

Adventist Writing

ON ENVIRONMENTALISM AND CONSERVATION

BY DAVID F. GARNER

What attitudes and ideas have Seventh-day Adventists historically held toward environmentalism and conservation? We must be careful asking such questions because our founders and the denomination itself existed before concepts of environmental conservation were popular. The modern conservation movement did not grow in earnest until the twentieth century, and modern notions of environmentalism until the 1970s. Nevertheless, asking this question is vital to understand how Adventists in modern times should address these issues.

In many ways, the lives of those living in the early nineteenth century had a much smaller ecological footprint than the average person today. They did not drive CO₂ spewing cars and hand made nearly everything they owned. The founders of the Seventh-day Adventist Church lived before or near the start of the second, and much more significant, industrial revolution. The modern environmental conservation movement and its values are primarily a result of the destruction left in the wake of this second industrial revolution. So, these negative effects were not known to those living in the first half of the nineteenth century. To impose our modern concepts of

environmental preservation and “green” living on people of past centuries is erroneous.

With that understanding, we can begin to probe their ideas and theology to discover how modern ideas of conservation and environmentalism align with how they understood the Bible, the earth, and their relation to it. Then we can proceed to discover how Adventists have historically reacted to and addressed the concerns raised by the environmental movement in the twentieth century.

In surveying Adventist writings addressing this topic, it becomes clear our denomination has not prioritized environmental issues as highly as others such as lifestyle, education, and financial stewardship. But care for the environment has been in our theology since the beginning and our Church has not been silent on this topic. The Church has taken steps to address modern environmental concerns, although not through means typically employed by the modern environmental movement. Historically, the environmental conservation movement has principally consisted of promoting governmental and political strategies, along with broadly educating the public on the negative impact we have had on nature since the industrial revolution began. The approach of the mainstream

environmental movement could be called a corporate approach and has historically focused on political activism and governmental legislation. The approach the Seventh-day Adventist Church has followed could be called a personal approach.

Since its early days, the Adventist Church has promoted lifestyle choices that are environmentally friendly, including a vegetarian diet, living frugally, shunning materialism, and maintaining frequent contact with the natural world. Adventist authors from the founders to the present day have explicated the benefits of contact with nature for the whole person, including physical, mental, and spiritual aspects. However, the environmental favorability of these practices was not by the design of the Church's pioneers or later leaders. Rather, by seeking to live according to God's standards of stewardship and following the example of Jesus in seeking close contact with God in nature, the founders inadvertently lived and taught environmentally friendly practices. Thus, we see a Christian lifestyle is environmentally friendly. This is by God's design rather than that of a church organization. The Church pioneers simply sought to follow God's principles of stewardship as laid out in Scripture.

The Adventist Church has employed other means to help preserve our environment for the benefit of humanity. For example, in 1976, Loma Linda University offered their first master's degree in public environmental health. This seems to be the first of its kind within the Adventist education system. The degree program set out to train "men and women how to control and improve living conditions in today's crowded, complex world." The timing of this degree offering is partly in response to the environmental movement that exploded in the late 1960s and early 1970s. This is evident through the language used to advertise the new program, which blatantly admitted the dire environmental problems of the era. The ad began, "Population growth and thoughtless damage to the environment threaten the health of man—indeed, his very existence on earth. Skilled persons are needed immediately to solve the monumental problems of air, water, and land pollution in both developed and developing countries."¹

Other efforts have been present within our Church in various areas, including other degree programs, programs to promote sustainable living and farming practices through overseas missions, and through environmental



The rock window at Egas Port on Santiago Island

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education for students in the Adventist education system at every level down to kindergarten.

The pioneers of the Seventh-day Adventist Church held two ideas in prominence. The first was the sacredness of Saturday as the Sabbath as laid out in the Ten Commandments. They believed the Sabbath was designed by God as a weekly celebration of creation. God identifies Himself as Creator in the fourth Commandment, “the Lord made heaven and earth, the sea, and all that in them is” (Ex. 20:11). The second idea was that of the importance of health. Paul declared, “your body is the temple of the Holy Spirit” (1 Cor. 6:19).

These two ideas, supported by other biblical texts, led them to put a high emphasis on human closeness with nature. They frequently promoted activity in the sunshine and fresh air to boost health and draw the mind to God. It became so central to their ideology that they built their institutions, schools, and hospitals in rural areas surrounded by much nature.

The first major educational institution opened by the Adventists was Battle Creek College. It opened its doors in 1874. Church leaders purchased a 12-acre tract near the Battle Creek Sanitarium. Feeling they did not need so much property for school buildings, they sold off five acres immediately, feeling the remaining was enough. Ellen White was out of town traveling in California at the time of the purchase and resale. Upon her return and realizing what happened, she is said to have wept. Selling off the extra land was a poor decision in her eyes. In vision she was shown that the school should have large grounds and be in a rural setting to provide plenty of land for students to enjoy and work gardens on. This was the recipe she later laid out for all future Adventist schools.²

Gardens and closeness with nature were not only for Adventist institutions. Individual Adventist families have been repeatedly encouraged to move out of the cities, “that the children might be saved.”³ The goal was to foster spiritual as well as physical health. Church leaders encouraged their members to get outside and exercise in the fresh air. More than that, they petitioned them to move out of the city and into the country to avoid demoralizing influences.

