Conservation Theology for Conservation Biologists—a Reply to David Orr

As an international group of Christians from five continents who are also professionals in a variety of conservation-related disciplines, we write this response to David Orr’s recent essay “Armageddon versus Extinction” (Orr 2005). Although we agree there are some elements of truth in Orr’s essay, three aspects of his argument significantly disappoint us. First, we think he seriously misunderstands the nature of science and the nature of religion. Second, his understanding of the connection between “evangelicals” and “right-wing conservatives” seems to be based on an ill-informed understanding of what evangelicals believe, so we aim to clarify this. Third, we are deeply concerned that by generalizing to such an extent and then calling for confrontation, Orr will only fuel a conflict that will be damaging to conservation in the long term, when instead much could be gained by both parties from constructive engagement (as his essay hints at, but then shoots down).

Although we are disappointed by these three aspects of Orr’s essay, and expand on these points below, we also want to make it clear that we are not rejecting his argument wholesale: it is unfortunately true that evangelical Christians have often been sluggish about caring for what they believe to be a world entrusted to human care by a loving God. We are greatly saddened by this reality, although as John Cobb (2005) pointed out in his thoughtful response to Orr’s essay, among the broader Christian community, evangelicals have often been ahead of other Christian traditions in “protecting declining species” and “respecting the integrity of creation.” In reality people associated with all religious and secular communities have contributed to the long history of environmental destruction, and most of us are living unsustainably. Our aim here, however, is not to exempt evangelicals from the charge of neglecting their responsibility to care for God’s world.

We write this response therefore in an attempt to seek constructive engagement and to explain where and why we disagree with Orr’s approach. Space does not permit us to demonstrate fully that the popular view of evangelicals as obsessed with Armageddon, and hence opposed to conservation, is ill informed and overly simplistic.

First, regarding Orr’s philosophy of science, he points out that conservation biologists “lack both a deep explanation of what ails us and a larger cosmology that resonates with the public” but worries “whether the sciences can come together to tell a compelling, authentic, and life-orienting story of our human sojourn.” We suggest that he is hoping for the sciences to deliver something that, by definition, they can never achieve. Science, on its own, cannot fulfill human aspirations and dreams. Science is about discovering the whats and the hows of the universe and does not address the deeper why questions relating purpose and meaning in life.

Scientific method, valuable as it is (and most of us are scientists), is surely not the only way in which we gain knowledge. People in their daily lives employ other disciplines to gain understanding, including the arts, philosophy, and religion. By disparaging religion, and seemingly seeking to move science into its place, we think Orr is trying to make science do something that it can never do. Of course he is not alone in this, and the reduction of conservation to being technical science alone surely contributes hugely to its lack of appeal in certain communities. In a recent influential paper entitled “The Death of Environmentalism” (Shellenberger & Nordhaus 2004), the authors write, “What the environmental movement needs more than anything else right now is to take a collective step back to re-think everything. We will never be able to turn things around as long as we understand our failures as essentially tactical and make proposals that are essentially technical.” The far-sighted 1990 Union of Concerned Scientists’ Open Letter to the Religious Community, signed by 33 leading scientists worldwide, said of the global environmental situation: “Problems of such magnitude, and solutions demanding so broad a perspective, must be recognized from the outset as having a religious as well as a scientific dimension.” We agree strongly with Rick
Flood's point (Flood 2005) that "the case for sustainability is ultimately a moral one based on a view that life—
including the lives of future generations of species—is indeed precious." If the conservation movement is to
develop a serious ethic, as we believe it must, then disparaging and
confronting religion, or elevating science to fulfill a religious function as
Orr proposed in his essay, is the very last thing we must do.

Second, the meaning of evangelical is not agreed upon universally.
Among the different Christian groupings, we understand the distinctive
feature of evangelicalism is its emphasis on the final authority of the Bible
as the Word of God written in human language. From this belief, a number
of others follow that are often seen as distinctive but that of course are
equally believed in part or in whole by adherents of other branches of
Christianity. They include an emphasis on redemption through the death
of Jesus Christ on the cross, the need for personal conversion, and the
importance of communicating those convictions to wider society. Contrary
to Orr's suggestions, however, evangelicals are far from monolithic,
and a wide variety of theological differences exist within the evangelical
community, almost all of which can be traced back to varying interpreta-
tions of the Bible.

