

Christian Environmentalism – A Biblical Worldview Perspective on You and the Earth

Dr. Bohlin applies a biblical point of view in determining a concerned Christian relationship to environmentalism. As Christians, we know we have been made stewards of this earth, having a responsibility to care for it. Understanding our relationship to God and to the rest of creation gives us the right perspective to apply to this task.

This article is also available in [Spanish](#).



Is There an Environmental Problem?

The news media are full of stories concerning environmental disasters of one kind or another, from global warming to endangered species to destruction of the rain forests to nuclear accidents. Some are real and some are imaginary, but it's not hard to notice that the environmental issue receives very little attention in Christian circles. There are so many other significant issues that occupy our attention that we seem to think of the environment as somebody else's issue. Many Christians are openly skeptical of the reality of any environmental crisis. It's viewed as a liberal issue, or New Age propaganda, or just plain unimportant since this earth will be destroyed after the millennium. What we fail to realize is that Christians have a sacred responsibility to the earth and the creatures within it. The earth is being affected by humans in an unprecedented manner, and we do not know what the short or long term effects will be.



Calvin DeWitt, in his book *The Environment and the Christian*,^[1] lists seven degradations of the earth. First, land is being converted from wilderness to agricultural use and from agricultural use to urban areas at an ever-increasing rate. Some of these lands cannot be reclaimed at all, at least not in the near future.

Second, as many as three species a day become extinct. Even if this figure is exaggerated, we still need to realize that once a species has disappeared, it is gone. Neither the species nor the role it occupied in the ecosystem can be retrieved.

Third, land continues to be degraded by the use of pesticides, herbicides, and fertilizers. While many farmers are rebelling against this trend and growing their produce organically or without chemicals, the most profitable and largest growers still use an abundance of chemicals.

Fourth, the treatment of hazardous chemicals and wastes continues as an unsolved problem. Storing of medium term nuclear wastes is still largely an unsolved problem.

Fifth, pollution is rapidly becoming a global problem. Human garbage turns up on the shores of uninhabited South Pacific islands, far from the shipping lanes.

Sixth, our atmosphere appears to be changing. Is it warming due to the increase of gases like carbon dioxide from the burning of fossil fuels? Is the ozone layer shrinking due to the use of chemicals contained in refrigerators, air conditioners, spray cans, and fire extinguishers? While I remain skeptical of the global threat that many see, pollution continues to be a local and regional concern prompting ever more stringent emission controls for our automobiles.

Seventh, we are losing the experiences of cultures that have lived in harmony with the creation for hundreds or even thousands of years. Cultures such as the Mennonites and Amish, as well as those of the rain forests, are crowded out by the

expansion of civilization.

Never before have human beings wielded so much power over God's creation. How should we as Christians think about these problems?

The Environmental Ethics of Naturalism and Pantheism

Some people have blamed Western culture's Judeo-Christian heritage for the environmental crisis. These critics point squarely at Genesis 1:26-28, where God commands His new creation, man, to have dominion over the earth and to rule and subdue it.[\[2\]](#) This mandate is seen as a clear license to exploit the earth for man's own purposes. With this kind of philosophy, they ask, how can the earth ever be saved? While I will deal with the inaccuracy of this interpretation a little later, you can see why many of the leaders in the environmental movement are calling for a radical shift away from this Christian position. But what are the alternatives?

The need to survive provides a rationale for environmental concern within an *evolutionary* or *naturalistic* world view. Survival of the human species is the ultimate value. Man cannot continue to survive without a healthy planet. We must act to preserve the earth in order to assure the future of our children.

The evolutionary or naturalistic view of nature is, however, ultimately pragmatic. That is, nature has value only as long as we need it. The value of nature is contingent on the whim of egotistical man.[\[3\]](#) If, as technology increases, we are able to artificially reproduce portions of the ecosystem for our survival needs, then certain aspects of nature lose their significance. We no longer need them to survive. This view is ultimately destructive, because man will possess only that which he needs. The rest of nature can be discarded.

In the fictional universe of *Star Trek*, vacations are spent in a computer generated virtual reality and meals are produced by molecular manipulation. No gardens, herds, or parks are needed. What value does nature have then?

