

# The root of our ecological crisis

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Christianity has been called arrogant toward nature and charged with being the historical root of our ecological crisis. It is therefore appropriate that we not only explore the Christian and Biblical basis of land conservation and stewardship, but go beyond that to ask the question, ‘What is the root of our ecological crisis?’ The following article addresses this criticism by presenting land conservation and stewardship from a Biblical worldview and challenges Christians to apply the Biblical principles of Christian stewardship to the use of God’s Creation.

## Crimes against nature

In 1967, Lynn White, an historian from the University of California, published an article in *Science* magazine entitled ‘The Historical Roots of Our Ecological Crisis’.<sup>1</sup> In his article, White maintained that because modern science and technology are products of Western culture, and because Western culture has at its roots Christian attitudes and principles, and because Christianity is arrogant toward nature and views nature as having no reason for existence except to serve mankind, then Christianity bears a huge burden of guilt for our current ecological crisis. Lynn White’s article, while published over 30 years ago, is considered in academic circles to be the definitive indictment of Christianity for crimes against nature. And modern conservationists and environmentalists, although they may not remember Lynn White, generally hold the view that Christianity is environmentally unfriendly. It is worth examining in some detail the allegation that Christianity is arrogant toward nature.

The portion of Scripture most quoted by critics who consider Christianity to be arrogant toward nature is found in Genesis:

‘And God created man in His own image, in the image of God He created him; male and female he created them. And God blessed them; and God said to them, “Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth, and subdue it; and rule over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the sky, and over every living thing that moves on the earth”’ (Genesis 1:27–28).

These two verses tell us three critical points about the Christian and Biblical bases of land conservation and stewardship.

1. Human beings did not evolve from non-human primates, but were created in the image of God. Men and

women are more than merely very complex and highly evolved apes. They possess physical attributes that are not shared by animals, such as an erect posture, hands with a highly developed opposable thumb that can do work, faces capable of expressing great emotional feelings, and a brain and tongue capable of articulate speech. More importantly, they possess spiritual attributes not shared by animals, such as a moral consciousness, the ability to think abstractly, an understanding of beauty, emotion, and the capacity to know and worship God.

2. Human beings are commanded by God to be fruitful and to populate the earth. Men, women and children are this world’s greatest resource, not its greatest liability. Estimates of the world’s human carrying capacity, that is, how many people this world can sustainably support, are meaningless unless we answer the question of how many people can be supported at what level of material affluence and habits of consumption. While the six-fold increase in world population over the past two centuries has been alarming, our world is currently undergoing a demographic transition. The United Nations recently estimated that 44% of the world’s population live in countries where the fertility rate has fallen below the replacement rate, and demographers are now predicting that world population will peak within 50 years and then decline, perhaps sharply, with potentially serious consequences.<sup>2</sup>

3. God entrusted humans to be the Earth’s stewards. To subdue the Earth and rule it, while not phrased in politically correct speech, is analogous to the process of gardening. For a garden to be a success, the soil must be broken up, seeds planted, the initial seedlings thinned, the young plants watered, weeds pulled, and pests controlled, but in the end there is a harvest. Gardening involves subduing and ruling a small patch of wild nature to yield a benefit useful to people. The Scriptures even tell us that it was God who planted the Garden of Eden as a home for the first man and woman (Genesis 2:8)—as if providing an example for us to follow. On a worldwide scale, subduing and ruling is like managing and administering. Humankind has been given the honor and privilege of managing and administering God’s creation, with the expectation that we will do it responsibly.

If Christianity is not to blame, then what *is* the root of our ecological crisis? Interestingly, the answer to that question—and a solution—can be found in an examination of the historic roots of the environmental movement itself.

## For usufruct alone

It has been said that the international environmental movement had its beginnings in the rock-strewn, clear-cut, soil-depleted fields of the state of Vermont, USA., with the birth of George Perkins Marsh in Woodstock, Vermont, in 1801.<sup>3</sup> George’s father, Charles Marsh, was Woodstock’s first attorney, a Calvinist and admirer of legendary preacher Jonathan Edwards and something of a naturalist himself.