Orr employs media terms such as right-wing evangelicals, but there is
nothing intrinsic to a commitment to biblical authority that requires
evangelicals to be right wing (just as it is perfectly possible for secular
conservationists not to be left wing). It is true that at present in
the United States the great majority of people who call themselves evangeli-
cals are politically conservative. This tendency is much less clear in the
rest of the world, however, and even in the United States there are many
evangelicals who are politically liberal. In particular, home-grown evan-
gelical movements in the so-called developing countries often face di-
verse challenges in terms of applying biblical teaching in their social con-
texts. One cannot simplify the political standing of such groups to being
either right wing or left wing.

Likewise, evangelicals are not united in a belief that the universe
as we know it will be destroyed at the end of time. Indeed, many be-
lieve that the overall thrust of biblical theology, built on a number of
key texts such as Romans 8:19-23 and Colossians 1:15-20, is exactly the op-
posite. The Bible also emphasizes the responsibility of people to care for ev-
erything that God has made, for example, in Genesis 2:15. Orr's view of
evangelicals as a community longing for the destruction of the material
world is simply inaccurate, although we recognize the presence of some
wildler individuals on the fringes who serve as colorful caricatures for those
seeking examples to reinforce their prejudices.

The thing that disturbs us most about Orr's essay is his call for con-
frontation, rather than dialog, with evangelicals. There are four reasons
why we believe this would be a seri-

1. Evangelicals form a large and
growing community worldwide.
Fighting evangelical Christians mi-
ght alienate them against conser-
vation but will do little to change
their beliefs and activities. Such a
conflict would probably lead to a
dangerous backlash against the en-
vironmental movement that could
seriously undermine the achieve-
ment of important conservation
targets. Furthermore, we might see
the current antipathy toward conser-
vation from certain evan-
gelical groups in the United States
spread to other parts of the world,
where currently such hostility is
rare.

2. There are many existing efforts
that are bringing Christians to-
gether with conservationists to
work together to protect areas of
natural habitat. We should build
on these initiatives rather than
take the confrontational approach

Orr proposes. Christian conserva-
tionists need the support of the
wider conservation community in
their efforts, not its opposition.
Those who work with communi-
ties around protected areas know
only too well that taking a con-
frontational approach over any is-

3. Christians have networks that sp-
read throughout communities ac-
ross the world and have the poten-
tial to be able to spread a joint me-

4. Perhaps of greatest importance
are the resources that authenti-
cally Christian theology can bring
to an otherwise bleak environ-
mental situation by establishing
the grounds for hope. By this we
mean something more than sim-
ply the belief that at the end of
time God will restore his creation
and that the loss of the dodo from
Mauritius and the golden toad
from the Monteverde Cloud Forest
in Costa Rica is therefore not the
end of the story. Of course this fu-
ture hope is an important one, but
when we say "grounds for hope,"
we are referring to our present sit-
uation as well. Evangelical Chris-
tians are committed by their bib-
lical beliefs not only to the con-

This tutorial is designed to help you understand and utilize code effectively. It covers various aspects of code, including syntax analysis, code execution, and debugging.

Conservation Biology
Volume 19, No. 6, December 2005
his creation. Furthermore, these present successes are a very real foretaste of even greater things to come on that day when God will fully restore all that He has made.

The recently released results of the Millennium Ecosystem Assessment (see http://www.millennium-assessment.org) strongly bear out Orr’s contention that the world is “going to hell in the proverbial handbasket.” There is little basis, it seems, for hope. A quote from the Economist (18 December 2004) captures this well: “The modern environmental movement appears to have borrowed only half of the apocalyptic narrative (i.e., the downside). There is a Garden of Eden (unspoiled nature), a fall (economic development), the usual moral degeneracy (it’s all man’s fault), and the pressing sense that the world is enjoying its final days (time is running out: please donate now!). So far, however, the green lobby does not appear to have realized it is missing the standard happy ending. Perhaps, until it does, environmentalism is destined to remain in the political margins. Everyone needs redemption.”

Christian theology can provide the conservation movement not only with the basis for much-needed hope, but it can provide the promise of the presence of the Creator God working with us in our seemingly weak and inadequate conservation efforts. It is perhaps time for secular conservationists to learn from those they seem to fear the most.