In 1876, Ellen White said:

To live in the country would be very beneficial

to them [children]; an active, out-of-door life would develop health of both mind and body. They should have a garden to cultivate, where they might find both amusement and useful employment. The training of plants and flowers tends to the improvement of taste and judgment, while an acquaintance with God’s useful and beautiful creations has a refining and ennobling influence upon the mind, referring it to the Maker and Master of all.⁴

The first to be considered a Sabbath-keeping Adventist was Captain Joseph Bates. He became a vegetarian in 1843, shortly after accepting the Millerite teachings. He was convinced of this move by the writings of Rev. Sylvester Graham (namesake of the graham cracker). Graham’s dietary advice was primarily health motivated, but he also condemned the cruelty of raising and killing animals for food. He wrote, “Stain not the divine gentleness of your natures by one spark of cruelty to the creatures beneath you. Heaven, to protect them, hath placed you at their head! Be not treacherous to the important trust you hold, by murdering those you ought to preserve!”⁵

This sentiment no doubt resonated with Captain Bates. Bates was responsible for converting the Whites to his beliefs in the Sabbath and a vegetarian diet. Ellen White also read Graham thoroughly. A copy of his book can still be seen in her personal library today. Throughout her writings she emphasizes kindness toward animals. She wrote the following in a letter in 1868:

A man cannot be a Christian and allow his temper to fire up at any little accident or annoyance that he may meet, and show that Satan is in him in the place of Jesus Christ. The passionate belaboring [beating] of animals or the disposition to show he is master is often exhibited toward God’s creatures in the streets. This is venting their own anger or impatience upon helpless objects which show they are superior to their masters. They bear all without retaliation. Children, be kind to dumb animals. Never cause them pain unnecessarily. Educate yourselves to habits of kindness. Then it will

become habitual. I will send you a clipping from a paper and you can decide if some dumb beasts are not superior to some men who have allowed themselves to become brutish by their cruel course of action to dumb animals.⁶

James and Ellen White initially switched to a primarily vegetarian diet after her first vision on health in 1863. Mrs. White occasionally ate meat when other food was difficult to come by for most of her life, up to 1894. After giving a lecture in Australia about health, a Catholic woman went up to her and asked if she still ate meat. Upon learning Mrs. White did on occasion, she fell to her knees and tearfully begged Mrs. White to consider the suffering caused to animals by the slaughterhouses and industrial farms. White reported she never again touched it.⁷

Concern for the treatment of animals became a part of the Adventist argument in favor of vegetarianism. In one 1865 pamphlet, H. C. Jackson, an Adventist doctor, wrote,

It is quite bad enough to eat meats at all, however favorable the conditions of health in which animals are placed while living; but to take an ox, sheep, or swine, and shut him up in a dark place, ill-ventilated, and where exercise is impossible, and thus keep him for months, in order to fit him to be eaten by man, is so thoroughly monstrous to one's moral sense as to admit of no justification whatever.⁸

Similar arguments can be seen throughout Adventist publications over the past 175 years.⁹

Treatment of animals also became a moral issue for Ellen White. She wrote of how Jesus treated animals as a child. Ellen White said of Jesus, "Mary often remonstrated with Jesus, and urged Him to conform to the usages of the rabbis. But He could not be persuaded to change His habits of contemplating the works of God and seeking to alleviate the suffering of men or even of dumb animals."¹⁰

Youth ministry workers seized on this idea to teach children that kindness toward animals is a proper Christian virtue. A special effort was made in youth publications to convey this idea. This goes back to the earliest days of Adventist publication ministry. Examples can be found

as early as the 1870s. M. R. Cady, in the *Youth Instructor*, pointed out that God made the animals to be companions to humans. "In return, man was to treat the animals with the spirit of kindness and love."¹¹

An unknown author dedicated an entire article to this topic titled "Kindness To Animals." He instructed, "It is very wrong to torment them or to keep food away from them. God has given them to us, to help make our homes pleasant, our work easy, and to supply many wants of our lives. And in return for these things, he wants us to treat them kindly."¹²

Another article in the *Youth Instructor* recounted the story of Edward F. Fowler, "missionary to horses." Edward was lauded as a hero. For what? He was a hero because he spent his life advocating for more humane treatment of laboring horses. His greatest accomplishment was convincing several large cities in Europe to replace cobblestone streets with a smoother paving material. He argued the bumpy cobble stone made pulling carts a torturous task for horses as they bounced up and down on every paving stone.¹³

