

Rooted in God's Word and Lands

A Celebration of the Earth That Nourishes Us

Land Stewardship: A Guide for Faithful Study and Action **The National Council of Churches Eco-Justice Programs**

THE GOOD EARTH

From towering mountains to stark deserts to glorious forests and wide open fields, God's lands are an integral part of creation. Just as it was for the ancient Israelites, the land is more than real estate or mere dirt under our feet. While it includes the gifts of soil, air, and water for material sustenance, it is also the foundation of human community—where we live, work, play, and find spiritual renewal. The lands we know and enjoy encompass both human-built communities and the wide open spaces of wilderness, which provide habitat and nourishment for God's other creatures.

Like trees putting down roots in the soil, we are deeply imbedded in the land—physically, culturally, and spiritually. Sharing the land with our neighbors and with other creatures gives us a sense of place and belonging within our communities and the whole of creation. Experiencing the solitude and beauty of wilderness reminds us of God's power and grace in our lives. We are called to be faithful stewards and good tenants on God's lands. It is a role of privilege and responsibility, which requires us to work actively to safeguard the land, the bountiful gifts flowing from it, and the integrity of the ecosystems and communities that rely on it.

LANDS AT RISK

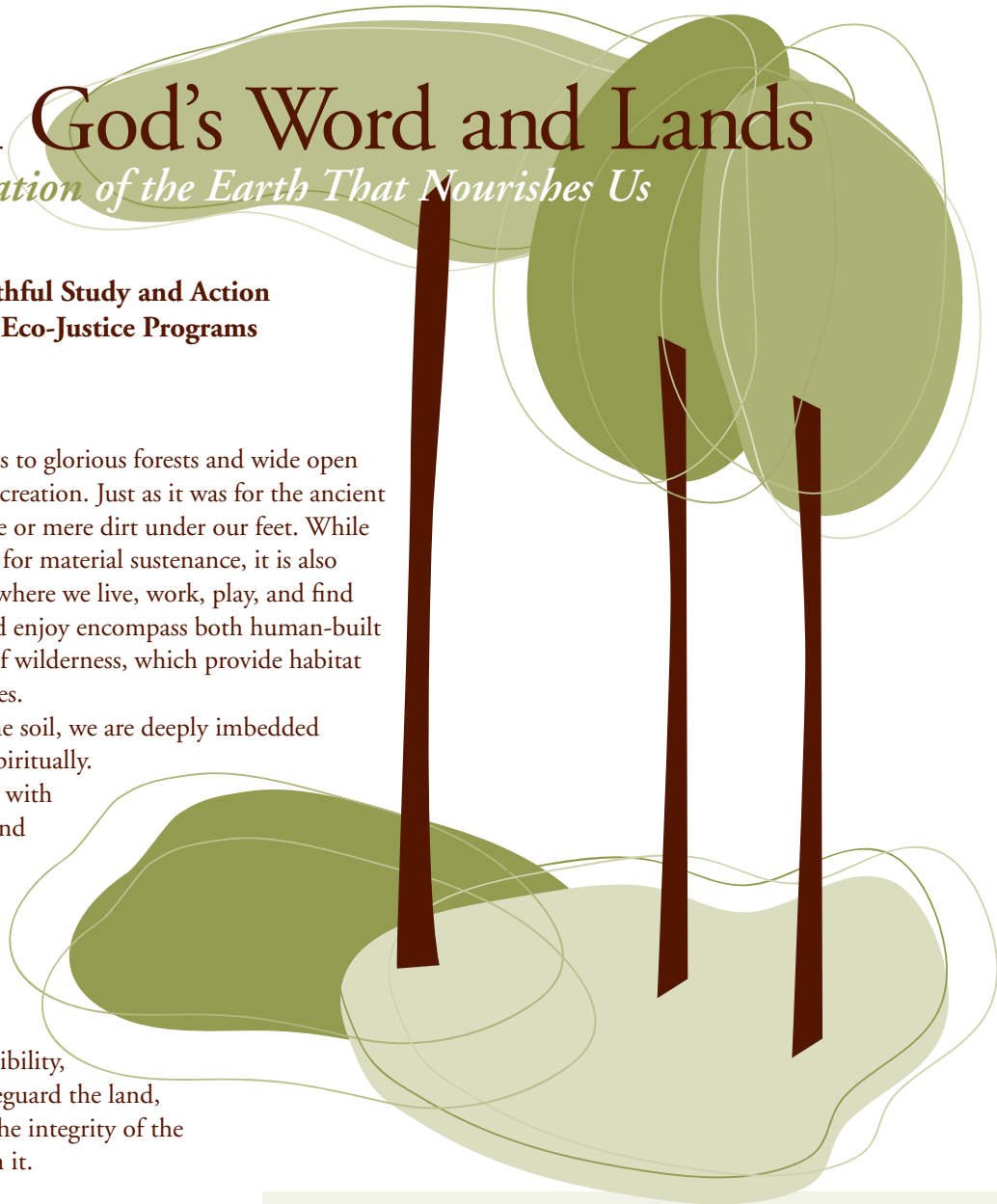
Humans utilize God's gift of land and open space for a range of activities, including recreation, farming and ranching, extracting minerals and water, building communities, and experiencing solitude. When conducted carefully—in ways that can be sustained and that allow us to leave healthy lands to future generations—these activities show reverence for all life and appreciation for the lands God has entrusted to us. But in many cases, we are abusing and overusing the land, polluting and degrading the soil, and destroying the communities and ecosystems that depend on it. We are also overtaking God's forests, deserts, and mountains with our cities, highways, and oil rigs and leaving little truly wild land to be experienced as God created it.

