



# Biodiversity and the Bible

Calvin B. DeWitt

*Is it surprising that thoughtful contemplation of deeply held beliefs and tenets in this world of unending change should produce new insights? It is only surprising, perhaps, that we don't meditate more about these guideposts to life or that we don't always think that all things created are precious. Legislative speakers and leaders may be taken aback in the months and years to come! (See also "A Charter for Earth" in Biodiversity Initiatives and Successes on page 27.) [D.E.M.]*

## INTRODUCTION

Over the past century, the focus of most religious groups has been on human beings. Now, however, there are powerful and effective calls to environmental stewardship and protection of God's creation, creatures, and their habitats. The result is an awakening of people and governments to human responsibility for natural biodiversity.

In their Joint Appeal by Religion and Science for the Environment in Washington, DC in 1992 some 250 key leaders in religion and science signed a statement in which they agreed to set aside their differences to work together to address the state of the global environment. This in turn resulted in the formation of the National Religious Partnership for the Environment in 1993 — a partnership among four US religious groups: the Coalition on the Environment and Jewish Life, the United States Catholic Conference, the National Council of Churches, and the Evangelical Environmental Network (EEN) — all of which adhere in varying degrees to the teachings of the Bible, and thus are all "People of the Book."

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*Calvin B. DeWitt, Professor, Institute for Environmental Studies, University of Wisconsin-Madison, 550 N. Park Street, Madison, Wisconsin 53706. E-mail: <cbdewitt@facstaff.wisc.edu>*

Dramatically, on 31 January 1996, the evangelical quarter of the partnership announced at a news conference in Washington, that the "Endangered Species Act is OUR Noah's Ark— Congress and special interests are trying to sink it!" (See *Global biodiversity* 5(4): 20–21 for more details.) Coming at a time when legislation was being proposed that would seriously weaken the current Act, this timely pronouncement was picked up by all of the major radio, television, and print media, including "As it Happens" on CBC radio and "All Things Considered" on National Public Radio. The story of Noah — until then considered archaic and irrelevant by many — emerged in an instant, dramatically altering the ground on which endangered species and biodiversity were being argued. Many conservative members of the US Congress came to recognize that responsibility before their Creator superseded all other interests, and that this responsibility included stewardship of the Earth. At the same time moderate and liberal members "unpacked" the story they had learned as children, finding some persistent truths that transformed their thinking.

Recorded in chapters 6 through 9 in the book of Genesis, the story of Noah addresses many pressing current questions: Is saving species more important than saving people? (It depends on how responsible they are!); Are only species with actual or potential utilitarian uses important? (Useful animals are taken into the Ark by sevens, but pairs of those with no human use are also saved.); Is the Creator determined to save the creatures even today? (The answer is yes — as affirmed in Genesis 9 in God's covenant with all life, the Earth, and every creature — signified from then until now by the rainbow.)

The Noah story is part of the larger biblical principle of "fruitfulness." This principle, together with the biblical principles of "earthkeeping" and "sabbath," constitutes the core of biblical ecological teaching. While the

Fruitfulness Principle — through the story of Noah — has made the news and penetrated the halls of the US Congress, the other two could do so as well in coming months and years. Because of their substantial impact, and potential continuing impact, it is important that these principles are understood by people interested in biodiversity.

## EARTHKEEPING

Genesis 2:15 is the focal point of the Earthkeeping Principle. Here, near the beginning of the Bible, Adam ("adam" is also the Hebrew word for "humankind") is placed in the garden to "till" and to "keep" it. While the word "till" conveys the concept of stewardship moderately well, the meaning of "till" in the original Hebrew is more profound. Simply, it means Adam is expected to *serve* the garden, which makes more sense than the modern, narrower sense of "till," when one remembers that the garden here has been planted by the Creator and thus was not likely planted in rows or suited to tilling by modern hoes, shovels, or plows.

In return, the garden is to serve the biosphere, and in its esthetic and nutritional senses, also serve people. But note that the garden's service is reciprocated with human service. Thus, human service is joined *with* that of the garden — it is a *con*-service. It is "service *with*" — *con*-servancy, *con*-servation.

**EARTHKEEPING:**  
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The second focal word in this passage, the word translated "keep," brings us directly to *earthkeeping*. It comes from the Hebrew word, "shamar," which has a rich and full meaning — rather than preserving as one would pickles in a jar, it conveys the idea of keeping the dynamic qualities of the thing being kept. When used in the invocation of the Aaronic blessing, the word *shamar* leads one to expect God to keep people physiologically and psychologically as well as relationally with others — relatives, other people, other creatures, soil, water, and air. It is a rich, full, and fulfilling "keeping."

