

## A humanist discussion of... environmental issues

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### Why should we care about the environment?

People care about the environment for many reasons, some emotional and some practical. Many people like the way it looks and enjoy spending recreation time in relatively unspoilt places. Life on Earth is both beautiful and valuable, and we should do more to preserve habitats, species and ways of life that are being destroyed by the over exploitation of natural resources and wilderness areas. We need these for materials, food, fuel, and as source of genetic diversity for artificial breeding programmes - many of our medicines, for example, have been developed from natural materials, and there may be many useful ones that we have not yet discovered. And bio-geo-chemical cycles are vital for life on the planet - for example, tropical rain forests have been called the "lungs" of the planet, and it might be hard for the planet to manage without them. In permitting the loss or destruction of natural resources, we may inadvertently be damaging ourselves - we don't always know what might be important or useful in the future, and so should preserve as much bio-diversity as possible, just in case. It is difficult or impossible to protect or reintroduce species once their habitat has been destroyed, and thousands of species become extinct every year, impossible to revive.

Our planet is small and becoming increasingly overcrowded. At the end of the 20th century, the world population had reached 6 billion people, doubling in the previous forty years. If we are not careful, it could double again in the next forty years, and all these extra people will need food, water, shelter and fuel. Many of them will want far more than this. Although humans in the past, and other animals, have also damaged the Earth and its atmosphere, modern population growth and technology have speeded up the process. Increasingly, human beings can control their own, and other species', fertility and evolution, and this places considerable responsibility on us. We will all be less well off if we use up valuable resources such as forests, water, fossil fuels, the fish in the oceans. These resources are often shared between nations and it is easy to foresee increasing tensions and even wars over basic resources if we do not come up with sensible ways of conserving and sharing them.

### What is distinctive about a humanist view of environmental problems?

Humanists seek to live good lives without religious or superstitious beliefs. They use reason, experience and respect for others when thinking about moral issues, not obedience to dogmatic rules. They promote happiness and fulfilment in this life because they believe it is the only one we have. Because of its name, some people think that humanism must be completely human-centred, concerned only with human welfare.

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Humanists are concerned with human welfare and happiness, but because of this concern, humanists also care about the natural world, which we all depend on and which will have to sustain our descendants. We should care about the future of our planet because we care about other human beings, even those not born yet. Because humanists have no belief in a god or supernatural force that will solve our problems for us, they know that human beings must take sole responsibility for sorting out environmental problems. We are the only ones capable of finding the solutions that can lead to a sustainable existence.

Some religious people think that God created the world and gave humans "stewardship" over it. This is not a belief shared by humanists, who believe that human beings evolved and go on evolving, along with the rest of nature. Humanists find good reasons elsewhere for caring about and protecting our environment. A humanist's moral reasoning would be based on a concern for the consequences for human welfare and happiness. Our welfare is highly dependent on the environment and the continued existence of many other species. Humanists also appreciate the happiness and inspiration that contact with nature and animals can bring. When the eminent scientist and former President of the British Humanist Association, Sir Hermann Bondi, was asked why he cared about conservation, he replied, "Because I want my grandchildren to be able to see elephants."

Humanists are unlikely to subscribe to "deep green" beliefs about the intrinsic value, or even superiority, of non-human nature, or to be sentimental about sweet or fluffy animals - rain forests and plankton and dung beetles are more relevant than pandas and tigers to the survival of life on this planet (though we would probably be less happy if pandas and tigers no longer existed).

Humanists have a scientific view of the world, and would not automatically blame science and technology for environmental problems. Indeed, it was and is scientists - mainly biologists and ecologists - who notice and monitor environmental problems. Societies (and that means us) must take the responsibility for how we choose to use scientific and technological developments. Cleaning up our planet and finding new sources of energy will be tasks for scientists and engineers, and the rest of us (especially those of us in the wealthier nations) must be prepared to fund their work. Humanists were involved in setting up organisations such as UNESCO, which has world wide environmental responsibilities. Humanists have always supported birth control as an important contribution to lessening the demands on the environment, and were also active in helping to set up United Nations birth control programmes

Humanists share many of the above ideas with rational and concerned people of all beliefs. Most environmental charities, such as Greenpeace, Friends of the Earth and the World Wide Fund for Nature, are non-

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religious, and are supported by people of all faiths and none.

### **Questions to think about**

- Does it matter if a species dies out? Why?
- Would it matter if human beings died out? Why? Would it matter less if humans died out but other forms of life survived?
- It would take 5.4 Earths to sustain the world's population if everyone lived like the average American. If everyone lived like you, how many Earths would be needed?
- How much are you prepared to give up to prevent further degradation of the environment? In theory? In practice?
- Is it morally wrong not to recycle cans, bottles, paper, vegetable waste etc?
- Can you justify using up fossil fuels or clearing tropical rain forests for farming so that we gain now, but the quality of life of people in other parts of the world or in the future is impoverished?
- "Sustainable development" is a fashionable phrase at the moment. How much development is genuinely sustainable? What kinds of development are sustainable?
- Is it right to build a dam that will supply water to thousands of people, but will destroy the habitat of many plants and animals?
- Find an example of an environmental problem in this week's news. What are the causes? How could the problem be solved?
- How are you deciding your answers to these questions? What principles and arguments influence your answers?
- How is the humanist view on this issue similar to that of other worldviews you have come across? How is it different?

### **Further reading:**

Ed Ben Rogers *Is Nothing Sacred?* (Routledge)

*With thanks to Dr Jonathan Newman, ecologist, Oxford University  
Department of Zoology*

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