Energy Development

Our communities need energy to run, but what type of energy we choose and how we find and make use of that energy can have a great effect on God's lands. In the U.S., drilling for oil and gas to feed our dependence on fossil fuels contin-

SPRAWL AND OPEN SPACE—Cities and suburbs are growing quickly, often taking up open space that provides wildlife corridors and improves air quality in nearby communities. In fact, every hour, we lose about 365 acres of open space to development.¹

ues to take a major toll on the land, especially in the West. In recent years, leasing of oil and gas rights has increased on lands held in the public trust, and sensitive areas that hold cultural and ecological value are being opened to energy development.² The natural beauty of the landscapes, functioning of ecosystems, and livelihood of nearby communities are being disrupted by pollution of air and water resources, erosion and soil degradation, destruction of wildlife habitat, and damage to human health.³ Ranchers who don't hold rights to the minerals beneath their land are also feeling the consequences as the government leases those mineral rights to energy companies. They are finding themselves struggling to live on and run their ranches amid oilrigs, service roads, and noisy truck traffic.



Agricultural Abuse

Land is one of the vessels through which God sustains us, but we often take for granted the soil beneath our feet and the meals on our tables. Low food prices and overflowing grocery store shelves hide the true environmental and social costs of our food and agriculture system. If not conducted correctly, grazing and crop growing can damage the land by leading to rapid erosion and degradation of soil, chemical contamination and depletion of water, loss of genetic diversity, poisoning of wildlife and destruction of habitat, loss of family farms, and impoverished rural communities.⁴ In particular, large, industrial “factory farms,” which emphasize producing lots of cheap agricultural products and often crowd livestock together and use excessive fertilizers and pesticides, are harmful to the land, to the life that depends on it, and to the viability of local communities.

Sprawl

As communities grow, the homes, businesses, and roads of our cities and suburbs are rapidly overtaking areas of God’s lands that were once open. Poorly planned, sprawling development threatens both wild areas and agricultural lands. Increasingly, human-built communities are fragmenting wildlife habitat, intruding on wilderness, and pushing up against areas set aside for protection. In some cases, the boundaries of protected areas like national monuments are actually being adjusted to allow development to spread further. The closer proximity of population centers also means more use—and in some cases abuse—as well as increased pollution in wild areas. At the same time, thousands of acres of the most productive farmland are being degraded and paved over. Currently, 86 percent of our fruits and vegetables come from farmland that is in the path of development.

FORESTS—745 million acres, or about 33 percent, of the United States is forested land. Our national forests currently include 58.8 million acres of roadless areas. Thirty eight percent of our national forests are permanently protected as wilderness. Fifty one percent are open to mining, logging, or energy development.⁵

Recreational Abuse

The opportunity for outdoor recreation is one of the greatest gifts of God’s wild lands. Getting outside and interacting with the land and the wildlife it sustains can bring peace and reconnection to creation. But like any activity, excessive or uncontrolled recreational use can be damaging to the land. The explosion of off-road vehicles—dirt bikes, ATVs, dune buggies, and snowmobiles—poses one of the fastest growing threats to wildlands. Poorly managed off-road vehicle use on public lands is splintering the landscape into a web of trails and roads, leading to erosion, the spread of invasive

weeds, damaged wildlife habitat, contamination of water, and disruption of solitude.