Adventists' instructions on kind treatment were not only for pets or domestic animals. They also strove to teach children that wild animals should be treated with kindness. In one example written in the moral-tale style common to the nineteenth century, an older sister suggests to her younger brother that they should keep their youngest sister in a cage. Throughout their dialogue the brother protests how cruel that would be. In an instructive tone the older sister finally asks the brother, if he knows little sister would not like it, why does he keep the wild animals he catches in a cage? She asks him if they would not be happier free to live with their fellow animals?¹⁴

As early environmental writers made the public aware of threats to nature at large, Adventists quickly took notice. Writers such as John Muir, John Burroughs, Aldo Leopold, and others, brought concerns of disappearing wilderness and polluted waterways to the attention of readers in the late 1800s and early 1900s. Theodore Roosevelt started the National Parks System in 1916 to help preserve natural areas. Adventist writers in this time, and throughout the twentieth century, were overwhelmingly positive toward the efforts of environmental conservation. Although they have rarely encouraged governmental or political action to enforce conservation, Adventist writers have mostly

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A frigate bird, known as the pirate of the Galápagos for stealing the eggs of other birds

Photo: Gerald Wraslow

reacted positively towards such measures. When State or Federal governments have set aside land preserves, Adventists were appreciative.

These early environmental writers helped Adventists see the importance of protecting the land and promoting good stewardship of nature. Adventist writers in the late nineteenth century were already aware of the Bible's instruction that we are stewards of all God's gifts, including the land. A. G. Daniells wrote in 1899: "Christ as owner of the world and all that pertains to it has made man steward over His possessions."¹⁵ They practiced and taught the biblical principles of agriculture for farming that helped to maintain the health and productivity of the soil in the long term.¹⁶ These early statements represent a rare occurrence. Stewardship of the land was a topic Adventists held as significant, yet rarely addressed in print or conversation.

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A 1929 book by LeRoy Edwin, *Stewardship In Its Larger Aspects*, attributed the very idea of individual property ownership to pagan religious philosophy. The

author credits the concept to impersonal pagan deities who had little to no regard for the affairs of this life. This idea has become entrenched in Western philosophy and law thanks to the influence of Roman law. The author believes we have used this idea to excuse our abuse of the land and given no thought to the claims of God as true owner.¹⁸

The concept of land stewardship sounds very modern and innovative in the twenty-first century, as this point of land abuse is often made by environmentalists today. Yet Adventists have been making this critique for decades. They have a long tradition of criticizing the excesses and materialism in modern society. At times they have even denounced environmentalists for being too cautious in their conservation. In one article they even critiqued John Muir for not going far enough in his conservation philosophy.¹⁹

In a 1945 issue of *The Journal of True Education*, an article by Margaret Drown was published on the importance of teaching children an appreciation for nature. The author gave the following as a key reason, "A knowledge of natural resources and wildlife creates an interest in them and a desire to protect them. Future citizens must know the need for conservation and learn what they themselves can do about it."²⁰

In 1946, likely with the destruction of WWII fresh in his mind, Ellis Colson declared in the *Northern Union Outlook*, "Man holds a steward relationship to God for the land, the animals, the resources and the wealth of the world, but most men, in their conquest for wealth and power, have forgotten their dependency upon God."²¹

During the Progressive Era, nature study became commonplace among public schools. Adventists embraced this trend enthusiastically as an opportunity to educate children how to see the Creator in nature and to teach spiritual lessons like stewardship. Numerous “nature study” books were recommended and advertised throughout Adventist publications, starting in the late 1800s.²² Books on scientific nature study, as well as biblical nature study that used nature to teach spiritual lessons, were popular. In fact, Adventists have never lost their enthusiasm for these kinds of books and media. Nature-based content can be found today in Adventist publications such as youth magazines, Adventist TV programs, VBS programs, summer camps, and schools.

Adventists have frequently promoted the idea that we should learn useful lessons from nature: practical, moral, spiritual, general life lessons. In *The Bible Echo*, an article was dedicated entirely to describing the majesty and awe-inspiring power of mountains. It then discussed the significance of mountains in the Bible.²³ Adventists realized that creation was meant to be a revelation of God’s character. In an outdoor sermon overlooking a peaceful grove and lake, Ellen White said, “such scenes should be sacredly regarded by us.” She reminded her hearers that Jesus frequently taught in such settings. “He had special reasons for choosing these natural sanctuaries; the familiar objects of nature were thus presented to the eyes of his hearers, and he used those objects to simplify his teachings.”²⁴ What a contrast to modern times where the artificial indoor sanctuary is regarded with greater reverence than the natural outdoor sanctuary.

A 1907 article in *Good Health* claimed in a bold title that nature is, “Our Natural Birthright.” It stated,

Nature is yours to enjoy, could you but realize it. For you the thrush sings, and the violets bloom, and the trees put on their spring robes of daintiest green. For you the sun shines, and the refreshing showers come down and water the earth. But you need a heart to appreciate and understand this beauty, and you need observing eyes to see it. You need to cultivate the outdoor spirit and endeavor as far as possible to bring it into your daily work.²⁵

This sentiment in no way was meant to embolden or justify selfish use and destruction of nature, but to increase personal appreciation and a desire to enjoy nature.