Another alternative is the *pantheistic* or *New Age* worldview. Superficially, this view offers some hope. All of nature is equal because all is god and god is all. Nature is respected and valued because it is part of the essence of god. If humans have value, then nature has value.

But while pantheism elevates nature, it simultaneously degrades man and will ultimately degrade nature as well. To the pantheist, man has no more value than a blade of grass. In India the rats and cows consume needed grain and spread disease with the blessings of the pantheists. To restrict the rats and cows would be to restrict god, so man takes second place to the rats and cows. Man is a part of nature, yet it is man that is being restricted. So ultimately, all of nature is degraded.{4}

Pantheism claims that what is, is right. To clean up the environment would mean eliminating the undesirable elements. But, since god is all and in all, how can there be any undesirable elements? Pantheism fails because it makes no distinctions between man and nature.

The Christian Environmental Ethic

A true Christian environmental ethic differs from the naturalistic and pantheistic ethics in that it is based on the reality of God as Creator and man as his image-bearer and steward. God is the Creator of nature, not part of nature. He transcends nature (Gen. 1-2; Job 38-41; Ps. 19, 24, 104; Rom 1:18-20; Col. 1:16-17). All of nature, including man, is equal in its origin. Nature has value in and of itself because God created it. Nature's value is intrinsic; it will not change because the fact of its creation will not change.{5} The rock,

the tree, and the cat deserve our respect because God made them to be as they are.{6}

While man is a creature and therefore is identified with the other creatures, he is also created in God's image. It is this image that separates humans from the rest of creation (Gen. 1:26-27; Ps. 139:13-16).{7} God did not bestow His image anywhere else in nature.

Therefore, while a cat has value because God created it, it is inappropriate to romanticize the cat as though it had human emotions. All God's creatures glorify Him by their very existence, but only one is able to worship and serve Him by an act of the will.

But a responsibility goes along with bearing the image of God. In its proper sense, man's rule and dominion over the earth is that of a steward or a caretaker, not a reckless exploiter. Man is not sovereign over the lower orders of creation. Ownership is in the hands of the Lord.{8}

God told Adam and Eve to cultivate and keep the garden (Gen. 2:15), and we may certainly use nature for our benefit, but we may only use it as God intends. An effective steward understands that which he oversees, and science can help us discover the intricacies of nature.

Technology puts the creation to man's use, but unnecessary waste and pollution degrades it and spoils the creation's ability to give glory to its Creator. I think it is helpful to realize that we are to exercise dominion over nature, not as though we are entitled to exploit it, but as something borrowed or held in trust.

Recall that in the parable of the talents in Matthew 25, the steward who merely buried his talent out of fear of losing it was severely chastised. What little he did have was taken away and given to those who already had a great deal.{9} When Christ returns, His earth may well be handed back to Him

rusted, corroded, polluted, and ugly. To what degree will you or I be held responsible?

This more thoroughly biblical view of nature and the environment will allow us to see more clearly the challenges that lie ahead. Our stewardship of the earth must grapple with the reality that it does not belong to us but to God though we have been given permission to use the earth for our basic needs.

Abuse of Dominion

While God intended us to live in harmony with nature, we have more often than not been at odds with nature. This reality tells us that man has not fulfilled his mandate. The source of our ecological crisis lies in man's fallen nature and the abuse of his dominion.

Man is a rebel who has set himself at the center of the universe. He has exploited created things as though they were nothing in themselves and as though he has an autonomous right to do so.^{10} Man's abuse of his dominion becomes clear when we look at the value we place on time and money. Our often uncontrolled greed and haste have led to the deterioration of the environment.^{11} We evaluate projects almost exclusively in terms of their potential impact on humans.

For instance, builders know that it is faster and more cost effective to bulldoze trees that are growing on the site of a proposed subdivision than it is to build the houses around them. Even if the uprooted trees are replaced with saplings once the houses are constructed, the loss of the mature trees enhances erosion, eliminates a means of absorbing pollutants, producing oxygen, and providing shade, and produces a scar that heals slowly if at all.

Building around the trees, while more expensive and time-consuming, minimizes the destructive impact of human society

on God's earth. But, because of man's sinful heart, the first option has been utilized more often than not.

