

The Conservation-Religion Interface: What Every Conservation Biologist Should Know

Religion and Conservation Biology Working Group of the Society for Conservation Biology,
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Introduction

Conservation biology is a multidisciplinary field that merges traditional and applied sciences and draws upon biology, economics, politics, and social sciences to make a concerted effort in providing solutions to the rapid loss of biodiversity. The issues of biodiversity loss and human caused degradation of natural systems demand an innovative, synthetic, broad scope of vision to provide solutions and restore ecosystem function (Meffe and Carroll 1997).

The translation of sound scientific findings into action involves political decision making and necessitates public interaction. The success of conservation will depend largely upon individuals and institutions making informed choices in daily life. Hence, the burden rests upon conservation biologists to effectively communicate their findings outside the arena of science.

The Religion and Conservation Biology Working Group “is based on the recognition that conservation depends upon broad support from a variety of value systems and world views, and it is important for conservationists to understand these views. Religions can help respond to the world environmental crises.... An understanding of religious world-views and the way they shape behavior toward the natural world is essential to the implementation of effective and lasting conservation management strategies (ARC, 2009).”

(See the RCBWG website: <http://www.conbio.org/workinggroups/Religion/>)

The Nature of Conservation Biology

Meffe and Carroll (1994) describe conservation biology as a synthetic field that combines ideas from many scientific and nonscientific disciplines. As an applied science, conservation biology is a normative discipline in which certain value judgments are inherent.

“Unlike many other areas of science, conservation biology is ‘mission-oriented’ ...; there is nothing value-free about it. However, the methodology used to obtain information must be good, objective science; if not, all credibility will quickly be lost.” (Meffe and Carroll 1994:21)

Conservation biology melds a science (biology) and a value system (conservation). Unlike the scientific component of conservation, the value-related aspect of conservation biology is subjective and draws upon other segments of human knowledge such as sociology, economics, politics, ethics, and religion. Conservation biologists must be clear about when we are reporting our scientific findings and when we are speaking our personal beliefs; our value systems must be acknowledged as such up front.

“...scientists are not policy makers or moral authorities, and should not, as scientists, make ethical or political recommendations. As human beings, of course, ...[scientists] do make these judgements.” (Krebs 2001:7)

“Scientists in fact have a dual role. First, they carry out objective science that both obtains data and tests hypotheses...They can also be advocates for particular policies that attempt to change society....But it is crucial to separate these two kinds of activities.” (Krebs 2001:12)

The Role of Religion

“Scientists in a secular culture are often uneasy about matters of spirit, but science on its own can give no reason for sustaining humankind. It can, with equal rigor, create the knowledge that will cause our demise or that will allow us to live at peace with one another and nature. But the spiritual acumen necessary to solve divergent problems posed by the transition to sustainability...must be founded on a higher order of awareness that honors mystery, science, life, and death.” (Orr 2002)

The majority of people on Earth identify themselves as religious. Religion is one of the most powerful motivating forces in the human experience, and religious institutions play a critical role in informing and changing the decisions and actions of society. Rallying support for conservation will depend largely upon the effectiveness of our communication with groups outside the arena of science, including religious groups. Because the worldviews people hold affect the way in which they interpret and accept information, understanding and addressing these views will increase the effectiveness of our communication. Johns (2005) points out that we must communicate in ways that people understand, and that without misrepresenting our own views, we can “recognize that we have common goals, notwithstanding differences in how we understand the world.”

Every major religion contains beliefs that support a conservation ethic. For example, Brahman-atman, ahimsa, stewardship, and many other religious principles may inform people’s attitudes and actions toward the earth and other life forms on it. Additionally, many religions denounce materialistic or selfish attitudes, emphasizing simple living or modest consumption of material goods, hand-in-hand with caring for the poor. Any principle that deals with the use and distribution of resources may have implications for conservation. Conservation biology cannot be fully successful without enlisting the help of religious adherents in identifying, understanding, and encouraging ideas and practices that would improve the relationship between humans and the rest of the natural world. Let us encourage religious groups to find within their own traditions ideas which would motivate them toward a conservation ethic. Those ideas will be more readily accepted and acted upon if people are persuaded to discover them within their own traditions.

Religious Statements on Conservation

Following is a brief sampling of statements made by religious leaders relating to the environment or conservation.