In 1864, while US Ambassador to Italy, George Perkins Marsh published *Man and Nature*, the first book to attack the myth of the superabundance and inexhaustibility of the earth. *Man and Nature* has been called the ‘fountainhead of the conservation movement’,<sup>4</sup> and his legacy is honoured at Woodstock’s Marsh-Billings-Rockefeller National Historical Park, the only US national park to focus on the theme of conservation history and the changing nature of land stewardship in America.

Perhaps the best known quote from *Man and Nature* is, ‘Man has too long forgotten that the earth was given to him for usufruct alone, not for consumption, still less for profligate waste’.<sup>5</sup> Except for the use of the obscure legal term *usufruct*, which can most simply be translated as ‘fruitful use’, Marsh’s words are as powerful and relevant today as they were 137 years ago. They are also Biblically and theologically correct. Having defined the symptom, Marsh also correctly defined the cause as human indifference, shortsightedness, selfishness and greed.

Marsh once wrote to a friend that he held it a ‘duty to adhere to the religion of one’s cradle until one finds a less objectionable one, which I have not’.<sup>6</sup> In other words, he accepted the principles of Christianity but had not experienced its life-changing power. Like many who embrace Christianity only part way, Marsh underestimated the selfishness of our fallen human character, and the need for a changed heart and mind before people can do what is right. Instead, Marsh’s antidote for wanton destruction and profligate waste was enlightened self-interest, science and reform by benevolent imposition. This is what environmentalists have continued to do for the past 135 years: encourage conservation, seek technological solutions and press for government regulations. It’s been a losing battle, and our world ecological crisis continues to deepen.<sup>7</sup>

### Frugal Vermonters

Human selfishness, greed and carelessness are moral problems that require a moral solution. A change of morals requires a change of the mind and the heart, and it is only God who can change minds and hearts. Listen to the promise God gave King Solomon:

‘If My people who are called by My name will humble themselves and pray, and seek My face and turn from their wicked ways, then I will hear from heaven, will forgive their sin, and will heal their land’ (2 Chronicles 7:14).

An example of this principle at work can be illus-

trated through the story of the state of Vermont, which has been called the ‘birthplace’ of conservation stewardship in the USA, and not only because George Perkins Marsh was born there.

After the Vermont territory was opened to European settlement, following the end of the French and Indian War in 1760, wildlife was all but eradicated due to very heavy trapping for furs, the forests being stripped for logging and for farming, and the barren hillsides being over-grazed by merino sheep. By 1850, in less than 100 years, Vermont had become an ecological wasteland.<sup>8</sup> Then something almost miraculous happened. Over the next 100 years, from 1850 to 1950, Vermont was transformed from an ecological basket case to a special place with a picturesque pastoral landscape known the world over.<sup>9</sup> How did this happen? The conventional answer is that the American West opened up following the Civil War, marginal and high elevation farms were abandoned, the human population stabilized and the land was allowed to recover.

Economic stagnation and loss of population, however, usually lead to a downward spiral into poverty and ignorance. In Vermont, the opposite happened. Why is that? I believe it is because Vermont got religion. When the pioneers and the adventure seekers headed West, most of whom were deists anyway, those left behind turned to God in a deeply devout, Yankee sort of way. Although it seems to go unmentioned in contemporary versions of Vermont history, Christian conversions and a turning toward God swept Vermont before and after the Civil War.<sup>10</sup> In fact, Vermont’s first tourist publication, issued by the Vermont Bureau of Publicity in 1911, was entitled: *Vermont, Designed by the Creator for the Playground of the Continent*.

