



The Compelling Case For Nature

A lawyer argues that nature has a right “to exist unmolested by humanity.”

by Glenn Coe

PART OF OUR ADVENTIST HERITAGE IS TO SEE things in sharp, contrasting terms: right and wrong, good and evil, pure and impure. There is little tolerance for ambiguities, for balancing. It is much easier to adopt positions and standards that do not allow for gradations: “no make-up” rather than “make-up that is tasteful”; “no jewelry” rather than “jewelry that is modest and becoming”; “no movies,” rather than “movies that make a compelling statement.”

Some would advocate a similar absolutist, purist position with respect to nature. I would submit that that position is unconvincing and, in the long run, does not advance the cause of nature. Instead, I suggest assessing the needs of humanity and weighing them against the legitimate and independent right of nature to exist unmolested by humanity.

Glenn Coe, Esq. partner at Hoberman and Pollack, P.C. in Hartford, Connecticut, was for 10 years president of the Association of Adventist Forums, on whose board he still serves. As 1991 honored alumnus at Andrews University, Coe delivered, at Pioneer Memorial Church, the Sabbath morning sermon from which this essay is taken.

In law, the constitutional freedom of the press, freedom of assembly, freedom of speech, even freedom of religion may, under certain circumstances, be limited if there is a competing and compelling state interest. The process calls for the balancing of the individual's constitutional rights and the needs of society. Satisfying society's needs must intrude as little as possible upon the rights of the individual.

Perhaps it is time to accord to Earth a comparable respect to that accorded to constitutional rights. Perhaps we should impose on ourselves the burden of articulating a compelling need before we encroach on nature. Even if “compelling” is too heavy a burden to impose, showing “some” legitimate need would provide a curb to our exploitation of nature.

Here is how this approach might apply to current environmental debates.

It could be argued that the need to wear furs is outweighed by the interests of nature. On the one hand, wearing furs is an insignificant human need, since there are many sufficient alternatives. Furthermore, the process by which animal skins are harvested does not respect

the legitimacy of nature's existence.

One could also reason that alligator and leather handbags, wallets, or belts can be forgone for the same reason, but could justify continued use of leather shoes until a synthetic material is developed that allows feet to breathe adequately to stay healthy.

Controlled harvesting of certain trees for construction of buildings or production of papers would seem to be defensible, provided it is accompanied by replanting and reforestation that substantially repairs the damage done by the original harvesting. Properly handled, this would seem to make unnecessary the cutting down of forests where endangered species make their homes, or the destruction of ancient trees or rain forests.

Harvesting the fish from the sea to provide food would seem to be defensible, provided it is not excessive and not done in a manner that results in significant, unnecessary destruction of other sea life. My wife threatened, along with other friends, to boycott Burger King, the fast food chain, because Burger King used Icelandic fish. In filling its quota for Burger King, Iceland killed whales. Subsequently, Burger King stopped using Icelandic fish and Iceland stopped killing whales, for all of which my wife claims credit.

The ode to creation found in Genesis 1 illustrates the competing and often conflicting values and principles present in the environmental debate. God created life in the trees and grass, life in creatures of the air and of the waters, life in the animals that roam the earth,

and life in humankind. It is clear that this has been a labor of love by our Creator-God who took personal delight in all that he brought into existence. But when God entrusted his creation to his children—the men and women who were told to populate the earth, exercise dominion over all the earth and over his created creatures—God did not abdicate his ownership of his creation. As the Psalmist says: “The earth is the Lord’s” (Psalm 24:1, NIV). This includes all living things that inhabit the earth. “Every animal of the forest is mine,” says the Lord, “and

the cattle on a thousand hills. I know every bird in the mountains, and the creatures of the field are mine” (Psalm 50:10, 11, NIV).

It can be argued that Genesis, indeed the Bible in general, establishes that humanity has a higher priority in God’s creation than animal or plant life; that both may be taken to sustain human life. But as we respond to human

needs by relying on the resources of creation, we must remember that we are accountable for how we fulfill the fiduciary responsibility God has given us for his creation.

It means that Adventist Christians should not begrudge the added cost of responsible, ecological stewardship; the cost of production without pollution. Practically, that means we should strenuously avoid all wastefulness, not only out of solidarity with the poor, but also out of respect for the living environment.

Adventist Christians need to join together in a fresh commitment to caring for God’s creation, a renewed vision of this planet as God’s earth.

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