As Christians we must treat nature as having value in itself, and we must be careful to exercise dominion without being destructive.[{12}](#) To quote Francis Schaeffer, We have the right to rid our house of ants; but what we have no right to do is to forget to honor the ant as God made it, out in the place where God made the ant to be. When we meet the ant on the sidewalk, we step over him. He is a creature, like ourselves; not made in the image of God, it is true, but equal with man as far as creation is concerned.[{13}](#)

The Bible contains numerous examples of the care with which we are expected to treat the environment. Leviticus 25:1-12 speaks of the care Israel was to have for the land. Deuteronomy 25:4 and 22:6 indicates the proper care for domestic animals and a respect for wildlife. In Isaiah 5:8-10 the Lord judges those who have misused the land. Job 38:25-28 and Psalm 104:27-30 speak of God's nurture and care for His creation. Psalm 104 tells us that certain places were made with certain animals in mind. This would make our national parks and wilderness preserves a biblical concept. And Jesus spoke on two occasions of how much the Father cared for even the smallest sparrow (Matt. 6:26, 10:29). How can we do less?

Christian Responsibility

I believe that as Christians we have a responsibility to the earth that exceeds that of unredeemed people. We are the only ones who are rightly related to the Creator. We should be showing others the way to environmental responsibility.

Christians, of all people, should not be destroyers, Schaeffer said.[{14}](#) We may cut down a tree to build a house or to make a fire, but not just to cut it down. While there is nothing wrong with profit in the marketplace, in some cases we must voluntarily limit our profit in order to protect the

environment.[{15}](#)

When the church puts belief into practice, our humanity and sense of beauty are restored.[{16}](#) But this is not what we see. Concern for the environment is not on the front burner of most evangelical Christians. The church has failed in its mission of steward of the earth.

We have spoken out loudly against the materialism of science as expressed in the issues of abortion, human dignity, evolution, and genetic engineering, but have shown ourselves to be little more than materialists in our technological orientation towards nature.[{17}](#) All too often Christians have adopted a mindset similar to a naturalist that would assert that simply more technology will answer our problems. In this respect we have essentially abandoned this very Christian issue.

By failing to fulfill our responsibilities to the earth, we are also losing a great evangelistic opportunity. Many young people in our society are seeking an improved environment, yet they think that most Christians don't care about ecological issues and that most churches offer no opportunity for involvement.[{18}](#) For example, in many churches today you can find soft drink machines dispensing aluminum cans with no receptacle provided to recycle the aluminum, one of our most profitable recyclable materials.

As a result, other worldviews and religions have made the environmental issue their own. Because the environmental movement has been co-opted by those involved in the New Age Movement particularly, many Christians have begun to confuse interest in the environment with interest in pantheism and have hesitated to get involved. But we cannot allow the enemy to take over leadership in an area that is rightfully ours.

As the redeemed of the earth, our motivation to care for the land is even higher than that of the evolutionist, the

Buddhist, or the advocate of the New Age. Jesus has redeemed all of the effects of the curse, including our relationship with God, our relationship with other people, and our relationship with the creation (1 Cor. 15:21-22, Rom. 5:12-21). Although the heavens and the earth will eventually be destroyed, we should still work for healing now.

For Further Reading

Beisner, E. Calvin. *Prospects for Growth: a Biblical View of Population, Resources, and the Future*. Westchester, Ill.: Crossway Books, 1990.

DeWitt, Calvin B., Ed. *The Environment and the Christian: What Can We Learn from the New Testament?* Grand Rapids , Mich.: Baker Book House, 1991.

Schaeffer, Francis. *Pollution and the Death of Man: a Christian View of Ecology*. Wheaton, Ill.: Tyndale, 1970.

Notes

1. Calvin DeWitt, ed., *The Environment and the Christian: What Does the New Testament Say About the Environment* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1991).
2. Lynn White, "The Historical Roots of Our Ecologic Crisis," *Science*, 155 (1967):1203-07.
3. Francis Schaeffer, *Pollution and the Death of Man: The Christian View of Ecology* (Wheaton, Ill.: Tyndale House Publishers, 1970), 26-27.
4. Ibid, 30-33.
5. Ibid, 47-49.
6. Ibid, 54-55.
7. Ibid, 49-50.
8. Ibid, 69.
9. Ibid, 69-70.
10. Ibid, 71.
11. Ibid, 83.
12. Ibid, 74-75.

