

# AN ECOLOGIST'S VIEW OF LATTER-DAY SAINT CULTURE AND THE ENVIRONMENT

*Steven L. Peck*

*Steven L. Peck is an assistant professor of integrative biology at Brigham Young University.*



**D**ead Horse Camp was hidden deep in the southern Wyoming Rockies. Owned by the Wyoming State Mental Hospital, it was a retreat for those suffering the wounds of mental illness. Each year my father, a social worker, would take our family there for a few weeks while he assisted the staff with patients who were spending the summer in the Rockies. For some, this was a place of healing. For me, it was a magical time. Next to the camp was a large beaver pond over which we would pole an old wooden raft. As we floated over the calm surface, we could see through the clear water a build-up of matted vegetation. If I looked over the edge of the raft, I could see the denizens of another world. Over the top of the vegetation glided an amazing assortment of

strange and bizarre creatures. Dragonlike insect larvae (although I did not know what they were then) walked slowly over the vegetation. I would hover over them, spying on their every movement, like Homer's god spying on the Athenians. For hours my friends and I would lie with our faces over the edge of the raft, floating lazily over the pond, watching the comings and goings of these strange creatures. I believe this is where the ecologist in me was born.

However, it was shooting the leopard frogs that now forces itself out of the depths of childhood as my most vivid memory. I had two guns up there, a pump-action BB gun and a .22 rifle. I was raised by a father who loved to hunt. From September to June we lived on game: deer, elk, moose, antelope, and rabbit. By the time we went back to beef, it seemed a wonderful treat.

Every morning that summer, my brother and another boy staying at the camp and I would walk around the pond, "plugging" frogs with our BB guns. Fanning out along the shore, we

would sneak up on one, take aim, and shoot it in the back. We would pile the massacred victims in an old gallon can and take our trophies back to camp to show everyone our hunting prowess. I remember an old lady we called "The Witch," a wizened patient with yellow skin, who was horrified at what we were doing. She scolded us, wagging a boney finger, "You boys ought not to do that!" We laughed at her; they were just frogs.

I vividly remember the sequence of feelings associated with shooting the frogs. It started with the intensity and excitement of the hunt — slowly, we would make our way through the tall reeds bordering the pond. There was a sense of expectation and anticipation as we walked, guns forward, slightly hunched as we had seen John Wayne do in *The Green Berets*. We would stalk quietly, looking carefully near the water's edge for the telltale bump in the water that signaled the presence of our quarry. There was a moment of strong exhilaration bubbling up into my stomach as I quickly aimed at the frog. The puff from the air gun gave a sweet sound, and the thud of hitting the helpless beast remains clear and distinct in my mind. Right after the kill, however, there was a momentary feeling of wrongness. A heavy stillness. A feeling of sin. For a few minutes I knew I had betrayed something inside me, that it was a wrong as clear as the buzz of the flies I heard all around me. But the feeling was easily swept away. Triumph returned with the verbal applause of my hunting companions, and a sense of pleasant satisfaction quickly drove out the negative feelings as we placed our lifeless quarry into the gallon can.

But something else happened that summer for which that sense of wrongness could not be removed. I was hunting for squirrels along the edges of the camp, my .22 caliber rifle at the ready. Suddenly in front of me up popped a woodchuck. It was an enormous beast — a magnificent rodent, nearly as large as our cocker spaniel, standing upright before me. It was turned to the side, looking down the hill I had been creeping

along. I slowly got to my knees and took careful aim. It was the shot of a lifetime. The bullet entered one shoulder and came out the other. It dropped to the ground limp and lifeless. With a whoop of joy, I ran up to it and turned it over. Along its breast ran a line of nipples, full and ripe, dripping milk. A feeling of sickness swept over me. I knew in that instant I had killed not only this woodchuck but its babies as well. I looked around for a hole, thinking maybe I could raise the babies myself, but could not find one. I went back to the body and looked at the wounds gaping from both shoulders. Its teeth were exposed — set in a deathly grimace. I don't remember what I did with it. I don't remember if I skinned it as my brother did the badger he shot. It seems like I would have, but I don't remember. My memory is vivid however of the rows of nipples dripping milk. That is as clear as if it had happened yesterday. Something in that killing sucked the joy of hunting out of me.

A change came in me after slaying the mother woodchuck. It occurred slowly. I would like to say that I had a sudden change that forever caused me to never take the life of an animal, but it was not that kind of change. It was slow and uneven. In the years that followed, I still hunted rabbits with my father, but I remember more often than not as I raised my gun to kill a rabbit, I would watch it in my sights for a while but then would remove my finger from the trigger and lower my gun. Sometimes I would shoot, but the excitement of the hunt was waning. In the death of that woodchuck, a new sensibility began to find its way into my life. In many ways, this new awareness acted as a midwife in my birth as an ecologist. I looked at nature differently after that. Its wonders became more apparent, its beauties something to ponder over more deeply. Things were not placed in the world for my unfettered use. I felt for the first time that things were not placed on the earth for my pleasure in their destruction. It strikes me as odd that my appreciation for nature came in the form of a needless death, but so it was.

