

The Earth Our Home: valuing the world's resources

Hilary Marlow takes a Biblical view of the earth's value



Photo Credit iStock

We live on a very small planet orbiting an insignificant star at the edge of a minor galaxy. Our sun is one of an estimated 100 billion stars (100,000,000,000) in our galaxy, the Milky Way, among over 100 billion galaxies in the universe. Amazing! But what has this to do with ecology? My point is that this small planet, this Earth, is our home, our only home. We are utterly dependent on its resources to survive: water, air, plants, minerals. Countless other life species, share this home with us, from elephants to bacteria, whales to amoeba, and together form a richly diverse and highly complex set of ecological systems. But we are pushing the planet to its very limits and beyond. Of all creatures, we are capable of creating the most havoc and causing irreversible damage to habitats and systems including those far beyond our own doorstep.

Valuing our home

Did you know that the words economics and ecology share the same Greek root: *oikos*, which means 'home' or 'household'? Both are concerned with the way that our home, planet Earth, functions. We might therefore expect economics to have a positive relationship with ecology or at least to be consistent with it. In practice, in the modern world economic concerns and decisions often take precedence over ecological ones.

You can see this most clearly in the way governments and policy makers approach environmental issues. The trend in

recent years is to decide priorities in environmental action based solely on the natural world's capacity to meet human need for goods and services.¹ But should the natural world be reduced to a series of financial calculations? Does the world exist merely to provide a home for human beings, and the resources necessary for our survival? Is this a biblical perspective and if not, on what basis does the Earth have value?

Here are six ways in which the Bible, especially the Old Testament, helps us think about the Earth and its value.

1. The physical Earth is God's creation

Regardless of its usefulness to human beings, the Earth has value because it is created and owned by God (Ps 24:1). At the end of Genesis 1 we read God's verdict on his own handiwork: "God saw everything that he has made and indeed, it was very good." (Gen 1:31; "good" here means fit for purpose rather than morally perfect). The Old Testament poets regarded the physical Creation as an expression of God's wisdom (e.g. Ps 104:24, Jer 10:12). Our belief in a Creator God says nothing about the processes by which life came into being and is entirely compatible with the theory of evolution. But it does mean treading lightly lest we destroy or damage this precious Creation.

References:

1. For more details see: *Millennium Ecosystem Assessment* (MEA, 2005) and *The Economics of Ecosystems and Biodiversity* (TEEB, 2009).

2. Biological diversity is celebrated

The authors of the Old Testament are interested in classifying and describing the species of wildlife that they encounter. You only have to read the description of the animals entering Noah's ark or the lists of clean and unclean foods in Leviticus (a bit more challenging!) to realise how closely they observe differences in behaviour and physiology. King Solomon is famously known for his wisdom, but did you know that this included his ability to catalogue plants and animals (1 Kings 4:33)? Psalm 104 is another great description of biological diversity, which accepts the reality of predation (v. 21) as well as acknowledging God as the giver of all life (vv.27-30). Likewise Job 39-40 celebrates the lifecycles, habitats and behaviour of various species, from the mountain goat to the hippopotamus. These and countless other species exist in all their diversity because of God's creativity, not just as resources for human beings to use at will.

3. The whole Creation has purpose

Psalm 19 tells us that "The heavens proclaim the glory of God" (v.1) and if you've ever gazed at the stars on a cloudless night, you'll probably agree. God's Creation reveals to us something of His majesty and glory. So the natural world is far more than just the backdrop to human society; it has a real purpose and reflects both God's[1] power and His care. The psalmists acknowledge this by calling the whole of Creation, animate and inanimate, to worship God. For example, in Psalm 148 mountains and winds, birds and animals, women and men, are all commanded to "Praise the name of the Lord" (Ps 148:13). This mandate is something we share with the rest of Creation, not something that separates us from it. By destroying species and habitats we are limiting the Earth's ability to fulfil its God-given purpose and silencing its voice of praise.

4. The Earth responds to God

The prophets of the Old Testament regarded the Earth as playing its part in the story of God's judgement and redemption of Israel. Birds and animals are held up as good examples of how to follow God's ways (Isa 1:3, Jer 8:7). The Earth responds to God by its joyful worship but also by its sorrow at the sin of God's people. For example, Hosea 4 chastises the people for neglecting God's ways (v.1), and lists the consequences this will have in society: increasing crime and bloodshed (v.2). Because of this, says the prophet, the land will mourn and its animals, fish and birds will perish (v.3). In Hosea, as in many other parts of the Old Testament, the Earth acts as a barometer of the relationship between God and society, and still does so today. The promised reversal of this desolation is the hope of God's coming salvation, which will be ushered in by an exuberant celebration of Earth's fertility and flourishing (e.g. Isa 35:1-2, 45:8).

5. Sabbath includes the Earth

In Genesis the culmination of God's Creation is the institution of the Sabbath (Gen 2:2-3) and the Israelites are reminded of this in the Ten Commandments in Exodus (20:8-11). The more detailed Sabbath laws in Leviticus stipulate setting the seventh year aside as "a sabbath of complete rest for the land, a sabbath for the Lord" (Lev 25:4). The land is to be protected from exploitation in its task of providing food, and wild animals, as well as domestic ones, are to eat what grows spontaneously in the Sabbath year (v.7). The counterbalance to this ideal picture comes in a graphic warning in the next chapter (Leviticus 26). Only when the Israelites are driven from the land will it be able to enjoy its Sabbath rests, suggesting that they have been careless and destructive in their land use. (Lev 26:34-35). God's inclusion of the land in His Sabbath instructions calls us to reconsider how we value the soil, and how we include rest for the land in our gardening and agriculture.

These and countless other species exist in all their diversity because of God's creativity, not just as resources for human beings to use at will.

6. The Earth and justice

In the economic marketplace of the 20th century, land has become nothing more than a commodity that can be sold if the price is right. But so often "land-grab" practices damage local communities or force people into unsustainable living conditions. The Old Testament also speaks out against such exploitation and abuse; in Isaiah (5:5-10) and Micah (6:8-15), land-grabbing and oppression of the marginalised renders the land unfruitful for its wealthy new owners.

These prophets see close connections between the economic structures in society and the fruitfulness of the land; acting with justice includes valuing the Earth as well as its human inhabitants, rather than pushing it to its limits.



Hilary Marlow is Senior Research Associate at the Faraday Institute for Science and Religion, and an Affiliated Lecturer in the Faculty of Divinity, University of Cambridge. Her PhD research examined the Old Testament prophets in the light of contemporary environmental ethics and was published by Oxford University Press in 2009 as *Biblical Prophets and Contemporary Environmental Ethics*.