Today, more than ever, we understand the interconnectedness and harmony of all life in the web of creation and the damaging impacts humans can have on this delicate balance. Degradation of God’s lands is not only an act of disobedience and destruction in an immediate sense. It is also an unraveling of the web of creation, which can have long-term consequences for our communities and for all of God’s creatures. As we grow in our understanding of how we are connected to the land, we also gain an understanding of our calling to work with God towards the healing of creation. We have a moral obligation to act on this knowledge and protect God’s lands so that other creatures and future generations can share in the bounty that flows from them.

PUBLIC LANDS:

GOD’S GIFT HELD IN THE PUBLIC TRUST

Public lands are held by our government in the public trust and managed in order to serve the good of society. They provide timber, energy supplies, forage for livestock, and minerals. They also offer opportunities for recreation, spiritual activities, and preservation of pristine wild areas and cultural sites. In addition to well-known public lands like Yellowstone National Park and the Grand Canyon, there are thousands of acres of public lands nationwide that are just as spectacular as the higher profile national parks. Chances are, you have a National Conservation Area, Wilderness Area, Scenic Trail, or other publicly managed area near you. These lesser known public lands provide some of the best wild places available for meditative prayer, spiritual journey, and praising and glorifying God. To learn more check out:

The National Landscape Conservation System

(<http://www.blm.gov/nlcs>)

Managed by the Bureau of Land Management, this network of spectacular areas includes 15 National Monuments, 15 National Conservation Areas, and 23 million acres of Wilderness and Wilderness Study Areas.

The National Wildlife Refuge System

(<http://refuges.fws.gov>)

Maintained by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, the network of National Wildlife Refuges is designed for management, conservation, and restoration of wildlife, fish, and plant species.

Sermon Notes: Ideas for Preaching About God's Lands

The heavens are telling the glory of God; and the firmament proclaims his handiwork Psalm 19:1 NRSV

The land shall not be sold in perpetuity for the land is mine; with me you are but aliens and tenants. Throughout the land that you hold, you shall provide for the redemption of the land Leviticus 25:23-24 NRSV

God, with an overflowing love for us, created the land, including wilderness and open spaces. Although we often take it for granted because it's right there—literally under our feet—land is an incredible gift that provides for the sustenance of all life. It is more than mere dirt. Land includes soil, air, and water for producing food, and it provides other blessings like minerals and lumber. Land is the foundation of human communities and provides places to play and find spiritual renewal. The lands we know and enjoy include both human-built communities and the wide open spaces of wilderness, which nourish us and all of God's creatures. They are an integral part of creation and a reflection of God's grace and love.

But land is more than a tool for our use, a supplier of natural bounty, or a gift given to us by God. Land also represents a trust. Leviticus 25:23 reminds us that ultimately, the land belongs to the Lord. We are God's tenants, entrusted with the land and with its care. We hold and make decisions about land personally and in our communities, but we have an underlying responsibility to care for that land on God's behalf. In the case of public lands—which are held by our government in the public trust—we have a responsibility to ensure that they are managed well on our behalf to the benefit of all, rather than exploited or reserved for a privileged few.

Land is also part of our cultural and spiritual heritage. As much as any tree has its roots in the soil, we have our roots in the land. Lands, wilderness and open spaces have always been central to the Christian spiritual experience. Immediately after his baptism, Jesus endured temptation as he wandered in the wilderness for forty days (Mark 1:12-13; Luke 4:1-3). The Israelites were also tested and struggled with questions of faith as they wandered and thirsted in God's vast desert lands (Exodus 17:1-7*). As people of faith we continue to gravitate towards the wild and stunning parts of God's creation—those places that, as Psalm 19:1 (NRSV) so aptly puts it, proclaim "God's handiwork." The breathtaking view from the mountaintop and the majestic silence of the ancient forest remind us that God is capable of miracles. As they did for Jesus, wilderness and open lands demonstrate the amazing power and grace of God in our lives.

Thinking of land in these ways leads to an understanding of the relationship between land and people with God at the center. This understanding results in a land ethic—a way of behaving that is consistent with our beliefs and actions that are suited to our faith commitments about the land, God, and people. To speak of a land ethic means that concerns about the land are more than economic and political. Our relationship to the land is also a moral and spiritual issue, a question of what is just and good and most likely to convey love to our neighbor and to the rest of God's creation.