13. Ibid, 74.
14. Ibid, 74.
15. Ibid, 90-91.
16. Ibid, 92-93.
17. Ibid, 85.
18. Ibid, 85.

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Global Warming

Fossil fuel emissions are unfairly being blamed for global warming. The Kyoto Protocol is based on questionable science, and will cause unnecessary economic hardship.

What is Global Warming?

Over the last few months, dating back to the 2000 election, we have been bombarded with the news of global warming. Unfortunately, this issue has become highly polarized politically. Some scientists and politicians believe the warming has been fully documented as being caused by human interference and drastic measures are necessary to bring it under control, while others just as strenuously maintain that nothing has been proven and drastic measures will only ruin our economy for no reason. What are we to think?

First, let me say at the start of this article that I have been what some would call an environmentalist since high school. I cooperate fully with the recycling program offered by my city: collecting all newspaper, glass, aluminum cans, and certain plastics for pick-up every other week. I don't buy Styrofoam plates or cups since it is not reusable or biodegradable.

I have long been a nature enthusiast, previously as an avid bird-watcher and feeder. Zoos have always been an attraction for me, but even better are opportunities to see God's creatures in their natural habitat. A jog in the woods is more preferable to a run down the street, even with no traffic.

I drive a small fuel-efficient car and as soon as it is practicable for my family financially, I intend to purchase one of those new cars run by both battery and gasoline, which gets close to 60 miles to the gallon.

I think stewardship of God's creation is a good thing and I think we (meaning humans) have often sought our own needs to the unnecessary detriment of the rest of creation. So with this as a background, what do I think of global warming? I'm afraid that my position will not totally satisfy either of the extremes mentioned earlier. For I don't think global warming requires the drastic action being required by the United Nations' Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC). But neither do I believe that the signs of global warming can be totally ignored, as some economists and political conservatives would have us think.

For instance, it does seem that there is credible evidence that both Arctic and Antarctic ice is receding, most glaciers worldwide appear to be in retreat, and sea levels are rising. The important question, however, is whether global warming is responsible for these events. And perhaps even more importantly, what can we realistically do about it even if rising global temperatures are even partly responsible for these disturbing trends?

In this article I will be examining the evidence for a human component to the increasing temperatures and whether the proposed remedies offered by the IPCC are the best means of effecting real change for the future.

Global Warming and the Kyoto Protocol

The issue of global warming has become a lightning rod issue the world over. When President Bush recently indicated that he would hold back on setting carbon dioxide limits for U.S. power plants, environmentalist groups around the world immediately demonized him. A campaign was put in motion to flood the White House with e-mails condemning his action.

To help understand this issue let's investigate the basics of the greenhouse effect on our planet and see what the fuss is all about. The greenhouse effect simply refers to the ability of some gases in our atmosphere to absorb and hold heat better than others. This creates a warming blanket around the earth without which life would be much more difficult for all life forms on earth.

It's similar to the effect produced by actual greenhouses with walls and ceilings of glass. Glass allows certain wavelengths of light and radiation in, but traps certain others from getting out. Leave your car in the full sun, even on a pleasant day, and you can later enter the car to blast furnace temperatures. That's a greenhouse effect.

Of great concern today is the fact that some greenhouse gases, such as carbon dioxide, are increasing in the atmosphere and the average temperature of the earth at ground level has increased by about a full degree Fahrenheit since 1900 (0.5 degrees Celsius). Many have become convinced that the increase in carbon dioxide and the increase in temperature are cause and effect respectively.

Further, many believe that the increased carbon dioxide is due to the burning of fossil fuels. Some global climate computer models predict that this is only the beginning of the rise of global temperatures and that by the end of the 21st century, average global temperatures could rise by as much as seven degrees Fahrenheit (3.5 degrees Celsius). As a result, the

United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change, based on the work of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, issued the Kyoto Protocol in December of 1997.

