

The Academy of Evangelical Scientists and Ethicists on the Critical Importance of Conserving Endangered Species

We are scientists and scholars in the scientific and ethical professional community who also are evangelical Christians. We come from diverse denominational and independent church traditions across the full evangelical spectrum--from Anabaptist to Baptist, Pentecostal to Presbyterian, Anglican to Lutheran, Methodist to Reformed. It is our privilege to engage in science and scholarship as our vocation, helping us and others understand, and care for, God's creation worldwide. We are committed scholars both of creation and the Scriptures, and are dedicated to applying what we learn to living rightly on earth.

As evangelical scientists and ethicists we are in accord--based upon scientific knowledge of the workings of God's creation and upon biblical and religious beliefs--on the critical importance and human responsibility to care for the earth's climate system,ⁱ earth's abundant life and variety, the great lineages of earth's living creatures, and the vitality of ecosystems for the well-being and community of all life.

The beauty, joy, and health of human life on earth depend deeply upon the wide variety and great richness of plant and animal life God has provided. This abundant life brings immense and continuous praise to God (Psalm 148), leaving all people without excuse about knowing God's divinity and everlasting power (Romans 1:20). Beholding God's creatures and the whole creation supports our spiritual well-being, while living in a world that sustains creation's marvelous variety protects our physical welfare.ⁱⁱ

However, as evangelical Christians and scientists in our time, we see a most profound threat to the integrity of God's creation in the destruction of endangered species and their God-given habitats. Among scriptural teachings, we believe the biblical story of Noah is a primary one. The story of Noah teaches us the meaning of faithfulness to God's commands, the overarching importance of maintaining the lineages of God's creatures, the vital necessity and stewardly duty to conserve endangered species and their habitats, and God's faithfulness in preserving faithful stewards of God's creation.

Noah was the first human being entrusted with endangered species. Noah was faithful to God's call to preserve the creatures together with his faithful human family--and followed through by returning the creatures he saved to a flourishing earth and diverse habitats that allowed them once again to be fruitful and multiply through succeeding generations (Genesis 8:17). Endangered species were saved by Noah at great cost of time, materials, and reputation. God cleansed the earth of the unfaithful and disobedient and yet did not leave things uncertain for faithful Noah, nor for the ongoing lineages of people and living creatures that were saved, by repeatedly making an everlasting covenant with all life on earth (Genesis 8-9). As a consequence of Noah's faithfulness, people and God's creatures, and the vital ecosystems upon which they depend, flourished on the earth (Genesis 1:22). The privilege and responsibility of human beings to be good stewards of creation was refreshed and renewed (Psalm 8). We believe from our deepest knowledge and convictions that we have the marvelous privilege and

responsibility to follow the example of Noah, even as we also follow Jesus Christ--the Maker, Sustainer, and Reconciler of all things, including God's other creatures (Colossians 1:15-20).

Among the great and effective models of conserving endangered species is the U.S. Endangered Species Act of 1973 that passed the Senate on December 19 by voice vote and the House of Representatives on December 20 by a vote of 355 to 4, and was subsequently signed into law by President Nixon. It recognizes that providing for living creatures requires protection of their homes and habitats and engages the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service to apply the most rigorous science to develop common sense solutions to prevent the extinction of endangered fish, plants, and wildlife. The Act is preventing extinctions, helping species stabilize, and starting species toward recovery. This "emergency room" for endangered and very fragile species is preserving God's creation, despite chronic shortfalls in sufficient funding.ⁱⁱⁱ

The Endangered Species Act's requirement for common sense solutions based upon application of scientific and ethical understanding is right and necessary. As in the act of Noah, it serves as a safety net for plants and animals that are on the brink of extinction. Beyond simply rescuing species, the Endangered Species Act provides the context for predicting what species might become endangered in the future and thereby encourages voluntary actions of responsible stewardship, both private and public, by groups and individuals to take corrective measures that make it unnecessary to declare species endangered. It also provides a system of checks and balances by requiring federal agencies whose projects could impact endangered species to consult with wildlife biologist experts. The Act safeguards the habitats within which endangered species can regain a foothold on life and ultimately flourish.^{iv} And it has been viewed as an important model by the rest of the world.

