

EARTH DAY SUNDAY 2002
Protection of God's Creatures
April 21, 2002 (or any Sunday throughout the year)



BACKGROUND INFORMATION AND REFLECTION

Protection of species from extinction is the theme for the 2002 Earth Day Sunday. Last year, the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church (USA) adopted an overture entitled "Preserving Biodiversity and Halting Mass Extinction." The overture recognized that humankind stands today at a turning point in natural history. We can decide to cherish and protect the diversity of other species, or we can pursue our present course of economic activity and consumer lifestyles which are leading to high rates of extinction for the other species which share the earth with us.

The call to halt mass extinction grounds itself in the following affirmations:

The Creator-Sustainer of all life wills its continuance, diversity, beauty, and interconnectedness. When human actions and inactions desecrate the natural systems ordained by God, they affront the Creator. When decisions and actions protect and restore creation's integrity, diversity, beauty and interconnectedness, they affirm God's wisdom and glory and please the Creator.

The Creator-Deliverer calls human communities to work with God to rectify the abuses whereby human impacts upon the earth are leading to a mass extinction of living species. This mass extinction would fundamentally alter and undermine the life and well-being of the human and other creatures that survive. It would rob all future generations of the gifts of wholeness and diversity that God intends.

(201st General Assembly, 2001, *Minutes*, Part 1, p. 473 or www.pcusa.org/ga213/business/OVT0160.htm.)

Human economic activity expanded through population growth contributes to loss of habitat, pollution of eco-systems beyond their ability to recover, depletion through over-fishing or over-hunting, and other factors which undermine a species' ability to reproduce and survive.

While species have come and gone throughout natural history, the pace of extinctions has dramatically increased. The noted Harvard professor, E. O. Wilson, has estimated conservatively that "Human activity has increased extinction between 1,000 and 10,000 times over [the normal 'background' rate] in the rain forest by reduction of area alone. Clearly we are in the midst of one of the great extinction spasms in geological history." (E.O. Wilson, *The Diversity of Life*, 1992, p. 280.)

Why is species protection to preserve biodiversity so important?

Ecological Value: Stopping environmental and habitat degradation leads to preservation of ecosystems in which endangered species live. As humans, we depend on these ecosystems to purify our air and provide clean water and food. When species are endangered, it is often an indicator that the health of these ecosystems is becoming unraveled. The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service estimates that losing one plant species can trigger the loss of up to 30 other plant and

higher animal species.

Agricultural Value: Wild species are both economically and agriculturally valuable. We depend on only 20 out of the estimated 80,000 species of edible plants in the world to provide 90 percent of the world's food. Wild relatives of these common crops provide a genetic reservoir from which new pest and disease resistant strains are developed (i.e., several years ago, genetic material from a wild corn species found in Mexico was used to stop a leaf fungus that had wiped out five percent of the U.S. corn crop). Wild species also provide us with the material to develop new crops which can thrive in poor soils or drought-stricken areas, helping us address world hunger.

Cultural Value: Preservation of ecosystems by preventing habitat degradation and destruction in turn contributes to the growing tourism industry. This benefits the economy and meets recreational, spiritual and quality-of-life needs. Spiritual needs can extend to many indigenous people whose religion may center upon respect for species and places.

Economic Value: Harvesting of certain wild species is also essential to a healthy economy. Fishing is a major industry worldwide providing jobs and personal income. In many areas of the world, including the United States, people may subsist on fishing which accounts for a major portion of their daily diet.

Medicinal Value: As humans, we depend upon the useful medications which come from plants and animals. How many Americans would perish within 72 hours of a heart attack without taking digitalis, a drug derived from the purple foxglove? Aspirin was derived from salicylic acid found in meadowsweet. The National Wildlife Federation estimates that 40 percent of all prescriptions written today are either based upon or synthesized from natural compounds found in the wild. Yet, E.O. Wilson notes these are from but a small percentage of existing species, and we continue to lose hundreds weekly which have never been tested.

Theological Value: All the previous values are based for the most part upon the utility of other species to humanity. For Christians, these values pale in comparison to the theological value of the rest of creation. God has created us wonderfully interdependent and interconnected in a marvelously intricate web of life. All this is a good creation of God (Genesis 1). Creation has dignity and value in its own right because it has dignity and value in God's sight. Thus, when any species becomes extinct before its time, the earth becomes less beautiful and God's praise is diminished.

Mass extinction can undermine the natural systems which God has ordained. The prophet Isaiah warned of the consequences of greed overruling caretaking: "Ah, you who join house to house, who add field to field, until there is room for no one but you, and you are left alone in the midst of the land!" (Isaiah 5:8)

God's promised salvation includes nonhuman creatures. The covenant with Noah extended to the rest of creation and to succeeding generations (Genesis 9:1-17). Isaiah's vision of a new heavens and a new earth included vineyards, wolves, lambs and lions (Isaiah 65). To seek protection for the creatures God has made is to bear witness to God's love for them and to acknowledge that they, with us, will share in God's new creation.

Together, living faithful lives, we can respect God's creation, help protect God's creatures, and avert mass extinction of other species.