

## **Animal Welfare Sunday-Endangered Species**

### **Background Theology-Why should we care?**

#### **A: We should care because God cares.**

- ✎ What kind of Creator would make beings capable of experiencing pain and pleasure, and then not care whether these creatures flourished or suffered? How could this detached and heartless God be reconciled with the compassionate and involved God who emerges from the Scriptures and the life of Jesus?
- ✎ How can we in turn claim to love God, and at the same time trample on the creatures and Earth which he created and loves? Surely we should treasure and celebrate the world and animals which are precious to him?

#### **Relevant Bible passages**

**Psalm 104; Psalm 147:9**-Presents God as Creator of all things, providing for both animals and humankind.

**Matthew 10:29**-God watches the fall of every single sparrow

**Jonah 4 (especially verses 9-11)**-God reproaches Jonah for his callous attitude towards the Nineveh. Jonah protests because the Lord created a plant which provided shade, only to destroy it with a ravenous worm; he is reminded that if that short-lived plant mattered to Jonah, the human and animal inhabitants of the city matter an awful lot more to God.

**Ecclesiastes 18.13**- *'The compassion of human beings is for their neighbours, but the compassion of the Lord is for every living thing. He rebukes and trains and teaches them, and turns them back, as a shepherd his flock.'*

#### **B: Human beings have a duty as stewards of God's Creation**

- ✎ One message which emerges from the first account of Creation in Genesis, is that human beings are given dominion over the Earth. Dominion should not be understood as a mandate to exploit, but a duty to care. In both the Old and New Testament, Godly kings and judges understand that their power is given to benefit the weak rather than to advance their own interests.

- 🐾 Human beings are presented as 'special' in Genesis, and uniquely made in God's image. But with their special place comes a special responsibility to act as stewards of Creation.
- 🐾 If humankind uses its power and strength to oppress and harm its fellow creatures, rather than to care for them as God intended, we are dishonouring God and abusing the sacred trust placed in us. Christians have a prophetic duty to speak out about animal suffering and environment damage.

## Relevant Bible passages

### Genesis 1:26-31

**Isaiah 3:14**—One of many Biblical examples of prophetic judgement against those using earthly power for the own gain at the expense of the weak.

**Matthew 20:25-28** <sup>25</sup>*But Jesus called them to him and said, 'You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their great ones are tyrants over them. <sup>26</sup>It will not be so among you; but whoever wishes to be great among you must be your servant, <sup>27</sup>and whoever wishes to be first among you must be your slave; <sup>28</sup>just as the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many.'*

## C: Our physical and spiritual survival depends upon it

- 🐾 In the Genesis creation stories, and also the passages from the psalms which describe God as creator, human beings are presented as part of God's wider creation. We are not separate from the world in which he has set us.
- 🐾 This theological truth is reflected by a very physical and practical connection. The current threats to biodiversity and endangered species do not just affect other animals, they put our continued existence in jeopardy too.
- 🐾 Furthermore it is a sad but inescapable reality that it is the poor and vulnerable who will suffer first (and in the short/medium term most) if we do not change our ways. Food shortages hit hardest those who already struggle to feed themselves; climate change and pollution those who have no choice but to live on flood plains or contaminated land. If we take our Christian duty to care for the weak and poor seriously, then we will take the present threats to animals and the environment seriously.
- 🐾 Also at a spiritual level, cruelty towards animals and indifference towards their suffering degrades us as human beings. When he causes pain to the innocent, we are not living life in all its fullness as people made in the image of God. Although harder to demonstrate practically, the spiritual and emotional damage done in perpetuating selfish and cruel behaviour is nevertheless very real.

## Relevant Bible passages

### Genesis 1

**Psalms**-There are multiple reminders of the Lord's care for the poor, and condemnation of the actions of the wicked in oppressing and exploiting them.

**Proverbs 12:10**- *'The righteous know the needs of their animals, but the mercy of the wicked is cruel.'*

**Proverbs 14: 34**- *'Those who oppress the poor insult their Maker, but those who are kind to the needy honour him.'*

**Luke 4:18, Luke 7:22, Luke 14:21**-Some examples from the Gospels of the importance of caring for the poor; obviously there are many, many more passages which could be cited!