In telling this story, I have never felt the need to condemn those that do hunt. I still hunt, although I try to hunt with a sense of gratitude for the life I take, and I hunt only with the intent to provide meat for my family. I also know that for many families with whom I grew up in Moab, it was a way of life; it was their connection with wild lands and places. It fed their families, and they took the provision and thanked the Lord for meat to eat. Hunting rooted them to earth—to the great chain of being.

## **Western Culture**

This was not true of all hunters. Some had attitudes and perceptions of nature that harken back to my days of plugging frogs without thought or conscience. Such people seem twisted and strangely broken, as I was.

I was raised a member of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. That didn't seem to mean anything about how we should relate to the earth. While growing up, the closest I came to understanding there might be a relationship between our religion and nature came during conference at our stake center, listening to President Spencer W. Kimball give his address "Don't Shoot the Little Birds." But at least among those I knew in Moab, the talk did not change anyone's behavior. I remember a discussion with several men in the ward who interpreted the entire talk as simply "Eat what you kill." That aphorism alone summed up the entirety of President Kimball's message. If there was a relationship between nature, the Church, or some sort of environmental ethic, it was never discussed by the members that I knew, either at our Church meetings or outside. In Boy Scouts we learned (and I don't think this is true anymore, as I have sensed a growing conservationist attitude within Scouting) that nature was to be tamed—bent for our enjoyment. In all my years as a youth growing up in the Church, I never heard expressed the idea that nature was something that mattered for its own sake. Certainly, it was the context of many of our activities—the matrix that framed much of

our lives. But its protection, its value, and its fragility were never mentioned. It was there, much as the air that we breathed, unnoticed and not reflected upon, and used as needed.

Each year as Scouts we would earn money for our boating trip to Flaming Gorge by cutting down pole pines. We would go to the nearby La Sal Mountains and cut down as many as we needed (there appeared no limit to the supply) and sell them to local people who were building or repairing fences. If the word *environmentalist* was used, it was to degrade or belittle someone. "Your mother is an environmentalist" was a cutting remark that could only be settled with a fistfight. While on a recent fishing trip with some good Latter-day Saint men who otherwise would never swear, they could not say the word *environmentalist* without putting the word *damn* in front of it.

What do we make of this? Are Latter-day Saints antienvironmental, as some claim?

Sadly, my impressions of the relationship between many of those in my religion and the environment seem consistent with the way many people negatively view us. As an ecological insider, it is clear that most ecologists view Mormonism as an enemy of nature. They often assume that to be a Mormon ecologist is an oxymoron. Many of our recent legislators have declared open season on the environment and have the worst environmental record of any state's representatives. This is true both of Utah specific legislation and national environmental programs.<sup>1</sup>

However, I strongly believe that this attitude within the Church is a holdover from our western United States culture and its history of antigovernment feelings and "Leave us alone!" sentiments. Because so many members of the Church in Utah and its surrounding areas have been raised with these Western attitudes, Western culture is often conflated with Church culture. What is needed is to educate the Saints in their "true" culture as is found in the gospel. How can this education proceed?

From my experience with members of the Church, I see that they have a profound love for nature. They love camping, hunting, and spending time in the wilderness. What are we to make of this dichotomy between how we are perceived and how we feel? Many of those who express outrage at the mention of environmentalism are Scouters who profess a strong conservation ethic. They have profound memories of being in wilderness areas, which they speak about with love and passion. But talk to these same people about environmental protection, and they vehemently denounce it and claim such legislation is supported only by extremists and malcontents. When I suggest anything to my good Latter-day Saint family and friends about global warming, the worldwide loss of species, or the protection of our wild areas, they scoff not only at the idea that we should be concerned about these things but that there is even such a problem that needs attention.

This attitude has disillusioned many of our finest Latter-day Saint environmental thinkers. It has polarized and separated people into camps that isolate us on issues that need unanimity and reconciliation if they are to be addressed. Sadly, some people who have a strong desire to protect and preserve the planet have left the Church over what they perceive as antienvironmental feelings among members of the Church. And some Latter-day Saints question whether one can be a good member of the Church and still be an environmentalist. It is too often the case that those on both sides of the issue promote uninformed stereotypes that help maintain differences. These differences then become exaggerated, polarized, and entrenched.

### **Perceptions and Realities**

To get past these differences, we need to understand the roots of current Latter-day Saint attitudes and from where these perceptions arose. I would like to explore reasons why I think that Latter-day Saints have been perceived as anti-environmental, and whether such perceptions are justified. I will also offer suggestions on how

to move beyond stereotypes and divisive line drawing and how Latter-day Saints can bring a unique perspective of caring for creation that is environmentally friendly, scientifically informed, and faith centered. These views and observations are informed by my own experiences of both growing up in Mormon culture and becoming an ecologist. These views are meant only as personal observations and are not comprehensive; they are given to open more discussion on this topic.

