. In short, a change to our societies, our economics, and our politics.
 - Christians should applaud Attenborough's love of nature, which witnesses to the goodness and bounty of God. The Bible sees it as man's duty to care for nature, and condemns the misuse of wealth. It is the wealthy of today's world who contribute most to over-harvesting the world's resources and the pollution of the environment.
 - The Bible looks to a new heaven and earth, where righteousness will dwell. The new earth must be similar to the new resurrected bodies that everyone will be raised with at the last day, that is a glorified, perfected version of our existing bodies. For this reason creation is supremely precious to God and we should work and pray to maintain them to the best of our ability.
1. The Bible gives practical agricultural advice. What lessons could be applied today? Look at Exodus 23:10-11; Leviticus 19:23-24; Deuteronomy 20: 19-20; 22: 6.
 2. Are the Bible's criticisms of the wealthy tenable in our consumer society? Look at Amos 6:4-6; Isaiah 4: 18-26; Matthew 6:19; Luke 12:13-21; 1 Timothy 6: 6 –10; James 5: 1-6.
 3. David Attenborough says: 'The future of life on earth depends on our ability to take action. Many individuals are doing what they can. But real success can only come if there is a real change in our societies, in our economics, and in our politics.'
- How far do you agree with him?
4. 'Never has a sophisticated society done anything so obscene to appease the God of Mammon' (Simon Jenkins in *The Times* commenting on measures to combat the Foot and Mouth crisis). In what ways do we sacrifice the environment for financial gain or personal convenience?
 5. Does it matter if half the species on the earth die out? What place should action and prayer for the environment have in a Christian response to the environmental crisis?
 6. What changes in environmental policies should the British government make? What changes in environmental policies should we be pressing other governments to make?
 7. What can we do as individuals to save the environment?

Further reading

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