Applied to keeping the garden, "shamar" means that the Earth is to be kept by human beings in its wholesome fullness — with its vibrant, lively, dynamic character intact. In the Jewish tradition "shamar" is recognized in the name of the environmental organization, Shomrei Adamah — Keepers of the Earth.

If the Earthkeeping Principle is applied today, humans then are to *keep* the Creation, making sure that the creatures under human care are maintained with all their proper connections intact — internal ones within their own selves, and external ones with members of their species, other species, the soil, the air, and the water upon which they depend. The rich and full keeping we invoke in the Aaronic blessing is the kind of rich and fulfilling keeping that we should bring to the garden of God — to God's creatures and to all of Creation.

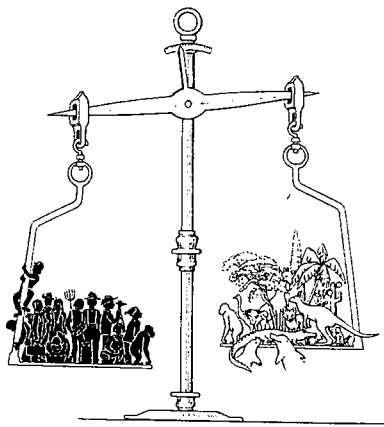
## FRUITFULNESS

The Fruitfulness Principle is best known from Genesis 1, "Be fruitful and multiply." It is a blessing given to people, but again note, it is not given to humans first. Instead, its first occurrence is the blessing to fish and birds: "Let the water teem with living creatures, and let birds fly above the earth across the expanse of the sky" (Genesis 1:20). "Be fruitful and increase in number and fill the water in the seas, and let the birds increase on the earth" (Genesis 1:22). A few verses later (Genesis 1:28) it is given to people: "Be fruitful and multiply and replenish the earth, and subdue it: and have dominion." How, then, can human beings interpret this to mean that their blessing is given at the expense of the blessing to the other creatures? Instead, the Creator blesses the Earth so that *all* creatures will flourish with great abundance and diversity. Moreover, the Hebrew word translated as "fill," used here both for human and animal populations has to do with *flourishing*, rather than overpopulation. It has to do with bringing to pleasant fullness, to fulfillment, to fruition.

The Fruitfulness Principle is also portrayed in the book of Deuteronomy: "If you come across a bird's nest beside the road, either in a tree or on the ground, and the mother is sitting on the young or on the eggs, do not take the mother with the young" (Deuteronomy 22:6). Thus, the lineage of the species must be preserved. If one must take the eggs or young, the mother must live so she can produce another clutch. If the mother were old and raising her last brood, a diligent interpreter of this law likely would not even take the eggs or young.

Fruitfulness is also illumined in some biblical references to pastures, water, sheep, and people. Psalm 23 puts the green pastures and quiet waters of nature into the context of human use, while the prophet Ezekiel comments on the abuse of the fruits and fruitfulness of creation: "Is it not enough for you to feed on the good pasture? Must you also trample the rest of your pasture with your feet?"

Is it not enough for you to drink clear water? Must you also muddy the rest with your feet?" (Ezekiel 34:18) Here there is a message that people should feed on the

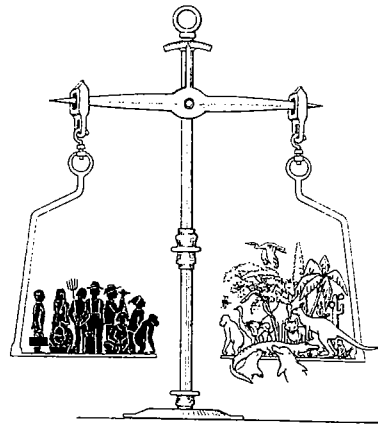


fruits of creation responsibly in a manner that does not destroy or degrade creation's fruitfulness.

The Fruitfulness Principle thus combines human responsibility and the goal of flourishing fulfillment for all the Earth's remarkable biological diversity. Humans are expected to enjoy Creation and its fruits, not to destroy the *fruitfulness* upon which Creation's fullness depends. Thus, humans must preserve the capacity of the land, water, and air to sustain flourishing life. And, as Noah spared no time, expense, or reputation when God's creatures were threatened with extinction, neither should we. Thus we must, with Noah, save the species whose interactions with each other, and with land and water, form the fruitful fabric of the biosphere — of creation.