The life of Vermont’s communities during this period was centered on the church and the Protestant work ethic. The Protestant work ethic is misunderstood today. It is often bemoaned that the longer hours Americans are now working represents a return to the Protestant work ethic. The real reason Americans are working longer hours and holding down multiple jobs is because they want more money to buy more things! One of the better definitions of the Protestant work ethic is actually found in the Vermont Constitution, which states ‘a firm adherence to justice, moderation, temperance, industry, and frugality are absolutely necessary to preserve the blessings of liberty, and keep government free’ (Chapter I, Article 18).<sup>11</sup>

Vermonters of this period of recovery from ecological disaster were a frugal people. When I arrived in Vermont 30 years ago, you could still hear the expression ‘Use it up,



*George Perkins Marsh published his seminal work, Man and Nature, in 1864. The book has been called the fountainhead of the conservation movement, and the beginning of the international environmental movement.*

wear it out, make it do, or do without'. Today, that kind of thinking is greeted with amusement, ridicule or even contempt. Moderation and frugality combined with work is a fundamental tenet of Biblical Christianity which is practiced for the benefit of the community as a whole.<sup>12</sup> Under the Biblical model, hard working and frugal people are content, are not a burden on society or their neighbors, and willingly give of their excess to help others in need. It also happens that hard working and frugal people are good stewards of their land and resources, who live a more sustainable lifestyle in the context of the natural world around them.

### Christian stewardship

Why is it that Christianity does not have this earth healing effect everywhere it reaches? I propose two reasons, which I lay at the foot of all Christian believers as a challenge to their basic assumptions and thinking about their place in it.

The **first challenge** is to our almost unqualified embrace of the current economics of growth and consumerism. Traditional capitalism's emphasis on work and the rewards of honest labor, restrained by Christianity and the Bible's many admonishments against greed and covetousness, produced great benefits for the good of society. Today, with Christianity relegated to the margins of society, the economics of growth and consumerism are spiralling upward unchecked, driven by relentless advertising and promulgating a worldview based upon dissatisfaction and craving. We are daily bombarded with appeals that we will be happier if we buy more things that we don't really need, that soon wear out, that bring only fleeting pleasure, and ultimately leave us in greater debt. This drive to earn more so we can get more has resulted in a booming economy, but at a disastrous cost to the human spirit and world ecology.

The **second challenge** is to our assumption that this world does not matter in the eternal scheme of things. It is interesting to note that the bestselling Christian fiction series of all time is the *Left Behind* series by Tim LaHaye and Jerry Jenkins, which is about the last days.<sup>13</sup> The minds and hearts of Christians are focused less on this life and more on the life to come, and rightly so. Biblical prophecy predicts the destruction of this world and the creation by God of a new heavens and a new earth. If this world and everything in it is headed for destruction, then why should we worry about some ecological degradation along the way?

The answer to these challenges is found in a right understanding of Christian stewardship. Christian stewardship is based on the concept that everything we have was given to us—our health, our emotions, our intellect, our talents,

the social and economic benefits into which we have been born, and all we do or earn or make with what God has given us—all ultimately are gifts from God for which we cannot take credit. In fact, because God created everything, He owns everything and they are only on loan to us. We are not owners but caretakers. And as the Biblical parable of the Talents<sup>14</sup> tells us, we will be held accountable to God for what we do with the resources He has entrusted to us.

Frederick and Julia Billings, and their granddaughter Mary French Rockefeller, were professing believers in Jesus Christ and understood the concept of Christian stewardship. It was their implementation of the principles of George Perkins Marsh at Marsh's boyhood home that led to its becoming a national historical park dedicated to conservation stewardship. It was their spirit and example that surely contributed to Woodstock being recognized as the prettiest small town in America.<sup>15</sup> They demonstrated through a century of careful management their belief that stewardship of God's Creation *does* matter! If we treat this world shabbily to meet our greed, our pleasure, our convenience, or our supposed materialistic, consumptive and consumer-driven needs, we are not glorifying God as the Maker of Heaven and Earth.