To fully realize this land ethic, we must, as we are advised in Leviticus 25:24 (NRSV), "provide for the redemption of the land." Our understanding of land as a gift, a trust, and a reflection of God's grace should compel us to action. It is good to offer praise and thanksgiving for the blessings that flow from God's land, but to truly fulfill our responsibilities we must actively address those issues that threaten the health and viability of God's land. This includes:

- following the guiding principles of sustainability and renewability when using the land
- making and enforcing certain rules of land care
- paying a fair price for products harvested from the land
- affording special attention to the needs of those who live directly off the land—humans as well as other creatures
- seeking land uses that are appropriate to land types, and protecting some lands and wild areas from human impacts altogether.

When we faithfully and passionately take up this mission, and begin answering God's call to stewardship, then perhaps we will know what is meant by words of the prophet Isaiah (35:1 NRSV): "the wilderness and the dry land shall be glad, the desert shall rejoice and blossom."

*Note: Exodus 17:1-7 is a suggested reading from the Revised Common Lectionary for Sunday, Sept. 25, 2005.

Adapted from: *The Land: God's Giving, Our Caring—A study document on the theology of the land* (Adopted by the Eleventh General Convention of the American Lutheran Church)

And from: *The Land: Place as Gift, Promise, and Challenge in Biblical Faith* by Walter Brueggeman



TAKE ACTION TO PROTECT GOD'S LANDS

Service on Public Lands

National Public Lands Day (held each year in late September) is a celebration of the more than 600 million acres of public lands in America. From coast to coast, volunteers will pitch in for a day of caring for public lands by performing trail maintenance, improving wildlife habitat, planting trees, and protecting cultural resources. For people of faith, this can be a chance to witness the glory of God's lands first-hand and answer the call to care for and restore creation. It's also a great opportunity to share in fellowship with your congregation, study class, or youth group. Join one of hundreds of already-planned events near you! Or work with a community-based environmental group to plan an outdoor activity and celebrate God's lands any date that works for your group.

For more information, contact Christine Hoekenga (choekenga@nccusa.org or 202-544-2350) at the National Council of Churches Public Land Stewardship Initiative. Or visit: the "Land" portion of the National Council of Churches Eco-Justice Website at <http://www.nccecojustice.org> or the National Public Lands Day Page at <http://www.npld.com>.

Reduce Unsustainable Energy Use

A major threat to the health of God's lands is energy development—from oil and gas drilling in the western U.S. to mountain top removal coal mining in Appalachia. Help create a market for clean, renewable energy and reward companies that are switching to solar, wind, and other clean power by purchasing it for your home or congregation. Many utility companies offer programs that allow you to purchase part or all of your power from renewable sources. Check with your local power company. If they offer a program, join it! If they don't, encourage them to start one.

You can also reduce energy development pressure on God's lands by ensuring that your home and worship space are energy efficient. Interfaith Power and Light (IPL) has programs across the country dedicated to clean energy and conservation. To find an IPL program in your region visit: <http://www.theregenerationproject.org/ipl/index.html>.

Shop at a Local Farmers Market

Shop at a local farmers market for in-season, locally grown produce or join with members of your congregation to participate in a Community Supported Agri-

culture (CSA) program. If possible buy organic products to reduce the amount of fertilizer and pesticide contaminating our soil and water. Buying your food this way helps support local farms and reduces the impacts of "factory farming." To find a farmer's market or CSA program near you, visit: <http://www.localharvest.org>.

Enjoy Responsible Recreation

Outdoor enthusiasts who love spending time exploring God's lands can end up "loving the land to death." When recreating—whether camping, fishing, hunting, hiking or, especially, using off-road vehicles—remember to minimize your impacts on the land as much as possible.

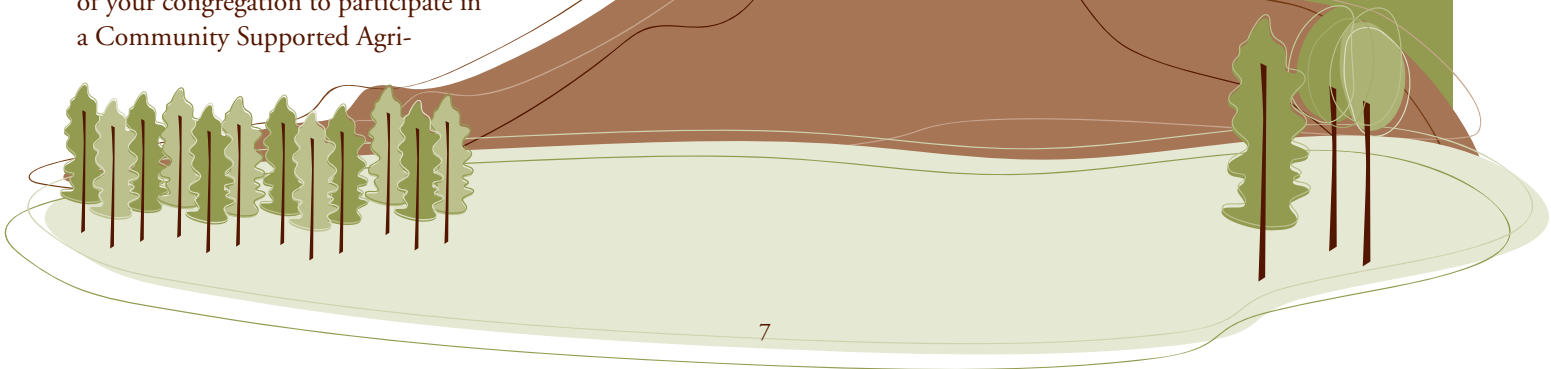
- Stay on the trail! And be sure to camp in designated areas.
- Pack out anything you pack in.
- Don't feed or harass wildlife.
- Don't remove any natural or cultural artifacts.