## SABBATH

The Torah teaches, "Remember the sabbath day by keeping it holy" (Exodus 20:8; Deuteronomy 5:12). Neither people nor animals should be relentlessly pressed but allowed to "get off the treadmill" so that they can enjoy both themselves and the wider creation — so they can recuperate and recreate. Moreover, as the sabbath of the week must be observed, so should the sabbatical year be observed. The Torah teaches, "in the seventh year the land is to have a sabbath of rest, a sabbath to the Lord" (Leviticus 25:4), and Exodus 23:10–11 commands, "For six years you shall sow your land and gather in its yield; but the seventh year you shall let it rest and lie fallow, that the poor of your people may eat: and what they leave the wild beasts may eat." You may ask, "What will we eat in the seventh year if we do not plant or harvest our crops?" (Leviticus 25:20). God's answer in Leviticus 25 and 26 is: "I will send you such a blessing in the sixth year that the land will yield

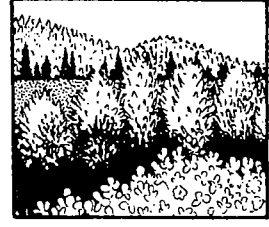
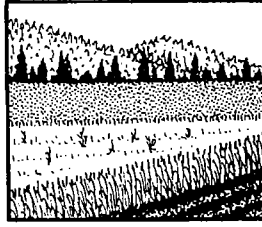
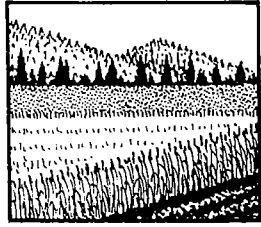
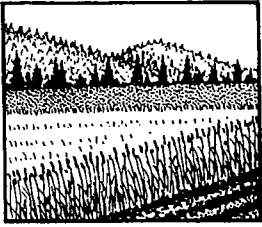


enough for three years." In other words, do not worry, but practice this law so that your land will be *fruitful*. "If you follow my decrees and are careful to obey my commands, I will send you rain in its season, and the ground will yield its crops and the trees of the field their fruit."

The law of the sabbatical year is given to protect the land from relentless exploitation, to help the soil, the heart of the land, rejuvenate. The law allows nature to restore itself. The scriptures warn that failure to give the land its rest will result in the land no longer supporting people and they will be driven off. "Then the land will enjoy its sabbath years all the time that it lies desolate...the land will rest and enjoy its sabbaths...the rest it did not have during the sabbaths you lived in it" (Leviticus 26:34–35).

This practice is still being used today by some farmers. For instance, a farmer in Neerlandia, Alberta — a hog farmer who practices the sabbath for the land — lets his land rest every two years, rather than every seven. When

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asked why, he responds that "the sabbath is made for the land and not the land for the sabbath" (roughly paraphrasing Jesus in Mark 2:27) adding, "that is what my land needs." Thus, for this farmer, the Sabbath Principle, fully applied, would leave some land resting more often than one in seven years, even giving particularly fragile land rest in perpetuity because "that is what it needs."

Not only does the Sabbath Principle protect the land from relentless exploitation, it also serves to set moral limits prior to reaching biological and physical limits. If this law were to be practiced worldwide, one-seventh or more of the land would be at rest each year. Surely that practice would benefit biodiversity, particularly the "unseen" flora and fauna of the soil. When one hears that "economic necessity" requires pressing oneself, other creatures, or the land continuously (7 days a week, 24 hours per day or 7 years upon 7 years), then the limit provided by the sabbath already is exceeded. The sabbath provides a buffer between reasonable self-limitation and a compelling crisis. Observing the sabbath for the land thus eliminates much of the argument about how many people can the Earth support, and other similar questions. If people argue that they *must* violate the sabbath in order to survive, they simultaneously announce that the limit has been reached or exceeded.

The Sabbath Principle thus allows people to make use of the land and its creatures, but not beyond the point of wholesome sustainability. It also sets behavioural limits before harsh biological and physical limits are reached, thereby allowing for the restoration and flourishing of life.

## CONCLUSION

Earthkeeping, Fruitfulness, Sabbath — these are the three leading biblical principles for the care of Creation. Thus, Christians and other People of the Book have within their system of belief the ethical capacity and direction for sustaining life on Earth with all of its flourishing biodiversity. Because the People of the Book understand that God is the author both of the biosphere and the Bible, ecological science and biblical ethics become

intertwined. Thus, the People of the Book can and should be inspired to learn of their Creator both from the world and from the word. The consequence can be a belief system of remarkable integrity that incorporates both moral behaviour and ecology.

Whatever one's beliefs, however, the teachings of this ancient book, coupled with modern scientific knowledge of the biosphere, provide humankind with a new source of hope. It is the hope that ethical and biospheric integrity can be achieved and the Earth and all its species will flourish.

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