Simon N. Stuart
IUCN/SSC—CI/CABS Biodiversity Assessment Initiative, c/o Center for Applied Biodiversity Science, Conservation International, 1919 M Street NW, Suite 600, Washington, D.C. 20036, U.S.A. and Department of Environmental Sciences, University of Virginia, PO Box 400772, Charlottesville, VA 22904-4772, U.S.A., email s.stuart@conservation.org

George W. Archibald
International Crane Foundation, 81376 Shady Lane Road, PO Box 447, Baraboo, Wisconsin 53913, U.S.A.

Jim Ball
Evangelical Environmental Network, 6801 1 Street SW, Washington, D.C. 20024, U.S.A.

R.J. Berry
University College London, Gower Street, London WC1E 6BT, United Kingdom

Susan Drake Emmerich
Emmerich Environmental Consulting, 13002 Forestview Road, Palos Heights, IL 60463, U.S.A.

Darren M. Evans
Centre for Ecology and Hydrology, Hill of Brathens, Banchory, Aberdeenshire AB31 4BW, United Kingdom

John R. Flennley
Geography Programme, Massey University, Private Bag 11 222, Palmerston North, New Zealand

Kevin J. Gaston
Biodiversity and Macroecology Group, Department of Animal and Plant Sciences, University of Sheffield, Sheffield S10 2TN, United Kingdom

David R. Given
Christchurch Botanic Garden, 101 Jeffreys Road, Christchurch 5, New Zealand

Andrew G. Gosler
Edward Grey Institute, Department of Zoology, South Parks Rd., Oxford OX1 3PS, United Kingdom

Peter Harris
A Rocha International, 3 Hooper Street, Cambridge, CB2 1NZ, United Kingdom

Sir John Houghton
The John Ray Initiative, University of Gloucestershire, QW212, Francis Close Hall, Swindon Road, Cheltenham GL5 0RA, United Kingdom

Erik D. Lindquist
Biology and Environmental Science, Messiah College, PO Box 3030, One College Avenue, Messiah College, Grantham, PA 17027, U.S.A.

David C. Mahan
Au Sable Institute of Environmental Studies, 7526 Sunset Trail, NE, Mancelona, MI 49659, U.S.A.

Michael D. Morecroft
NERC Centre for Ecology and Hydrology, Wallingford, United Kingdom

David C. Moyer
Wildlife Conservation Society, PO Box 936, Iringa, Tanzania

Daniel Murdiyarso
Environmental Services and Sustainable Use of Forests Program, Center for International Forestry Research (CIFOR), Bogor, Indonesia

Bihini Won Wa Musiti
Bureau Régional pour l'Afrique Centrale, IUCN, B.P. 5506, Yaoundé, Cameroun

Craig Nicolson
Department of Natural Resources Conservation, University of Massachusetts Amherst, Amherst, MA 01003, U.S.A.

Alfred Oteng-Yeboah
Council for Scientific and Industrial Research, P.O. Box M 52, Accra, Ghana

Andrew J. Plumptre
Albertine Rift Programme, Wildlife Conservation Society, PO Box 7487, Kampala, Uganda

Sir Ghilean Prance
The Eden Project, The Old Vicarage, Silver Street, Lyme Regis, Dorset, DT7 3HS, United Kingdom

Vinoth Ramachandra
International Fellowship of Evangelical Students, 5/10, Sulaiman Terrace, Colombo-05, Sri Lanka

John B. Sale
Fach Gynan, Moelfre, Oswestry SY10 7QP, United Kingdom

Joseph K. Sheldon
Messiah College, PO Box 3030, One College Avenue, Messiah College, Grantham, PA 17027, U.S.A.

Stella Simiyu
Global Strategy for Plant Conservation, IUCN Eastern Africa Regional Office, PO Box 68200, Nairobi 00200, Kenya

Richard Storey
River Ecosystems Group, National Institute of Water and Atmospheric Research, PO Box 11-115, Hamilton, New Zealand

Les G. Underhill
Avian Demography Unit, Department of Statistical Sciences, University of Cape Town, Rondebosch 7701, South Africa

Juliet Vickery
British Trust for Ornithology, The Nunnery, Thetford, Norfolk IP24 2PU, United Kingdom

Tony Whitten
Literature Cited