One of the biggest reasons Adventists were enthusiastic about nature was the health benefits it offered. Along with promotion of the health benefits of vegetarianism, was the promotion of outdoor activity, especially in the garden. It was stated in *Health, or How to Live*, Mrs. White’s first major publication on health from 1865, that, “The healthiness of a dwelling is increased very considerably, by allowing to it a capacious [large] yard, which may either be well paved, laid down in grass, or cultivated as a flower garden.”²⁶ As previously mentioned, this became the ideal standard for all Seventh-day Adventist institutions.

Adventist theology led them to understand, “it is God’s Word, continually spoken to the earth, that makes the harvest.”²⁷ Out of this understanding flowed a logical progression that participation in the process of growing food would bring Christians closer to God. Thus, from its infancy, Adventism has strongly promoted gardening, which offered a practical means of exercise that bore a usable end-product.

Missionary gardens were promoted heavily throughout the late nineteenth century as the most expedient method of doing this. Missionary gardens were popular and heavily encourage in Seventh-day Adventist publications for both adults and youth. These gardens could be grown on your property or on a “vacant lot” near your home. The intention was to sell the crops and donate the money to medical mission work. Many goals were accomplished at once by the missionary garden; outdoor exercise in fresh air improved personal health while also producing a cash crop that could support you and the extra proceeds donated to the Lord’s work. In 1897, J. H. Kellogg wrote in *The Indicator*, “The spare hours spent in the cultivation of such a crop [for mission work] may be as truly hours of communion with God as a church service or a prayer meeting.”²⁸ But gardens were not just for those in the country or used to hard labor. Several articles offered praise of window gardens in city apartments and homes.²⁹ One 1920 issue of *Good Health*, an Adventist health magazine, advocated gardening as a hobby for the average city woman.³⁰

The rise of Pathfinders gives an interesting window into the stewardship philosophy of Seventh-day Adventists.

The Boy Scouts came to the United States in 1911 and spread like wildfire. From the outset, the Boy Scouts placed an emphasis on ethics and stewardship when using outdoor spaces. It taught much stricter standards than those practiced by the typical camper of the time. It taught an appreciation and respect for wild places. Camping was fast becoming a favorite pastime in the United States, which aided the spread of Boy Scouts. Adventist Youth workers quickly adopted both of these trends and immediately saw the value to youth ministry and to imparting Christian and especially Adventist values. While other Protestant denominations also quickly noticed this and started Boy Scout troops in their local church, Adventist youth workers soon felt Boy Scouts did not emphasize Christian teachings as much as they would like.

So, Adventists became one of the first churches to start their own spin-off of the Scouts, Pathfinders. They also wanted girls to have the lessons and so created co-ed clubs. Camping was a central part of Pathfinder groups as early as 1926, as was nature study.³¹ This has always been a central aspect of the program. In fact, “nature” is the largest category of Pathfinder honors today.

Pathfinder programs rapidly spread to many conferences because Adventists have always held a high view of nature. We have often pointed to nature as evidence of God’s character and for lessons on how to become more like Him. Thus, Pathfinders was a natural application of these ideas. Not only were Adventists one of the earliest denominations to adopt a Boy Scout-like program, but they have also been one of the most successful. Pathfinders has a presence in the most countries worldwide, and the largest membership of any similar program the author could identify.³²

Long before minimalism was trendy, Adventists were raising awareness of modern societies’ wastefulness. Throughout its history, the Church has emphasized living a simple life that does not overindulge in materialism. This comes from one of Christ’s most basic teachings, “lay up for yourselves treasures in heaven” (Matt. 6:20). In a critique that sounds surprisingly modern, one author said, more than a hundred years ago, “Civilized peoples have been too prosperous for their own good, and in almost every stratum of society there has been excessive eating and drinking and unnecessary and inexcusable waste.”³³

In a 1910 article in *Christian Education*, titled “True School Economy,” H. G. Lucas, an academy principle, gives advice on how to operate an Adventist school. Among his top advice is, “Do not waste water. Avoid waste in feeding cattle and horses. Avoid waste in fuel.”³⁴ He desired schools to run economically to better carry out their mission to offer affordable Christian education.

As environmental concerns became a prominent issue in the mid-twentieth century, Adventists addressed these topics more frequently. A 1950 article in *The Signs of the Times* warned, “Today’s industrial world is stranger than the fiction of yesteryear. Lamentably, in far too many instances, the wizardry of shop and factory is used to corrupt, pollute and destroy.”³⁵

In a surprisingly insightful article by *Audubon News*, quoted in the *Youth’s Instructor*, and published a full year ahead of Rachel Carson’s *Silent Spring*, it was stated that,

Plants are the first link in every food chain. Insects eat plants, but other insects and many animals help control insect numbers. They do it better, and cheaper—we are learning—than man can do it with insecticides. Increasingly, scientists are urging that we let nature do as much of the job of controlling pests as possible. Every plant and animal plays a role in regulating nature’s world. Man is left to regulate himself. Since his actions could deplete the natural world of its riches, he has to think of the future and leave enough for the generations of men to follow.³⁶

The significance of the timing of this article is that Rachel Carson’s book is credited with single-handedly starting the modern environmental movement. Her book made similar points about avoiding insecticides and led to the banning of DDT, the most widely used insecticide at the time. It brought concerns about environmental degradation and mass pollution from chemical farming into the public spotlight. It made going green trendy. Adventists later recommended her book to readers. Additionally, in 1973, Pathfinder leadership at the General Conference released an honor titled Environmental Conservation. Its requirements include studying the effects of pollution and reading and drafting a book report on Carson’s *Silent Spring*.

