

Endangered Species: Animal Welfare Sunday 2013

A resource for youth groups

Purpose

The purpose of these materials is to provide a resource for youth leaders to engage with Animal Welfare Sunday and to introduce the concept of care for our fellow creatures as part of our Christian responsibility.

Introduction

What is Animal Welfare Sunday?

Animal Welfare Sunday is a day in the Church's calendar on which we take time to think more deeply about our fellow creatures. On Animal Welfare Sunday, we address issues of the well-being of non-human animals, the suffering that human activity causes to our fellow creatures, and our responsibility as Christians to alleviate suffering and promote the welfare of all of God's creatures. We also take time to think about the place of animals in God's Kingdom.

Each year, there is a theme for Animal Welfare Sunday, focussing on a particular animal welfare issue. This year, our theme is Endangered Species, and we look at the plight of endangered wildlife, the impact of human activity on other creatures, and the Christian response to species loss.

Why on this Sunday?

Animal Welfare Sunday is the Sunday nearest St Francis' Day. St Francis is the patron saint of animals, and was well-known for his concern for all of God's creatures, both human and non-human, as can be seen in these excerpts from Thomas of Celano's Life of St Francis of Assisi:

"It is truly remarkable how even irrational creatures recognised his affection for them, and sensed the tenderness of his love. Once, for example, when he was staying at the hill town of Greccio, one of the brothers brought him a live baby hare that had been caught in a snare. When the saint saw it, he was moved with pity and said: 'Come to me, brother leveret, Why did you allow yourself to be caught out like this?' As soon as the hare was released by the brother that was holding it, it took refuge with Francis and without any coaxing lay peacefully in his lap, knowing it was absolutely safe...He was moved by the same compassion for

fish. When people caught fish, if he had the chance he would throw them back into the water, warning them to avoid being caught next time...Francis overflowed with charity, and he felt pity not only for men in need, but also for dumb animals, reptiles, birds, and all other creatures, whatever their intelligence."

from Thomas of Celano, First Life of ST Francis of Assisi, translated by Christopher Stace (2000, pp61 & 75)

Game

'Animal charades': Write the names of different endangered species on individual cards. Give one card to each member of the group. Each person should act out the movements or behaviours of their animal (but in silence - no roars, growls or calls), and the rest of the group needs to try to guess what animal they are.

Discussion

What sort of species are endangered?

Many different types of animals are endangered, from insects and fish to amphibians and reptiles, birds and mammals. The World Wildlife Fund lists 15 species as being critically endangered (near extinction), and these include three species of gorilla, two turtle species, two species of rhino (Sumatran and Javan), two species of tiger (including the Sumatran Tiger), the Sumatran Elephant, the Sumatran Orangutan, the Saola (a type of antelope), and the Vaquita (a type of porpoise). Other endangered or vulnerable species include three species of tuna, the African Elephant, the Giant Panda, and the Polar Bear, among many others. It is estimated that 600 species of insects are at risk of extinction, including some butterflies, moths, bees, and beetles.

*http://worldwildlife.org/species/directory?sort=extinction_status&direction=desc
<http://www.endangeredspeciesinternational.org/insects5.html>*

How do we feel about endangered species?

Get the group to talk about the different animals you've mentioned in the previous discussion. How do they feel about these species being lost to the world? What do they think each contributes to a local or global ecology? Why do they think so many 'Sumatran' species are critically endangered? Are there some species that they feel more strongly about than others? If so, explore why this might be (is it the cute and cuddly factor, or because of the important role that some species, such as bees, play in our own survival, or other reasons).

A few key facts

According to the *State of Nature* report, a survey of British wildlife carried out by the RSPB and other conservation organisations, 60% of British wildlife species have declined in numbers over the past 50 years. Over the past 10 years, 72% of Britain's butterfly species have declined. It is estimated that the population of breeding birds in the UK has declined by 44 million since 1960.

According to the *Living Planet Index*, global biodiversity has decreased by 30% since 1970.

http://www.rspb.org.uk/Images/stateofnature_tcm9-345839.pdf
http://wwf.panda.org/about_our_earth/all_publications/living_planet_report/health_of_our_planet/

Ask the group what they think about these facts - What changes have taken place over the past 50 years that may have caused the decline of so many species? What is different about the environment? What do they think is the root cause of the extinction of so many species?

Film clips

Star Trek IV: The Voyage Home

Some background may be needed to set the scene before showing the clips: Admiral James T Kirk and his senior officers are returning to earth in a captured enemy ship. On their way, they receive a distress call from earth, explaining that an alien probe is disrupting earth's oceans and atmosphere. It is broadcasting some sort of message to earth, but no-one can decipher it in order to respond.

DVD time index 0:20.26 to 0:25.38

(scene in which Kirk and his officers listen to the transmission from the alien probe, ending with the discussion between Kirk, Spock and McCoy about going back in time to find some humpback whales).

