Conservation in Context

Editor’s Note: The April 2005 “Conservation in Context” by David Orr (“Armageddon Versus Extinction”) and the responses by Rick Flood and John B. Cobb Jr. have drawn a greater-than-typical response from readers. These responses range from fully supportive and complimentary to strongly disagreeing and critical, reflecting the inherently polarizing nature of this subject. At least eight informal email responses to Orr thanked him for addressing this issue and urged his continued attention to the matter. They included several responses from self-identified Christians (including evangelicals). One stated “I am a long-time member of the society and also a conservative Christian in my theology and practice. I am in strong, if not complete, agreement with you . . . . The wrong-headed ethic dominating the religious fundamentalists that you describe is not only destructive to the witness of the Church, but is also corrupted in its foundational world view. It does not represent the true message of Scripture.” Another stated “I do agree that Evangelicals are not all of one mind and that some have vigorously defended the Creation. Having said this, however, the weight of Evangelicals on the right-wing has been otherwise and perversely so in the present political climate.” Other responses were similarly supportive, and I personally know of several cases of readers urging their colleagues to read this column as being especially important and pertinent.

Conversely, four formal submittals to the journal were critical of Orr in various ways, and they are published here, along with a response from Orr. My intention is to give voice to those who disagree with David Orr or believe he oversimplified the matter or disparaged their world views. I hope this further exchange will clarify some points raised and that readers will gain further insights into various perspectives on this sensitive topic. In the end we all, I think, strive toward a world in which war, fear, and destruction are replaced by peace, optimism, and creativity, with flourishing human and biological diversity ad infinitum. Gary K. Meffe.

Orr and Armageddon: Building a Coalition

The essays by David Orr and Rick Flood on conservative Christianity and the extinction crisis make important points but are too simplistic to inform a sound political strategy. The beliefs they find problematic—denial of evolution, seeing the world as black and white, embracing apocalyptic—are most accurately termed fundamentalist. Fundamentalism holds all aspects of doctrine, not just the most basic truths, to be sacred and inerrant (Rappaport 1999). Although preoccupied by the next world, fundamentalists are also quite focused on this one, hence their efforts to enact their beliefs into law. In contrast, the hallmark of evangelicalism is aggressive proselytizing. Many evangelicals are fundamentalists and vice versa, but the two should not be conflated. Conservationists evangelize.

Neither evangelicals nor fundamentalists are uniformly opposed to conservation. It was the Evangelical Environmental Network, not conservation biologists or the Sierra Club, that stopped Newt Gingrich’s attempt to dismantle the U.S. Endangered Species Act (Barcott 2001). More recently, Richard Cizik, leader of the National Association of Evangelicals (which represents 30 million people), stated that Christians have a duty to care for Creation, and he is working toward this (Solomon 2005). There are even challenges to antievolutionism among conservative Christians. Professor Richard Collins, a microbiologist at Olivet Nazarene, argues forcefully for evolution in his classes and new book (Begley 2004). He is in a minority, but there are many reasons people support conservation that have nothing to do with evolution.

Conservationists cannot afford to write anyone off. We need to work with evangelicals and other groups on the issues when it is possible. There is common ground for lobbying to protect species and wilderness and to battle global warming. Elections are more problematic. Conservative Christians, like most Americans, cast ballots based on the two or three issues they feel most strongly about. The vast majority of Americans support conservation, but that is not how they vote, as the current occupants of the U.S. Congress and White House reflect. Our challenge is to make conservation a top priority.

Conservative Christians are only one important constituency that anti-conservationist politicians rely on. The Republican Party elite, which includes extractive industries most vehemently opposed to conservation, has fashioned an electoral coalition consisting of those who resent the civil rights legislation of the 1960s, the conservation and environmental
legislation of the 1970s, legalization of abortion, legislation recognizing women and homosexuals as full citizens, and a media that frequently offends conservative values. This coalition was built with steadfastness of purpose and strategic discipline over the last 40 years—a steadfastness and discipline conservationists would do well to learn from.

Although extractive industries give money to both parties, they favor Republicans, who have long ceased being the party of Teddy Roosevelt. But conservationists need to recognize that both U.S. political parties consist of wealthy, powerful interests, and political professionals. The former give the majority of money to campaigns and control the institutions whose cooperation government requires to rule. These interests are able to bargain to ensure that their material interests are protected by successful candidates. It is the elite coalition in each party that struggles to fashion an electoral coalition of voters that can deliver a victory. Mere voters, however, are not in a position to directly bargain with candidates; they must largely settle for symbolic rewards in exchange for their votes.

As Orr notes, the elite-voter coalition that elected the current U.S. government is rife with contradictions. Virtually all the culturally conservative groups are injured materially by the elite that has organized them. Their myopia is reinforced by their knee-jerk response to antigovernment rhetoric and a lazy media. These voters see government as the problem rather than part of the solution and believe any who seek public solutions to public problems are suspect. Of course, the elite propagating this antigovernment faith does not hesitate to use government for their purposes. And to the degree government is in their hands, it is part of the problem.

Undercutting this coalition and creating an effective alternative is paramount to achieving conservation goals. This will not be accomplished through "popular education" or appeals "to the facts," or by simply confronting anticonservation beliefs. Facts do not change belief systems, including the (mis)perception of interests that in part underlie political action, and facts do not alter interests. What does work is carefully targeted long-term organizing, recruitment through social networks, strategic bargaining with other organized interests, and speaking in a language audiences understand. These are the means to a coalition that can effectively reward and punish power holders over the long term.

We will never succeed in our work if we indulge in our own mysticism. Flood suggests speaking truth to power, and Orr offers that it is "impossible to run a country for long on red ink, war, mendacity, and ecological denial." Such statements are not based on political observation, but ungrounded hope. (The powerful frequently dismiss the truth, and the Roman Empire—only one example—lasted for 500 years under Orr's conditions.) Ungrounded hope, as Ronald Wright (2005) observed "...drives us to invent new fixes for old messes, which in turn create ever more dangerous messes. Hope elects the politician with the biggest empty promise...and fuels the engine of capitalism." Ben Franklin also offered some sound political advice: "Men are saved in this world not by faith, but by the want of it."

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Literature Cited
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