

A Sustainable Environment: Our Obligation to Protect God's Gift

by
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Let's Not Destroy the Environment for Material Gain

An integral component of the energy bill recently passed by President Bush is for the production of more oil in the U.S. The Bush administration is encouraging drilling for more oil without much regard for the environment. To understand the potential impact this could have on the environment, one can look at some examples of what man has done in the past and has affected the environment negatively.

Marmots, the largest member of the squirrel family, were very common on Vancouver Island until man started to clear-cut the forest below the sub alpine habitat in order to harvest timber. Young mature marmots travel up and down looking for a clear meadow to dig burrows. However, when they find an open space of a clear-cut forest, they think it is a natural meadow and call it home. As a result, they begin to perish due to unacceptable temperatures and predators. The clear-cutting of the forests has changed the natural habitat of certain species and has prevented them to adapt.

The population of the Sumatran rhinoceros has declined precipitously over the past three decades as they were being killed for the animals' horns, of which this species has two. The interest in the horns is due to a Chinese medicine, which claims that the horn can cure numerous illnesses. Demand for the horns also increased to make handles for ceremonial daggers in Yemen. Higher oil prices made these daggers affordable to the young Yemenites.

You may have had the experience of eating delicious seafood in San Francisco called abalone. The demand for this delicacy increased so much that the shallow-water species went into a steep decline. Consequently, fishermen started going after the deep-water white abalone, a more tender species. Now, even the white abalone is almost extinct.

A few months ago, you may remember the big news of the first sighting in many years of the ivory-billed woodpecker. This species was seen all over the Southeastern part of the U.S. But then, small towns and farms replaced the bird's forest habitat, and the woodpecker had not been seen for over fifty years ago. This latest sighting of the ivory-billed woodpecker was two years ago, although not reported until earlier this year. Since then a few more sightings have been reported.

Other examples of what has happened to life on this earth include the slaughter of mammals in Australia. Many of the mammals native to Australia have disappeared since the European settlers arrived, and the extinction of various species continues. The early Polynesians destroyed many animal and plant species as they introduced agriculture to the Hawaiian Islands, thus necessitating the clearing of forests and grasslands. Over two centuries ago, the Europeans arrived and converted most of the islands to plantations, again eliminating some native species. The part of Hawaii that has not been touched is what is not accessible. It has been said that of all the animals, the first to go are the big, slow and tasty ones.

Some may think that many species are dying off because of old age. That is a myth as the majority of the declining species are young and healthy. Human activity is just not allowing these species to grow and reproduce. An excellent example is the California condor, which came very close to extinction, not because it was deteriorating physiologically, but because man destroyed most of its natural habitat and shot and poisoned the remaining survivors. Fortunately, when only a few remained, biologists took action and implemented a plan to allow these birds to flourish again.

Edward O. Wilson, in his book "The Future of Life", suggests several key elements in how to protect the remaining ecosystems and species. He suggests salvaging the twenty-five most valuable hotspots in the world which are home to 44% of the plants and 36% of the known mammals, birds, reptiles and amphibians, yet these hotspots occupy only 1.4% of the earth's land surface. He also suggests that we cease logging of old-growth forests everywhere and let the secondary native forests recover. One company that has been practicing sustainable forestry is Weyerhaeuser. This company has developed agricultural technology that is part of a 100-year plan to provide forest products for years to come despite an increasing demand. For example, it plants seeds in a special area where the saplings may be very close to each other until reaching a certain size. Then they are transplanted to a new area, spaced accordingly, until they reach maturity.

One might ask what is the value of our natural habitats and why should we be so concerned about them? A few years ago, an international team of economists and environmental scientists estimated the value of all the services provided to man at no cost by the natural environment. These services are defined as the flow of materials, energy and information from the biosphere that support human existence. Taking data from many databases, these experts estimated that the natural environment provides \$33 trillion of services each year, almost twice the gross world product, the combined GNP of all the countries.

Besides the economic value of the environment, there is also a psychological value based on biophilia. Studies have shown that people prefer to be in natural environments, and especially in savanna or park-like habitats where they can see large plains of grass with scattered trees. They also want to be near a body of water, whether it be the ocean, a lake, a river or even a stream. No wonder golf course lots or properties with water views go for a premium. The theory is that this biophilia has been imbedded into hominids as a result of the many, many years that were spent in exactly these types of habitats. There have been numerous studies to support this theory. In one study, a group of 120 volunteers were shown a very stressful movie followed by videotapes of either urban or natural settings. Recovery from the stressful movie was much quicker when looking at natural settings. Response studies of patients prior to surgery or dental work have shown a reduction of stress when viewing plant or water life, even if they are pictures. After surgery, patients recover more quickly and have fewer complications if they are provided views of savanna-like terrain.

The new energy bill is based primarily on more production and consumption with little regard for conservation or its impact on the environment. We must be very careful not to destroy our environment for material gain, because in the long run, it will affect us economically as well as psychologically. It has already started.