Discuss the possible consequences of species extinction. No species exists in isolation - the earth and its inhabitants are part of complex interconnecting relationships. The removal of a species from a habitat can have knock-on effects. The decline in bee populations, for example, is of serious concern, because bees do much of the pollination that is necessary for our crops to produce food.

DVD time index 0:43.34 to 0:45.53

(scene at the cetacean institute where Kirk and Spock view the video at the start of a tour of the centre). Background to the scene: In this scene, Kirk and his friends have made the journey back in time to the 1980s, and set out to find some whales.

Discuss Spock's observation that, "To hunt a species to extinction is not logical." Why do we do things that endanger our fellow creatures? You may wish to discuss specific scenarios, such as the hunting of rhinos or tigers for body parts to use in 'traditional medicines'. What is the motivation for doing this? Is it logical for the people who want or sell these products to pursue these species to extinction? A similar discussion can be had about overfishing - is it logical to take so many fish from the sea that one day soon there won't be enough left to maintain a viable population?

DVD time index 0:50.19 to 0:51.53

(scene in which Dr Taylor talks to her boss before the whales are released into the ocean, ending with "I don't know about you, but my affection for someone isn't based on my estimation of their intelligence")

Discuss what gives humans and other species value. Does it matter that other animals are less intelligent, or intelligent in a different way, than humans?

Many animals are not so different from us as we sometimes like to think. Several species can demonstrate not only intelligence, but language, advance planning, and what psychologists call 'theory of mind' - the understanding that others observe the world and think. Grey Squirrels, for example, will gather nuts in the autumn, and bury them so that they have a food source for the winter. If they are confident that they are not being watched, they just dig a hole and bury the nut. If, however, they think they are being watched, they will dig several 'false' holes, before actually burying the nut, to confuse the watcher and make it harder to steal the nut. A recent study has found that elephants are less likely to raid crops when there is a full moon than at other times. It appears that they know that when the moon is full and the night bright, they are more likely to be seen by humans and driven away (or worse). Many other species also show evidence of intelligence, co-operative working and problem solving.

Discuss what the group thinks about animal intelligence. Would it make them think differently about animals if it could be proved that they were intelligent creatures who could think?

Many people would deny that animals have emotions. But mammals all have a section of the brain called the limbic system, which is the part of the brain in which we experience and process emotions. Part of the limbic system is the amygdala, which is thought to be critical to experiencing emotions, and all vertebrate animals have a form of amygdala. This suggests that many animals, not just humans, experience emotions. Although these may be different from the way that we experience emotions, we cannot say that they don't feel.

Discuss what this means in terms of our treatment of animals. If an animal can feel fear or sadness or loneliness, is it right that we hunt them, capture them, or disrupt their habitats so that individuals and small groups become isolated from one another?

Discussion and Bible study

Human impact

Christians will say that human value and authority come from our being made in the image of God (Genesis 1.26–27). This is true, but what does it really mean? Read Colossians 1.15 and Philippians 2.6–8. The first of these passages reminds us that Christ is the only true and uncorrupted image of God. The Philippians passage tells us what that means.

Discuss how these passages might help us to understand what it means to be made in the image of God, especially in our relationship with other creatures. Are we to be their masters or their servants, if we are to be like Christ?

"Fill the earth and subdue it." (Genesis 1.28)

Although some species have always become extinct at different periods in earth's history, and there have been episodes of mass extinction (such as the end of the dinosaurs), the rate of species extinction taking place now is greater than has ever been seen before. Much of this is attributed to human activity, primarily hunting (or over-fishing), habitat destruction, and global climate change.

Ask the group if they think that this instruction in Genesis, that human beings "fill the earth and subdue it" gives us permission to wipe out other species at will. How does this fit with the idea that we are made in the image of God - God who came to earth in the person of Jesus to serve his creatures?

Who's animals are they anyway?

"The earth is the Lord's, and everything in it." (Psalm 24.1).

The earth and its creatures are not ours to use as we wish, but belong to God.

Ask the group what they think about the human impact on other creatures in the light of this verse. Do we have the right to cause the extinction of creatures that belong, not to us, but to God?

Rescue mission

"Noah's Ark" (Genesis 7)

Get the group to discuss Noah's role in preventing species extinction. Does God want us to act as modern-day Noahs for endangered species?

Summing up

If we are to be good stewards of God's creation, we must be good caretakers of our fellow creatures. The story of Noah, like the story of creation, shows us that God values life, human and animal alike, and that the preservation of species is important to God. That Jesus was willing to relinquish his equality with God (Philippians 2.6–8) to serve humankind, we should not think of being made in the image of God as giving us privilege, but instead to think of it as giving us responsibility to be the servants of our fellow creatures. Much of the current decline in biodiversity currently seen is the result of human activity. We don't know what knock-on effects the loss of any individual species might have. In endangering other species, we may well be endangering ourselves. But even if that were not the case, if we are to be faithful to our calling as Christians, we must act to protect and care for all of God's creatures.