*Frederick Billings purchased the Marsh family property and put Marsh's concepts into practice. Today it is the only US national park dedicated to telling the story of conservation history and the changing nature of land stewardship in America.*

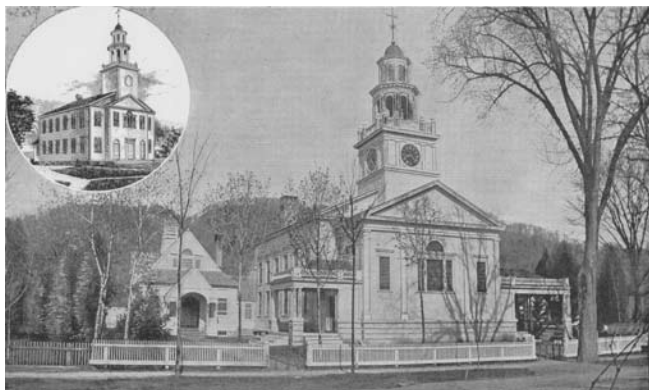
### Creation groans

Scripture hints at a mystical and even more compelling reason to care for His Creation. In Romans 8:21–22, the Apostle Paul writes the following very curious and profound statement:

'... the creation itself also will be set free from its slavery to corruption into the freedom of the glory of the children of God. For we know that the whole creation groans and suffers the pains of childbirth together until now.'

The historical creeds and confessions of Christianity emphasize that not only the souls but also the bodies of those who trust in Jesus Christ will be resurrected and transformed into renewed, perfected and glorified bodies.<sup>16</sup> The resurrection of the physical body was emphasized by the New Testament writers and the historic creeds and confessions of Christianity because of the Gnostic heresy. The Gnostics maintained that only the spirit went to heaven and so it didn't matter what immoral actions were committed in the physical body. Christians are guilty of a type of modern day Gnosticism if they maintain that, because we are heaven bound, it does not matter what we do to this physical earth. According to the Apostle Paul, not only will our bodies be resurrected but the very creation itself, in some mystical way, will be transformed and renewed, actually reborn, and freed from the effects of the Curse, the Flood and human abuse.





Charles Marsh, the father of George Perkins Marsh, donated the land and raised the funds to construct the First Congregational Church of Woodstock, Vermont, as it appeared in 1808 (inset) and 1890. The structure is well preserved today and home to an active evangelical fellowship.

### Conclusion

Biblical Christianity, far from being the root of our ecological crisis, in fact offers not only a credible *explanation* for our ecological crisis but also the very *solution* to our ecological crisis. As the popular author Wendell Berry has stated it, our ecological crisis is a crisis of character, not a political or social crisis.<sup>17</sup> Enlightened self-interest alone is not sufficient motivation for fallen human beings to deny gratification and sacrifice desires. The religion of consumerism is a spiritual problem, and we must fight fire with fire. Spiritual problems require spiritual solutions. Jesus Christ can transform our fallen and sinful natures, and truly change our character and our values. The promise of eternal happiness with Jesus Christ can free us from relentless pleasure seeking in this life, and can give us the peace of knowing that this corrupted and abused world will be redeemed and made perfect forevermore.

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- Conflicted as Marsh may have been in his faith, it is important to note that the man behind ‘the fountainhead of the conservation movement’ did not embrace the ideas of his contemporary, Charles Darwin, who sought to locate man as part of nature. As Marsh wrote to his publisher, ‘nothing

is further from my belief, that man is a “part of nature” or that his action is controlled by the laws of nature ...’ (Lowenthal, Ref. 6, p. 291).

- For a readable portrayal of the cultural forces that produced the Vermont of today see: Klyza, C.McG. and Trombulak, S.C., *The Story of Vermont*, Middlebury College Press, Hanover, NH, 1999; also Albers, Ref. 3.
- Vermont has been recognized by *National Geographic Traveler* (October, 1999) as one of the top 50 places to visit in the world, and the National Trust for Historic Preservation (USA) has placed the entire state of Vermont on its list of America’s ‘Most Endangered Historic Places’ (June, 1993).
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- See the Apostle’s Creed and the Westminster Confession of Faith of 1647, Chapter XXXII, among others; based on 1 Cor. 15:51 & 1 Thes. 4:16–17.
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