A different writer gives us more insight into Adventists' understanding of humanity's relationship to nature. Arthur L. Bietz said,

To believe in God as the Creator is to root creation in love as revealed in Jesus. Jesus shows us that the purpose of Creation is holy love, and that His holy love is also the final cause of Creation. In Jesus Christ the ideal reason for Creation is disclosed. The Old Testament narrative of Creation must be understood from the viewpoint of love as it is seen in Jesus in order for it to have meaning. The purpose of the Creation truth is not to provide an argument but to point to a relationship of love with God.³⁷

This explains why Adventists have long put a high emphasis on looking to nature as God's other revelation about Himself. It is second only to the Bible.

As the modern environmental movement became a hot-button political topic in the 1970s, Adventists were sympathetic. When addressing this topic, they confined their influence to writing about the negative health results of pollution. They chose a semi-separatist approach and rarely joined the public discourse on solutions. They did at times educate readers on ways to minimize pollution in their own homes to benefit personal health, but even this was rare. When asked why they did not do more to combat major environmental concerns, Mervyn Maxwell responded, "Adventists are trying to meet people's practical needs; yet they have not become officially involved in the anti-pollution crusade. Why not? Because one denomination cannot do everything effectively."³⁸

While one author's opinion does not represent the whole of Adventism, his response does portray a wider

trend of separation since the 1970s from the mainstream environmental conservation movement. This seems odd given the Adventist commitment to its health message and especially to the Sabbath as a memorial of creation. Celeste Ryan Blyden, a life-long Adventist, summed it up well: "Of all God's people, it seems odd that we would be so silent on the issue. Yet I have not heard one sermon, seen one magazine or Adventist television program, or read any Sabbath School lessons on the topic."³⁹

Adventists have historically chosen to focus a lot of attention on discussing stewardship of money. This is even more true today. Stewardship Ministries, a department of the North American Division tasked with educating church members in stewardship, provides insight in its mission statement, "Our mission is to inspire God's people to fund the message of Hope and Wholeness."⁴⁰ Their primary purpose is to educate members on the importance of paying tithes and offerings into the Church. One might wonder if "stewardship ministries" has simply become a means by which the Church seeks out more money. Stewardship, as defined by numerous Adventist publications, encompasses everything God has given, body, mind, talents, time, natural resources, and yes, our



A land iguana speaks to the visitors passing by.

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money. Why has stewardship ministry become so narrowly defined? Do church members no longer require education on stewardship of other areas? As Blyden noted, “I don’t believe that when God called us to be faithful stewards, He was only speaking about tithes.”⁴¹

A great opportunity is being missed by neglecting to place higher emphasis on educating our church members and non-church members on the importance of creation stewardship. Revelation says Jesus is coming quickly and He brings our reward with Him. He comes to “destroy those that destroy the earth” (Rev. 11:18). We should be shouting this message from the mountain tops. It should be the headline in every major Church publication. If that author’s defense for Adventists’ lack of emphasis on environmental stewardship was true in 1970, that a single church can only do so many things effectively, it is much less of an excuse today. Our Church’s membership has swelled to more than ten times the size it was in 1970; today it is somewhere over 20 million.⁴²

A recent report by the United Nations concluded that faith-based communities can have an “immense” impact on sustainable living and development. They own or control 8% of the earth’s total inhabitable land, a figure of which the Adventist Church is certainly a part. But the size of faith-based communities’ influence is much greater than other institutions or corporations. The way a faith-based community manages its land sets an example to its members. It can support its local community through actions such as providing affordable food through a community garden grown on church property. It can educate its parishioners on better sustainable practices. Investments in green technology such as more efficient appliances and lighting or solar power can reduce operating costs and free up money for missions or outreach. Religious communities can do more than most because they have an enormous audience.⁴³

While some Adventists may still look on modern environmentalism with suspicion, Ernest Steed, in a 1980 *Adventist Review* issue, saw environmentalism as a positive movement that fosters self-control.⁴⁴ Adventists have mostly written positively about the modern environmental conservation movement since its inception. But they have also seen fit to criticize it at times. They have repeatedly pointed out the error of deifying nature. In the late ’70s and early ’80s, New Age philosophy enthusiastically took

up the cause of environmentalism. This sometimes led to far leftist eco-terrorism and earth-over-human ideology. Conservative Christians quickly distanced themselves from all left-wing agendas in the culture wars. Adventists have routinely pointed out that this brand of environmentalism is inconsistent with biblical teachings.⁴⁵

Mainline churches and denominations took up the cause of environmentalism also. Meanwhile, some conservative evangelicals not only denied the problems of environmental degradation but actively fought against solutions. The Adventist Church fell somewhere in-between. Adventist writers since the ’80s have continued to affirm environmental stewardship as a Christian duty.