Simply put, the Kyoto protocol calls on all agreeing nations to reduce their fossil fuel emission by at least five percent below their estimated 1990 levels by around 2010. Most nations were actually assigned reductions of 7-8 percent, including the United States. Now that doesn't sound like much at first glance. However, it is widely recognized, that with the growth in the U.S. economy since 1990, this would amount to as much as a 30 percent actual reduction in fossil fuel use by 2010. To achieve such a drastic reduction would require major shifts in U.S. energy policy and the economy. We'd better make sure it's worth it.

Next we'll look at the science of global warming.

Scientific Problems with Global Warming

Now I want to discuss some of the problems with the scientific evidence that purports to show that human produced carbon dioxide is responsible for global warming.[\[1\]](#) As I mentioned earlier, levels of carbon dioxide are increasing in the atmosphere and ground stations have reported a slight warming in this century. Many believe that the increase in carbon dioxide has caused the slight rise in temperature, and they fear this is only the modest beginning of more significant temperature increases in the 21st century. I think there are several reasons to strongly doubt this conclusion.

First, we need to consider the influence of long-term trends. The last ice age ended about 11,000 years ago by most estimates, and the planet has been warming ever since. Sea levels have been rising at the rate of 7-8 inches every 100 years. Therefore, the fact that sea levels are rising is not necessarily due to humanly caused global warming. There was a significant warming trend from around 900 A.D. to 1300 A.D.

Greenland was actually green on its coasts at one time. This was followed by what is referred to as the "Little Ice Age" from about 1450 to 1850. Both of these trends occurred without human influence and the current warming trend could just be stabilization from this last Little Ice Age.

I have mentioned that the warming trend has been measured from ground stations. This distinction has been added because there is conflicting data from weather balloon and satellite data. The most significant warming has been measured in the last two decades. However the temperature of the atmosphere has remained constant over the last twenty years.

How can the ground temperatures increase and the atmospheric temperatures stay the same? To be honest, nobody really knows for sure, but there is evidence that the ground based temperatures are in error. This could be due to what is called the heat island effect. It has been noticed that urban measured temperatures have increased faster than rural temperatures. The concrete, asphalt, factories, motor vehicles, and population density of large cities may be biasing these readings and giving a false warming trend.

If the warming trend is real, there may be another significant factor involved that has nothing to do with human interference: the sun. A measurement of solar activity in terms of the sunspot cycle length shows a strong correlation with global temperatures over the last 100 years: including the rise from 1920-1940, the dip from 1940 to 1980, and the rise over the last twenty years.

All these data seem to indicate that global warming, if it exists, is not likely to be due to human action.

The Economic Effects of the Kyoto Protocol

Knowing that the science is highly questionable raises severe

concerns about the Kyoto Protocol, which calls for at least a 30 percent reduction in U.S. fossil fuel use by 2010. Not only is this drastic reduction unnecessary to combat global warming, but also its effects on the U.S. economy could be catastrophic.

First, let me point out that some warming is not such a bad thing. It is widely recognized that increased carbon dioxide is good for plants. They grow faster and require less water. A slightly longer growing season is not a negative either. It is simply not factual to suggest that global warming is responsible for increases in severe weather, including hurricanes, tornados, floods, and droughts. Storms, in particular, have not shown any real increase in frequency or intensity.

John Christy, professor of atmospheric science at the University of Alabama and one of the lead authors of the IPCC report, said, "Hurricanes are not increasing. Tornados are not increasing. Storms and droughts do not show any pattern of increasing or decreasing Variations of climate have always occurred, even when humans could not have had any impact." [\[2\]](#)

Beyond these observations is the realization that the implementation of the Kyoto Protocol would have severe economic consequences. Our own U.S. Energy Information Administration (EIA) says Kyoto could drain more than \$340 billion a year from the U.S. economy (\$1,500 per person), double electricity prices, and cause the price per gallon to soar 65 cents for gasoline, 88 cents for diesel, and 90 cents for home heating oil. What is most significant about these rises in energy prices is that they would affect low-income families most severely. Upper and middle-income families can better shift resources to meet rising energy costs than the poor or the elderly on fixed incomes. Yet no one has talked about this.