While we owe it to our children and grandchildren to be good stewards of creation, leaving them a legacy of protecting endangered species and their habitats, we also owe this to our Creator through whom and by whom these creatures have been created and are sustained. We count it a privilege to be good and faithful stewards of creation and to image in our lives and landscapes God's care for us and all creation. For us, stewardship also requires witness and includes raising our voices against attempts to weaken public policies that protect the common good, such as the U. S. Endangered Species Act.

The Academy is concerned about efforts to erode provisions of the Endangered Species Act of 1973 that have helped prevent the extinction of many species, including the American Bald Eagle.^v Weakening of the Endangered Species Act does not serve the common good and undermines our efforts to be faithful stewards. As a society, we must not presume authority to achieve self-interest at the expense of God's creatures and God's creation. Turning away from care for God's creation and the common good in order to promote self-interest shifts seeking the kingdom of God out of its appropriate and necessary first place.

In addition, the Academy is concerned about deceptive statements that couch weakening of the Endangered Species Act in words that mislead people into thinking that actions to weaken the Act are "reforms," "modernizations," "enhancements," and so on. An example is legislation voted on in 2004 that would have significantly hampered the full use of science in informing

ESA decisions. Because of this, the bill was publicly opposed by hundreds of scientists and groups like the Ecological Society of America; yet this anti-science legislation was termed by its authors the “Sound Science for Endangered Species Act Planning Act” (H.R. 1662). It is dishonest to dress damaging of the Endangered Species Act in terms that suggest its improvement. We believe such efforts amount to a "wolf in sheep's clothing.”

All this means that we, as professional scientists and ethicists, and as believers, find God's creation to be rich and full--created, sustained, and reconciled as beautifully described in Colossians 1:15-20. We know, however, that we have the capacity to destroy ecosystems on a global scale. Our scientific belief in this horrific potential parallels the biblical judgment that the destroyers of the earth themselves will be destroyed (Revelation 11:18), even as we believe that people who truly follow the One who created, sustains, and reconciles all things (Greek: *ta panta*) are promised everlasting life (John 3:16).

In recognition of the need for people of all faiths to come together to safeguard God's creation, the Academy calls upon other religious communities to address this important and vital need to protect and preserve the lineages of God's living creatures so they will not perish from the earth. We offer our cooperation with other faith traditions in this mutual pursuit. Respectful of our biblical heritage, the Academy particularly invites cooperation with those traditions that take seriously, as we do, the biblical example of Noah as a model for being faithful to God's call to protect endangered species from extinction. Ours is the time for a concert of religious voices to proclaim our privilege and responsibility for not allowing the great lineages of God's living creatures to be broken, for preventing these lineages from becoming but a fading memory for our children and grandchildren, born and unborn.

More about the Academy:

Among its nearly 70 members, the Academy of Evangelical Scientists and Ethicists includes scientists and ethicists that have been consulted by evangelical leaders, other Christian leaders, and leaders of Jewish and other religions over three decades. Membership in the Academy is restricted to evangelical scientists and ethicists who have earned the highest degrees in their disciplines and who are actively engaged in their fields of expertise in research, college and university teaching, and public service. The Academy also contains a Council of professional scientists and ethicists that are distinguished by having made very substantial contributions to the professional primary refereed literature.

Among the membership of the Academy are professionals across the full range of evangelical churches, evangelical denominations, and evangelical colleges and universities. All confess that to be evangelical is to be unselfish in sharing knowledge about the good news as summarized for example in Mark 16:15, "Go ye into all the world and preach good news to every creature" (Greek: *pas ktisis*). The Academy professes that extinction is not good news for any of God's creatures.

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Dr. David Clements, Associate Professor of Biology, Trinity Western University, Langley, British Columbia
Dr. Bruce Congdon, Dean, College of Arts and Sciences, Seattle Pacific University, Seattle, Washington
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Dr. Janel Curry, Professor of Geography and Environmental Studies, Calvin College, Grand Rapids, Michigan
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Dr. Calvin B. DeWitt, Professor of Environmental Studies, University of Wisconsin-Madison President, AuSable Institute of Environmental Studies, President, Academy of Evangelical Scientists and Ethicists
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Dr. Susan Drake Emmerich, Trinity Christian College, Palos Heights, Illinois, Former U.S. Representative and Delegate to the United Nations on Environmental Affairs, U.S. Department of State
Dr. LisaRenee Duke, Assistant Professor of Biology, Goshen College, Goshen, Indiana
Dr. Chris Farrell, Professor of Biology, Trevecca Nazarene University, Nashville, Tennessee