Take only memories and leave only footprints (on the trail!). For more details on how to leave God's lands as healthy as you found them, check out the Leave No Trace (LNT) Program. Visit: <http://www.lnt.org/programs/lnt7/index.html>.

GOING ORGANIC

Gonzalo Gallegos, a wheat farmer who lives near Questa, New Mexico, is president of the Sangre de Cristo Agricultural Producers Cooperative. The co-op, which began in 1995, is comprised of nine members who grow organic wheat on 120 acres near the Colorado border. The wheat is sold to local outlets like the Cloud Cliff Bakery in Santa Fe, which makes Pan Nativo (or native bread) from the grain. "The co-op has done wonders for the community," says co-founder Del Jimenez, referring to the jobs, increased income, and new skills that have revitalized northern New Mexico farms and co-op members like Mr. Gallegos. In fact, demand for the

co-op's grain has been growing, and the group hopes to expand and buy its own wheat mill soon.



DRILLING THE WEST

Keith Goddard is a carpenter, hunting guide, and resident of Colorado's West Slope, where his backyard looks out on the Roan Plateau—a spectacular piece of God's handiwork with diverse wildlife, rich opportunities for recreation and solitude, and natural gas reserves held by the Bureau of Land Management (BLM). Mr. Goddard and others in the community worry that the BLM's recent rush to permit oil and gas drilling throughout the West could mean severe damage to the Roan Plateau and to privately held lands in the area. The Plateau, which already has some energy development at its base, is on the BLM's list for additional gas leasing, and many in the community fear that an expanded spider web of drill pads, roads, and pipelines will disrupt other uses of the land (like hunting and hiking); fragment the habitat of deer, elk, and other wildlife; and bring erosion, air pollution, and noise. For More Information on the Roan Plateau, visit: <http://www.saveroanplateau.org>.

FARMLAND—In 2002, the United States was home to more than 2 million farms, which covered some 900 million acres of land and produced agricultural products worth over \$200 million.⁷ But everyday 3,000 acres of American farmland are transformed into highways, parking lots, and homes, damaging the land and pushing out traditional family farms that form the backbone of many rural communities.⁸

Endnotes

- ¹ Natural Resources Defense Council: Smart Growth & Sprawl <http://www.nrdc.org/cities/smartGrowth/default.asp>
- ² "BLM Oil and Gas Leasing Program," The Wilderness Society, Feb. 2005.
- ³ Western Organization of Resource Councils: <http://www.worc.org/issues/energy.html>
- ⁴ "Food and Farm Connection," The Land Stewardship Project: <http://www.landstewardshipproject.org/foodfarm-main.html>
- ⁵ Forest Information: <http://www.forestinformation.com/home/> Heritage Forest Campaign: <http://www.ourforests.org/>
- ⁶ The Wilderness Society: www.tws.org America's National Wildlife Refuge System: <http://refuges.fws.gov/> Info Please. "Land and Water Area of States, 2000." <http://www.infoplease.com/ipa/A0108355.html>
- ⁷ Farmland Information Center: <http://www.farmlandinfo.org/agricultural%5Fstatistics/>
- ⁸ American Farmland Trust: The New Frontier of Conservation, 2003.

For more information on how you can help protect God's lands visit the National Council of Churches Eco-Justice Program website at www.nccecojustice.org or call 202-544-2350.

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And God said, 'Let the waters under the sky be gathered together into one place, and let the dry land appear.'
And it was so. Genesis 1:9

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