The EIA also calculates that the Kyoto treaty could cost 3.2 million American jobs. An exhaustive study commissioned by a coalition of minority business groups concluded that 1.4 million of those lost jobs would be in our Black and Hispanic communities. And average annual family incomes in those communities would decline by between \$2,000 and \$3,000 under Kyoto.[\[3\]](#)

What is most disconcerting is that all this economic impact would be essentially for nothing, because not only is the science of human caused global warming suspect, but even if the Kyoto Protocol is followed, it would result in less than one-half of one degree reduction in global temperature by 2050. It hardly seems worth it.

So What Do We Do?

After exploring the question of global warming, we've found the science behind it to be questionable at best and the economic impact unnecessarily severe, particularly for minority families and businesses. This may raise a question in some people's minds as to why this is being pushed so uncritically by other world governments and by the media.

Well, the first clue comes from a quick perusal down the list of nations from the Kyoto Protocol itself. Some countries like the Russian Federation are simply asked to hold their emissions at 1990 levels with no reduction. Countries from Latin America, Asia, Africa, and Polynesia, including China and India aren't even on the list (except Japan)! The reason is that these countries are still developing their economies and will need unrestricted energy use. However, as these populous nations grow economically, they may well exceed the emissions output of western nations altogether.

Implicitly, this affirms the necessity of fossil fuel energy for healthy economies. This treaty may be little more than a tax on western nations, not a policy for climate change. The

late Aaron Wildavsky, professor of political science at UC Berkeley, wrote, "Warming (and warming alone), through its primary antidote of withdrawing carbon from production and consumption, is capable of realizing the environmentalist's dream of an egalitarian society based on the rejection of economic growth in favor of smaller population's eating lower on the food chain, consuming a lot less, and sharing a much lower level of resources much more equally."[\[4\]](#)

Now I don't think all those things are bad in and of themselves. But I don't like the idea of being forced into it in the name of avoiding climate change. A recent *Time* cover story, apart from a wholly typical and irresponsible scare article promoting the myth of human induced global warming, actually provided some common sense activities for responsible environmental activities that save resources and money.[\[5\]](#)

Among them were: running your dishwasher only when it's full, replacing air-conditioning and furnace air filters regularly, and adjusting your thermostat to a little warmer in summer and a little cooler in winter. You can also set your water heater to no higher than 120 degrees (F); it saves money and is safer. Try low-flow showerheads to use less hot water and wash clothes in warm or cold water. Most detergents today clean just as well in cooler temperatures. Use energy efficient light bulbs. Improve your home insulation. And seal up all the cracks.

Since all of these save electricity, they save not only resources, but also money for you. It just makes sense.

Increased energy prices, which should occur as demand for oil and gas increases and supply remains steady temporarily but begins to drop in 20 to 40 years, will spur development for more renewal energy sources such as solar, wind, and geothermal power. Also, research is progressing in stimulating the ocean to be more biologically productive through seeding with iron to act as a sink for carbon dioxide, if levels are

shown to be affecting the general climate.

But where is the voice of the church? For too long we have been silent on environmental issues. As Christians we should lead the way in care for the environment, since we claim to be rightly related to its Creator in the first place.

Notes

1. S. Fred Singer, 1997, 1999, "The Scientific Case Against the Global Climate Treaty," <http://www.sepp.org/GWbooklet/withfigures.html>. All of the scientific evidences in this section can be found in this fair and reasoned report. Singer is a retired climatologist from the University of Virginia and has formed The Science and Environmental Policy Project (SEPP) to help educate the public on global warming. This website is a great resource for up-to-date information on the global warming controversy. The report above is available with and without figures, but I reference and recommend the version with the figures copied with permission from peer-reviewed science journals for the full effect.
2. Quoted by James K. Glassman, in "Administration in the Balance," March 8, 2001, *Wall Street Journal*.
3. Paul Driessen, 2000, "Navigating the Treacherous 'Seven Cees' of Climate Care," The Issue Archive of CFACT (Committee for a Constructive Tomorrow) at <http://www.cfact.org/Issues.htm>.
4. Quoted by James K. Glassman, in "Administration in the Balance," March 8, 2001, *Wall Street Journal*.
5. "What Can You Do?" *Time*, April 9, 2001, p. 39.