Dr. David K. Foster, Assistant Professor of Biology, Messiah College, Grantham, Pennsylvania
Dr. Michael Freake, Assistant Professor of Biology, Lee University, Cleveland, Tennessee
Dr. Orin G. Gelderloos, Professor of Biology and Environmental Studies,
University of Michigan-Dearborn
Dr. Jeffrey Greenberg, Department Chair, Professor of Geology, Wheaton College,
Wheaton, Illinois
Dr. Herbert Grover, Associate Professor of Biology, Hardin-Simmons University, Abilene,
Texas
Sir John T. Houghton, Past Co-Chair of Working Group III (Scientific Assessment),
Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change
Dr. James Huggins, Chair, Department of Biology, Union University, Jackson, Tennessee
Dr. Daniel Ippolito, Professor of Biology, Anderson University, Anderson, Indiana
Dr. D. Blake Janutolo, Dean, College of Science and Humanities, Anderson University,
Anderson, Indiana
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Michigan
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Dr. David C. Lahti, Post-doctoral Research Fellow, University of Massachusetts, Amherst
Dr. Kirk J. Larsen, Professor of Biology, Luther College, Decorah, Iowa
Dr. Mark Lassiter, Associate Professor of Biology, David L. Parks Distinguished Professor,
Montreat College, Montreat, North Carolina
Dr. Thomas E. Lee, Jr., Associate Professor of Biology, Abilene Christian University,
Abilene, Texas
Dr. Erik Lindquist, Assistant Professor of Biology, Messiah College, Grantham, Pennsylvania
Dr. Richard Lindroth, Professor, Department of Entomology, Department of Zoology,
Molecular and Environmental Toxicology Center, Institute for Environmental Studies,
University of Wisconsin-Madison
Alfred Mayfield, Ph.D. candidate, College of Environmental Science and Forestry,
State University of New York
Dr. Michael Mooring, Professor, Department of Biology, Point Loma Nazarene University,
San Diego, California
Dr. Chris H. Newhouse, Professor of Biology, Spring Arbor College, Spring Arbor, Michigan
Dr. David S. Oakley, Professor of Physical Science and Mathematics,
Colorado Christian University, Lakewood, Colorado
Dr. Robert K. Pelant, Director, Au Sable Institute-Pacific Rim,
Past Asia/South Pacific Director of Heifer Project International
Dr. Jeffrey Port, Associate Professor of Biology, Bethel College, St. Paul, Minnesota
Sir Ghilleen T. Prance, Scientific Director, Eden Project, Cornwall, United Kingdom,
Former Vice-President, New York Botanical Garden and The Royal Botanic Garden
Dr. Hal C. Reed, Professor of Biology, Oral Roberts University, Tulsa, Oklahoma
Dr. A. Relton, Hon. Director, Heber Au Sable Institute of Environmental Studies,
Bishop Heber College, Tiruchirappalli, Tamil Nadu, India
Dr. Jeffrey P. Schloss, Professor of Biology, Westmont College, Santa Barbara, California
Dr. Joseph K. Sheldon, Professor of Biology, Messiah College, Grantham, Pennsylvania
Dr. John Silvius, Professor of Biology, Cedarville University, Cedarville, Ohio

Dr. Eric Steinkamp, Associate Professor of Environmental Science, Northwest College, Kirkland, Washington
Dr. Kenneth J. Sytsma, Professor of Botany, University of Wisconsin-Madison
Dr. Todd Tracy, Assistant Professor of Biology, Northwestern College, Orange City, Iowa
Dr. Craig Tsuchida, Associate Professor of Biology, Whitworth College, Spokane, Washington
Dr. Randall VanDragt, Professor of Biology, Calvin College, Grand Rapids, Michigan
Dr. Fred VanDyke, Professor of Biology, Wheaton College, Wheaton, Illinois
Dr. Vernon M. Visick, AuSable Institute of Environmental Studies Fellow
Dr. Timothy Wakefield, Assistant Professor of Biology John Brown University, Siloam Springs, Arkansas
Dr. David P. Warners, Associate Professor Biology, Calvin College, Grand Rapids, Michigan
Dr. Leslie Ann Wickman, Lecturer in Mathematics and Physics, Director, Center for Research in Science, Azusa Pacific University, Azusa, California
Dr. Dennis Williams, Professor of History, Southern Nazarene University, Bethany, Oklahoma
Dr. Norman Wirzba, Chair, Department of Philosophy, Georgetown College, Georgetown, Kentucky
Dr. James Wolfe, Chair of the Biology Department, Botany, Houghton College, Houghton, New York
Dr. Uko Zylstra, Professor of Biology, Calvin College, Grand Rapids, Michigan