In 1990, B. L. Vickery wrote in the *Record*:

Scripture repeatedly declares God’s sovereignty of the earth. Granted Adventism’s unequivocal loyalty to the creation account, we would be remiss if we collectively were not strong on the biblical concept of conservation. Salvation entails full restoration and regeneration—and it extends even to the environment. . . . Genesis makes it clear that nature is a precious resource to be used judiciously. Polluting and abusing the earth is tantamount to vandalising God’s neighbourhood! Christians should respect and honour God’s creation regardless of whether Christ’s coming is near or not.⁴⁶

The next year, Bruce Manners wrote,

Reports in the media have certainly helped to raise my awareness of environmental issues. But the real reason I’m becoming more green is because I’m a Seventh-day Adventist. Let me explain. Seventh-day Adventists worship on the seventh day—it’s part of our name. God created the earth and then rested on the seventh day. . . . It’s a memorial to His creative work. The Ten Commandments emphasize the need to remember the Sabbath day. They state that we should keep the day holy because of God’s creative power. And the three angels’ messages of Revelation 14 emphasize yet again the worship of the One who created. The Bible

begins and ends with a call to worship on the Sabbath.

Every Sabbath is a memorial of creation. We who take the time every week to remember the Creator should be concerned about His creation. And we have better reasons than any New Age-inspired activists. . . . every tree felled unnecessarily, every animal killed for vanity, every bit of preventable pollution should concern those who worship the Creator.⁴⁷

Creation stewardship was specifically added to the fundamental beliefs of the Church in the 1980s. It is clearly defined in the sixth fundamental belief. The following statement appears in the classic book *Seventh-day Adventists Believe* on the 27 Fundamental Beliefs of the Church (since updated to 28 beliefs).

Stewardship of the Earth: Modern science has made earth one vast laboratory for research and experimentation. Such research yields many benefits, but the industrial revolution has also resulted in air, water, and land pollution. Technology, in some instances, has manipulated nature rather than managing it wisely.

We are stewards of this world and should do everything to maintain life on all levels by keeping the ecological balance intact. In His coming advent, Christ will “destroy those who destroy the earth” (Rev. 11:18). From this perspective Christian stewards are responsible not only for their own possessions but for the world around them.⁴⁸

The General Conference affirmed the Church’s stance on the issue in a formal statement first made in 1992. “Since human poverty and environmental degradation are interrelated, we pledge ourselves to improve the quality of life for all people. Our goal is a sustainable development of resources while meeting human needs.”⁴⁹ The GC has since reaffirmed this stance with other statements.⁵⁰ When the Church first put forth this statement, they were serious about their commitment.

The Church sponsored a float in the 1992 Rose Parade that was witnessed by one billion people! They decorated it with animals and a slogan that read, “Enjoying and Caring for Nature.” Media commentators pronounced the Seventh-day Adventists bona fide environmentalists.⁵¹

Creation stewardship is considered a core doctrine of the Seventh-day Adventist Church. Sadly, little has been done to act on these beliefs, even in recent decades with the popularity of “going green.” Seventh-day Adventists profess to believe in creation stewardship, but in practice it is mostly a back-burner issue. For much of the twentieth century, the Church and most church members have put minimal active effort toward creation stewardship practices and education.

John Baldwin, a prominent Adventist theologian from Andrews, called Adventists to be more active in creation stewardship in 2001. He said, “it’s time to move vigorously ahead on this.”⁵² Little action seems to have taken place across the global Church for at least a decade. Now well into the twenty-first century, things seem to be changing with the Church leadership and local church communities around the world.

In 2009, the General Conference, in partnership with the Geoscience Research Institute at Loma Linda University, designated October 24, 2009, as Creation Sabbath. A website was created, and the word spread. Churches around the world were called to center their church service around the theme of “Worshiping God as our Creator.”⁵³ The website declared two goals of Creation Sabbath: to feature the Creator God, “In our worship times,” and “As we communicate within our communities.”⁵⁴ The goal behind this campaign was to emphasize the Church’s stance on creation-origins theology as opposed to evolution. The timing of the first Creation Sabbath was strategic, as 2009 was widely celebrated as the 200th anniversary of Charles Darwin’s birthday.⁵⁵ But October 24 has since been designated as an official annual Sabbath theme by the General Conference. It provides a prime opportunity to highlight the Church’s stance on environmental stewardship.