Christianity

“For the human family, this home is the earth, the environment that God the Creator has given us to inhabit with creativity and responsibility. We need to care for the environment: it has been entrusted to men and women to be protected and cultivated with responsible freedom, with the good of all as a constant guiding criterion. ... Humanity today is rightly concerned about the ecological balance of tomorrow. It is important for assessments in this regard to be carried out prudently, in dialogue with experts and people of wisdom, uninhibited by ideological pressure to draw hasty conclusions, and above all with the aim of reaching agreement on a model of sustainable development capable of ensuring the well-being of all while respecting environmental balances.”-
Pope Benedict XVI, World Day of Peace Address, 2008

“We will resist the claim that anything in creation is merely a resource for human exploitation. We will resist species extinction for human benefit; consumerism and harmful mass production; pollution of land, air and waters; all human activities which are now leading to probable rapid climate change; and the policies and plans which contribute to the disintegration of creation”. -- World Council of Churches; Ten Affirmations on Justice, Peace, and the Integrity of Creation; Seoul, 1990

Judaism

“The land belongs to God. We are given permission to enjoy the Creator’s abundant gifts, but we must not waste or wantonly destroy anything. The Jewish injunction known as bal tashchit teaches us to live lightly, conserving earth’s abundance. Indeed, the rabbis declare that anyone who eats a fruit without saying the proper blessing of thanksgiving to God is like a thief, stealing from the Creator.” -Daniel B. Fink, Rabbi of Congregation Ahavath Beth Israel (Idaho, USA), and co-author of *Judaism and Ecology* (<http://fore.research.yale.edu/religion/judaism/index.html>)

“Now, when the whole world is in peril, when the environment is in danger of being poisoned and various species, both plant and animal, are becoming extinct, it is our Jewish responsibility to put the defence of the whole of nature at the very centre of our concern.” –from The Assisi Declarations, 1986

Islam

Statements from Dr. Abdullah Omar Naseef, secretary general of the Muslim World League, *Muslim declaration on Nature*, 1986:

“For the Muslim, humankind's role on earth is that of a Khalifah - vicegerent or trustee of Allah. We are Allah's stewards and agents on Earth. We are not masters of this Earth; it does not belong to us to do what we wish. It belongs to Allah and He has entrusted us with its safekeeping.”

“So unity, trusteeship and accountability, that is tawhid, khalifah and akhirah, the three central concepts of Islam, are also the pillars of the environmental ethics of Islam. They constitute the basic values taught by the Qur'an. It is these values which led Muhammad, (peace be upon him), the Prophet of Islam, to say: 'Whosoever plants a tree and diligently looks after it until it matures and bears fruit is rewarded', ... Environmental consciousness is born when such values are adopted and become an intrinsic part of our mental and physical make-up.”

Buddhism

“The Buddha commended frugality as a virtue in its own right. Skillful living avoids waste and we should try to recycle as much as we can. Buddhism advocates a simple, gentle, nonaggressive attitude toward nature—reverence for all forms of nature must be cultivated.” from Buddhist Faith Statement prepared for Alliance of Religion and Ecology (<http://www.arcworld.org/faiths.asp?pageID=66>)

“We need to live as the Buddha taught us to live, in peace and harmony with nature, but this must start with ourselves. If we are going to save this planet we need to seek a new ecological order, to look at the life we lead and then work together for the benefit of all; unless we work together no solution can be found. By moving away from self-centeredness, sharing wealth more, being more responsible for ourselves, and agreeing to live more simply, we can help decrease much of the suffering in the world,” from the Buddhist Statement on Ecology 1996.

Hinduism

“Hindu religion wants its followers to live a simple life. It does not allow people to go on increasing their material wants. People are meant to learn to enjoy spiritual happiness, so that to derive a sense of satisfaction and fulfilment, they need not run after material pleasures and disturb nature’s checks and balances. ... Do not use anything belonging to nature, such as oil, coal, or forest, at a greater rate than you can replenish it. For example, do not destroy birds, fish, earthworms, and even bacteria which play vital ecological roles; once they are annihilated you cannot recreate them. Thus only can you avoid becoming bankrupt, and the life cycle can continue for a long, long time.” - Swami Vibudhesha Teertha, Acharya of Madhvacarya Vaishnavas, Udupi, Central Advisory Committee Member of the Visva Hindu Parishad

“God’s creation is sacred. Humanity does not have the right to destroy what it cannot create. Humans have to realize the interconnectedness of living entities and emphasize the idea of moral responsibility to oneself, one’s society, and the world as a whole. ... Hindus revere the Earth as mother. She feeds, shelters, and clothes us.

Without her we cannot survive. If we as children do not take care of her we diminish her ability to take care of us.” - Dr. Sheshagiri Rao, Chief Editor of The Encyclopaedia of Hinduism

Jainism

Statements by Dr L. M. Singhvi, President of the Jain Institute, which brings together the three distinct Jain traditions. (Available at the Alliance of Religions and Conservation website):

“Jainism is fundamentally a religion of ecology and has turned ecology into a religion. It has enabled Jains to create an environment-friendly value system and code of conduct.”