* Affiliations for identification purposes only.

Notes

ⁱ Basic to this responsibility for stewardship of life and habitats is the parallel responsibility of caring for earth's climate that we already have addressed, members of the Academy along with other scientists and ethicists, in the Oxford Declaration on Climate Change that we also commend for study and implementation. The Oxford Declaration on Climate Change can be accessed at www.climateforum2002.org (May 19, 2005).

ⁱⁱ "Everyone in the world depends on nature and ecosystem services to provide the conditions for a decent, healthy, and secure life." Millennium Ecosystem Assessment, *Living Beyond Our Means: Natural Assets and Human Well Being*, Statement of the MA Board, at <http://www.millenniumassessment.org/en/Products.BoardStatement.aspx> (May 19, 2005). "Nearly two thirds of the services provided by nature to humankind are found to be in decline worldwide. . . . The simpler, more uniform landscapes created by human activity have put thousands of species under threat of extinction, affecting both the resilience of natural services and less tangible spiritual or cultural values." Id. at 2 (downloaded prepublication draft). "Species and ecosystems provide a wealth of essential goods and services upon which human well-being fundamentally depends. Many insects, birds, and bats, for example, pollinate flowering plants, including agricultural crops. Green plants remove carbon dioxide from the atmosphere and replenish it with oxygen . . . Essential goods come in the form of foods, fuels, fibers, and medicines. Of the top 150 prescription drugs in the United States, for example, 118 were originally derived from plants, fungi, and other species. . . . Similarly, the wild relatives of major agricultural crop plants provide important sources of genes for increasing the resilience of agricultural systems to effectively cope with changing climates and outbreaks of pests and diseases." Union of Concerned Scientists, Frequently Asked Questions About Biodiversity, at

http://www.ucsusa.org/global_environment/archive/page.cfm?pageID=387 (May 19, 2005).

ⁱⁱⁱ The National Academy of Sciences (NAS) concluded its 1995 comprehensive study, “Science and the Endangered Species Act,” by noting that “[t]he 20-year history of the Endangered Species Act has validated its focus on species endangerment,” and “[t]he Endangered Species Act is a critically important part of our efforts to conserve species and thereby conserve ecosystems.” Committee on Scientific Issues in the Endangered Species Act, National Research Council, *Science and the Endangered Species Act* ix (1995).

^{iv} A scientific and ethical assessment of endangered species makes it clear that one of the requirements for protecting and restoring viable populations of living creatures is to protect and restore the places and environments in which they live. In meeting this requirement, extensive worldwide efforts are already underway, including such things as the international Ramsar Convention on Wetlands and the worldwide Biosphere Reserve program.

^v Among the many other species saved from extinction are the Florida Key Deer, Kemp’s Ridley Sea Turtle, American Alligator, Black-footed Ferret, American Peregrine Falcon, Whooping Crane, California Condor, Gray Wolf, Riparian Brush Rabbit, and Running Buffalo Clover. “[W]e can adopt a few simplifying assumptions to predict how many species ought to have gone extinct between the inception of the ESA in 1973 and 1998. . . . [O]ne expects that during the past 25 years . . . 192 [Endangered Species Act] listed species should have gone extinct. . . . [Thus] seven observed extinctions represents a significant benchmark of success of the ESA.” Schwartz, *Choosing the Appropriate Scale of Reserves for Conservation*, *Annual Review of Ecology and Systematics* 30:83-108, 87 (1999) (at <http://www.des.ucdavis.edu/faculty/Mschwartz/choosing.pdf> (May 19, 2005)).