In 2009, Bill Knott, editor of the *Adventist Review*, reminded readers of the fallacy of “going green” for its trendiness. He encouraged Adventists to consider and implement greener practices and technology where reasonable. However, we should never lose focus of our

number one goal. He summarized, “our ‘going green’ must take a respectful second place to the crimson story of His cross.”⁵⁶

At the Fourth International Bible Conference in Rome, Italy, held in 2018, many Adventist Bible scholars, teachers, and pastors gathered for the annual meeting. One of the major topics was Adventists’ actions toward climate change. An article by Marcos Paseggi in the *Review* reported that scholars at the Bible Conference concluded, “The fact that the world’s climate is changing for the worse should be a motivation to double our evangelistic and social efforts as God’s remnant church.”⁵⁷ Two speakers that stood out from the conference are noteworthy.

Andrews University Associate Professor of Hebrew Bible A. Rahel Wells pointed out that the Seventh-day Adventist understanding of end-time events acknowledges that after the second coming the entire earth will burn. This understanding has led many to place environmental care on the backburner, “since the earth will be renewed by God anyway.” The *Review* article summarized her thoughts on this rationale, “it is a position that overlooks the clear descriptions of God’s care for the earth and human ecological responsibility in the original creation, the new earth, and all laws for the present.”⁵⁸

Antillean Adventist University Professor Silvia Schimpf-Torresblanca said, “it is usual for the environmentalists’ agenda to be accompanied by a political battle between governments, financial consortiums, scientists, and others.” “It is something,” she said, “that has led Adventists to withdraw and not get involved. But as Adventist pioneers showed, being good stewards of God’s creation should often prompt us to be socially and politically involved . . . because many [of these] issues can be better addressed at broader social levels.”⁵⁹

Spectrum has been especially vocal about this topic since the magazine’s inception. It has wrestled with the nuances and complexities of creation stewardship more than most other Adventist publications. Here are some examples. “Because we believe in God the Creator, we believe we are to love the earth and care for it. But we also know we are to expect and long for the end of the world and the creation of a new earth. How are we to bring these two imperatives together?” wondered Berry Casey in a 1983 *Spectrum* article.⁶⁰ Mark Cimino optimistically hoped in a 1990 article that, “Ideally, we could emphasize

both without compromising either.”⁶¹

In a 2003 intellectual treatise on the theology of ecology, writer Warren Trenchard wrote,

Although God has promised to recreate the physical world in the future, believers may even now begin not only to prepare for that restoration but also to live an environmentally conscious and active lifestyle. God not only acted definitively in Jesus to overcome the deterioration of humans and their world caused by the rebellion but also in the form of the Holy Spirit acts in the interim to provide this hope and to give believers this advance experience of the future restoration of all things.⁶²

In other words, we can participate with God in the restoration of creation even now by working to better live in harmony with nature and restoring it where possible. Rather than waging a war against nature, we can learn to operate within the laws God set up to govern the natural world.

Sigve K. Tonstad has written extensively on this topic, including contributions to *The Earth Bible Commentary*. In an article for *Spectrum*, he addressed the common perspective Western Christians have toward the lower animals. We often treat them as commodity. We see no purpose for them beyond their immediate utility to humankind. We factory farm animals for meat, we kill “pests” we deem unworthy of life. Many point to the blessing in Genesis where God granted Adam and Eve dominion over earth. This view is partly to blame for modern environmental problems. Tonstad points out that God also blessed the nonhuman creatures, (see Gen. 1:22). The Genesis accounts provides nonhuman creation with a “bill of rights.” “From the point of view of the Bible, interest in nonhuman creatures and the earth is not motivated by an ecological state of emergency but by recognition of the dignity and rights of the rest of the created order.” He makes a strong case that an Adventist view of creation stewardship is a ready-made bridge we can use to connect with others. In it we can find common ground upon which to converse in our efforts to share the gospel.⁶³

In yet another article on this topic, David J. B. Trim explored the concept of Adventist political involvement on

environmental issues. He reviewed Ellen White's advice to avoid aligning ourselves with a specific party or candidate and concluded that this does not negate the importance of our involvement in the political sphere, as Ellen White encouraged church members to vote on important issues such as temperance, abolition, and separation of church and state. Thus, our involvement in encouraging environmental solutions, especially where they protect the poor and vulnerable, is paramount.⁶⁴

The best summary of this topic comes from a 1971 *Spectrum* article written by Ervil D. Clark.

What, then, is the Christian's responsibility to his environment? The solution to the problems of man and the environment lies in the fundamental truth of Adventism: Christ's soon return and his promise to make all things new. But only the Godhead know the end from the beginning, and how soon is soon! We must live as if we will be here for but a day, but plan for it to be a hundred years.⁶⁵

Action has been taken by Adventists in recent years to address our ecological footprint and broaden educational efforts regarding creation stewardship.

In 2012, the Pathfinder leadership released two new honors addressing recycling. In 2019, a new honor called Stewardship was added. Several of the requirements are dedicated to helping Pathfinders gain a knowledge of biblical principles of stewardship and practical ways to live those in daily life. These are just a few of several environmental stewardship-oriented honors that have been released in the last decade. They range from alternative fuels to renewable energy and many environmental science topics.