## Factual Background

### A: One planet - common threats

- 🐾 The same planet which supports animal life supports human life; we are quite literally in the same boat! The current threats to biodiversity and endangered species are damaging human beings already and threatening us in the future.
- 🐾 We give thanks for the harvest and for God's provision. He provides for human and animal life alike, with the same natural processes. We cannot celebrate the harvest and thank God without acknowledging the wonder and fragility of his Creation, and our place in the eco-system.
- 🐾 The present crisis faced by bees provides a frightening example of this fragility and mutual dependency. Whilst the precise causes of the dramatic decline in the world bee population are still a matter of scientific debate, it is highly likely that chemicals released into the environment by human activity (e.g. pesticides in farming) have played a significant role. Many important food crops are reliant upon bees for pollination; unless we find a way to stabilise and increase the bee population, the consequences of our indifference towards their welfare will be catastrophic for human beings as well as insects.
- 🐾 Sometimes even Christians make the argument that we should make looking after human beings a priority, and worry about hungry children before thinking about suffering animals. This is profoundly illogical; firstly because compassion is not a finite resource. But secondly, because the future and wellbeing of human beings is inextricably linked with that of our fellow creatures. It isn't a case of either/or when it comes to human and animal suffering; in reality it is a case of both or neither.

## B: Endangered species

- 🐾 It is true that the extinction of species is part of the story of life on our planet. Inevitably the natural geological processes and climate changes mean that over time some animals die out: being large, fatty and having lots of hair is great during an Ice Age, it's less than ideal if your home becomes a desert. However most of the species becoming extinct in the contemporary world are dying because of human activity. It is estimated that **the current extinction rate is between 1000 and 10,000 times higher than it would be without human involvement.** (An even more chilling figure in light of the Christian belief that human beings have been appointed as stewards of God's Creation.)
- 🐾 It is estimated that **at least 10,000 species become extinct every year.**
- 🐾 Many well known species are in a desperate plight.<sup>1</sup> The most recent available **statistics for pandas suggest that about 1600 animals are now left in the wild,** compared with **4880 black rhino** and just **1850 Bengal tigers** and Often too, the creatures facing oblivion are *known* to have sophisticated emotional and cognitive capacity; not only are they dying as a species, they are suffering as individuals. For example there are **now only around 7,500 Sumatran orangutans left in the world.** It would be a blow for biodiversity if orangutans were to be lost; they play a vital role in the rainforest eco-system, as their stable diet of fruit means that they disperse many seeds and help ensure forest regeneration.
- 🐾 But the suffering and death of a single orangutan is also an individual tragedy. Imagine a two year old infant falling to the ground as its mother is shot by a farmer. The pain which that baby would suffer from a broken leg, and its distress and horror when its mother doesn't answer its helpless screams and cries. It will respond in many ways exactly as a terrified and agonised human toddler would. It is hard to see how anyone could dismiss such suffering as unimportant. Happily some infants in this situation are rescued by conservation charities, do recover and are ultimately released back into the wild. And the people who help to care for them as they recover mentally and physically testify that they are individuals with personalities; each precious in their own right.
- 🐾 But endangered species are not just found abroad, and large, cuddly animals like orangutans are not the only ones who matter. In the UK many species are under threat. Species like the water-vole, red squirrel, sand lizard, natterjack toad, fresh water pearl mussel and white clawed crayfish are critically endangered.

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<sup>1</sup> Ibid *Priority Species*

- 🐾 For instance, there are now only 140,000 red squirrels in the UK.<sup>2</sup> At first glance that might sound like a lot, but it really isn't, especially when you consider that we have 2.5 million grey squirrels.

### **C: What can we do?**

- 🐾 Acknowledge that we have a spiritual duty to take these issues seriously, and that it is an important part of our Christian discipleship, not an optional 'add on'. Naturally we can pray, and encourage others to join us in this.
- 🐾 We can make responsible and ethical choices when we are shopping e.g. considering whether products contain palm-oil, checking that wooden objects have FSC (Forest Stewardship Council) certification.
- 🐾 We can get actively involved with charities and projects seeking to promote or conserve biodiversity.
- 🐾 Committed people have made a difference for endangered species in the past, and continue to do so. The otter population in the UK came back from the brink, and the water vole population is showing some signs of recovery. The situation for species in the UK and abroad is by no means without hope, but the future depends upon the choices which we *all* make in the present.

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<sup>2</sup> Forestry Commission <http://www.forestry.gov.uk/forestry/Redsquirrel>