“This [ahimsa or nonviolence] is the fundamental vow and runs through the Jain tradition like a golden thread. It involves avoidance of violence in any form through word or deed, not only to human beings but also to all nature. It means reverence for life in every form including plants and animals. Jains practice the principle of compassion for all living beings (Jiva-daya) at every step in daily life. Jains are vegetarians.”

Sikhism

From a statement compiled by Sri Singh Sahib Manjit Singh (one of the five heads of Sikhism) and Sri Akhal Takhat Sahib. (Available at the Alliance of Religions and Conservation website):

“In Sikh beliefs, a concern for the environment is part of an integrated approach to life and nature. As all creation has the same origin and end, humans must have consciousness of their place in creation and their relationship with the rest of creation. Humans should conduct themselves through life with love, compassion, and justice. Becoming one and being in harmony with God implies that humans endeavor to live in harmony with all of God’s creation.”

“Life, for its very existence and nurturing, depends upon a bounteous nature. A human being needs to derive sustenance from the earth and not deplete, exhaust, pollute, burn, or destroy it. Sikhs believe that an awareness of that sacred relationship between humans and the environment is necessary for the health of our planet, and for our survival. A new ‘environmental ethic’ dedicated to conservation and wise use of the resources provided by a bountiful nature can only arise from an honest understanding and dedicated application of our old, tried and true spiritual heritage.”

Confucianism

“Heaven is my father and earth is my mother, and even such a small creature as I finds an intimate place in their midst. Therefore, that which extends throughout the universe I regard as my body and that which directs the universe I consider as my nature. All people are my brothers and sisters, and all things are my companions. . .” -Chang Tsai (1020-1077 C.E.), Western Inscription

“Heaven, earth, and humans are the basis of all creatures. Heaven gives them birth, earth nourishes them, and humans bring them to completion. Heaven provides them at birth with a sense of filial and brotherly love, earth nourishes them with clothing and food, and humans complete them with rites and music. The three act together as hands and feet join to complete the body and none can be dispensed with.” -Tung Ch’ung-shu (c. 179–c.104 B.C.E.)

Daoism

Statements from the China Daoist Association, the leading body representing all Daoists in mainland China (available at the Alliance of Religions and Conservation website):

“In the Dao De Jing (Tao Te Ching), the basic classic of Daoism, there is this verse: ‘Humanity follows the Earth, the Earth follows Heaven, Heaven follows the Dao, and the Dao follows what is natural.’ This means that the whole of humanity should attach great importance to the Earth and should obey its rule of movement. The Earth has to respect the changes of Heaven, and Heaven must abide by the Dao. And the Dao follows the natural course of development of everything. So we can see that what human beings can do with nature is to help everything grow according to its own way. We should cultivate in people’s minds the way of no action in relation to nature, and let nature be itself.”

“If anything runs counter to the harmony and balance of nature, even if it is of great immediate interest and profit, people should restrain themselves from doing it, so as to prevent nature’s punishment. Furthermore, insatiable human desire will lead to the overexploitation of natural resources. So people should remember that to be too successful is to be on the path to defeat.”

Shinto

Statements from Jinja Honcho, representative body of Shinto Shrines in Japan. (Available at the Alliance of Religions and Conservation website):

“Shinto regards the land and its environment as children of Kami. In other words, Shinto sees nature as the divinity itself. ... Kami are the origin of all lives, and the life of all things is deeply connected to them. This leads to an awareness of the sacredness of life and an appreciation for life given by Kami.”

“The ancient Japanese considered that all things of this world have their own spirituality, as they were born from the divine couple. Therefore, the relationship between the natural environment of this world and people is that of blood kin, like the bond between brother and sister.”

Conclusion

It is evident by the above statements that religions and their motivating power can be allies for conservation if we will emphasize values they share in common with conservationists. Every major world religion teaches ideas that lend themselves naturally to conservation. Scientists must communicate not only with scientific accuracy but also with civility and tolerance if we hope to rally the support we need to make conservation successful. If we are serious about gaining the support of religious groups, we must communicate in a way that resonates and rallies rather than confuses and conflicts. We can be careful to avoid language that engenders strife and instead employ language with which religious groups can identify, such as “intrinsic value of nature,” “reverence for life,” and “stewardship.” In such communication, we need not compromise our science, either by downplaying it or by failing to distinguish it from our value system. Conservation can be a topic of agreement despite diverse worldviews, if we will communicate science accurately and work respectfully with religions to find common ground in our values.

Additional Resources

Sources and Resources section of the RCBWG website;

<http://www.conbio.org/workinggroups/Religion/Resources.cfm>

Alliance of Religions and Conservation (ARC); www.arcworld.org

Forum on Religion and Ecology (FORE); <http://fore.research.yale.edu/main.html>

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