In 2011, Southern Adventist University formed a committee for environmental sustainability that created a Green Campus Initiative with a 12-point process to make the college operations more sustainable.⁶⁶ Fresno Adventist Academy, in California, started a 13-acre farm in 2014. Not only does the farm offer jobs for school students, while also teaching them essential skills for life, but it is also an example to the surrounding community, showing that large-scale organic farming is possible and sustainable.⁶⁷ In 2017, Oakwood University restarted

Some of the young people in my church became frustrated by all the single-use disposable plates and utensils thrown away every potluck. So, they asked the church to switch to regular plates and flatware and volunteered to help wash the dishes so the deaconesses would not be left with all the work.

its farm with a goal of providing fresh organic produce to students and educating local farmers on sustainable practices.⁶⁸ In 2018, Madison Academy in Tennessee started a new agricultural endeavor that provides jobs to students on campus. The produce is sold to local community members through a design called community-supported agriculture. Essentially, a customer pays a subscription for a weekly box of items. This garden is produced sustainably and entirely organically.⁶⁹ Walla Walla University started a community garden project just last year (2020).⁷⁰

Forest kindergarten programs have been started at several of the elementary schools in my home conference in the last 3–4 years. These have also appeared at schools in California, Georgia, Virginia and elsewhere. These programs encourage their students to play outside for hours every week as part of the curriculum. The forest becomes the classroom where lessons are taught. Grades have been shown to stay the same or even go up for most students compared to traditional classroom-only teaching. These programs will create a lifelong connection to the natural world that will foster a relationship with the Creator.

While leaders of our denomination seem to be talking about and making a more considerable effort on this front, efforts are also being made at the local level. Many of our elementary schools, are planting gardens that the students help manage. Some churches have started community gardens on church property. The food is often donated to families in need. My own local church installed paper

recycling bins to collect used bulletins which had previously gone to landfills. Some of the young people in my church became frustrated by all the single-use disposable plates and utensils thrown away every potluck. So, they asked the church to switch to regular plates and flatware and volunteered to help wash the dishes so the deaconesses would not be left with all the work. The money saved is being repurposed toward evangelistic efforts.

Several of our colleges offer ecology and environmental science classes. Some have done so for several years. These classes educate students on the challenges present in the natural world including pollution mitigation, conservation, and public land management. Pacific Union College offers a general education course wholly dedicated to studying pollution and the environment.⁷¹ Loma Linda University offers a full degree program in this area. Other schools offer degrees in biology and other science areas that allow students to pursue a career studying God's creation.⁷²

Things are not only happening in the United States. Adventists in other countries are also making efforts to raise awareness and improve our practices of creation stewardship. Two conference offices in Germany recently released a document calling for Adventists to practice a "sustainable faith." It emphasized the ways its own employees could reduce waste in church offices.⁷³ In 2019, over 5,000 Adventists, including many Pathfinder clubs, participated in a city-wide cleanup day in Tuxtla, Mexico. The church members picked up trash, swept walkways, and held up signs encouraging residence of Tuxtla to keep their city beautiful. Church members saw it as an opportunity to share a message of the importance of environmental care with fellow residents. The COVID-19 pandemic prevented the event happening in 2020.⁷⁴

There are many other efforts being made around the world, too many to list here. These efforts are made by individuals who feel called to fulfill the biblical directive of creation stewardship. However, we should not join the environmental movement because it is a trend. These thoughts from the *Australian Record* are important to keep in mind.

Individual church members should be seen to support such initiatives. Didn't Jesus say, "Let your light so shine . . . that they may see your good works"? God clearly states that He "will

destroy them that destroy the earth." But we don't become green to avoid His wrath. Nor do we espouse such principles because we believe this world will go on forever if we treat it right. We "look for new heavens and a new earth." We adopt conservationism because we have a responsibility as caretakers for what the Creator has given us. But we have a weightier responsibility through our consistent, ethical behaviour to prepare humanity for a better world to come.⁷⁵

Our denomination cares deeply about God's creation and has since its beginning. We Adventists have a responsibility to be good stewards of the earth. Pollution and global warming hurt the poor most harshly as they have the fewest resources to combat them. What is more Christian than helping the poor? If living an "eco-friendly" life means producing less pollution that harms poor individuals, isn't that a worthy goal for Adventists everywhere? Our Church believes in creation care. Perhaps we just need to try a little harder to show that to the world. It is part of our witness to the world that there is still a Creator who cares about the plight of His children and other creatures.⁷⁶ It strengthens our testimony to the importance of the Sabbath, a weekly celebration of creation. Living out the principles of creation stewardship remind us of the soon return of Christ by encouraging us to focus on building heavenly treasure rather than collecting material possessions. In closing, here is a call to action from the *In His Steps* baptismal study guides: "Will I live differently when I totally accept the fact that God has placed me here and given me the responsibility to care for his creation?"⁷⁷

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