To do this I would like to explore these issues in the context of Don Browning's practical-theological ethics. He writes from a perspective of hermeneutic realism and practical theology. Hermeneutic realism is the view that understanding rests in dialogue—that pure objectivity is impossible not only in ordinary discourse but in science as well. He has used this framework as a way to look at difficult ethical questions found in practical theology. He has identified five dimensions of moral thinking and practical reason:

In a series of essays and books stretching from the early 1980s to the present, I have identified five dimensions of moral thinking or practical reason: (1) a visional level generally conveyed by narratives and metaphors about the character of the ultimate context of experience, (2) an obligatory level guided by some implicit or explicit moral principle of a rather general kind, (3) assumptions about basic regularities of human tendencies and needs, (4) assumptions about pervasive social and ecological patterns that channel and constrain these tendencies and needs, and (5) a level of concrete practices and rules that are informed by all the foregoing dimensions. . . .

A hermeneutically conceived practical-theological ethics should proceed as a dialogue involving all five of these dimensions. According to this view, practical-theological ethics begins with a problem, crisis, or question that exposes the practical thinker's preunderstanding at each of the five levels.<sup>2</sup>

Using this framework, I want to explore various aspects of the Latter-day Saints and the

modern environmental movement. By making these dimensions explicit, I hope to open a dialogue between these currently widely separated groups. I believe it will be useful to see how these dimensions structure the context for a Latter-day Saint environmental viewpoint. I express my own observations in what follows. This is not meant to be an analysis of objectively obtained data, but if my observations are biased, it is because there are little data on Latter-day Saint attitudes about the environment. My observations are based on my interactions with members of the Church in family, church, and educational settings (I teach environmental science at Brigham Young University). These are observations about American Saints only. I hope that these thoughts may be useful both for the Saints trying to understand more about environmentalism and for environmental thinkers curious about how Latter-day Saint beliefs structure attitudes about the environment. I doubt there is a consensus on anything I'm about to say, but I hope to capture broad trends that can be explored by sociologists more rigorously and either confirmed or refuted.

### **Dimension 1: The Ultimate Context of Experience**

*Latter-day Saint view.* Latter-day Saints view this life as a continuation of one that began in the premortal life, where people lived as literal sons and daughters of God. Earth and the known universe were created for our sake. All that exists from the level of stars to bacteria are present to propel human salvation and advancement forward toward greater knowledge and glory. In an eternal biological sense, we are of the same species as God. Latter-day Saints also believe that the earth has a fixed, finite temporal life and that at some point it will die and be re-created in a celestial state. They also believe that the most important truths are revealed to humans through prophets. Truth can be garnered through the scientific method and rational discourse, but these truths must cohere with revealed truth, which

always has priority. This viewpoint structures both Latter-day Saint theology and praxis. Therefore, Latter-day Saints look upon this earth life as a stepping-stone to greater things. Of ultimate concern during this earthly sojourn are those things that will be taken into the next life, such as family relationships structured by married couples and children, and priesthood-defined power and its associated ordinances. Interestingly, Latter-day Saint doctrine includes the notion that the earth has a spirit and is alive in some sense, and that it can "feel" the wickedness of the earth's inhabitants, including the degradations of sin and pollution produced by the human family (see Moses 7:48).

*Modern environmental view.* Conversely, most biologically based environmental ethics are based on the overwhelming physical evidence presented by geology, genetics, physiology, anatomy, and sophisticated mathematical modeling that earth came into being 4.5 billion years ago and that life has evolved through the Darwinian process of natural selection and genetics. Humans are one of many species that have occupied the earth since life's appearance over 3.5 billion years ago. The value of life comes from the recognition that it demonstratively exists in only one place in the universe and that its rarity and diversity are unique objects that have value in and of themselves, or may be practically useful and necessary to human survival. Truth is gathered only through the scientific method and rational discourse.

*Comparison.* At first glance, these two viewpoints might seem irreconcilable, as the reason for the existence of humans moves from being central to accidental. However, Latter-day Saint biologists have argued that while not central to ultimate concerns, the mode of creation remains an open theological question and that one viewpoint does not preclude the other.<sup>3</sup> There is widespread belief among Latter-day Saints that these fundamental contexts *are* incompatible. The reason for this animosity is due more to historical accidents than to any revelatory instruction on the

Latter-day Saint side or even a reasoned response from either side. Shortly after Darwin published the *Origin of Species*, several prominent scientists such as Huxley and Hooker used Darwin's theory to support an atheistic agenda. The reaction of the religious community was to entrench and counterattack. Because these two camps became antagonistic, Darwin's theories became associated with atheism, and biblical creationists became vocal opponents of the theory.<sup>4</sup> These entrenched attitudes and misunderstandings continue to this day despite notable attempts at reconciliation.

Unfortunately, this ideological war unnecessarily spilled over into many Latter-day Saint's viewpoints on evolution. This created an attitude of suspicion toward science in much of Mormon culture.<sup>5</sup> This antiscience stance is still prevalent in my conversations with members of the Church through much of the United States, but I personally find it most prevalent in rural Utah. An antienvironmental stance may in part be explained by these feelings, as most of the evidence for environmental degradation is coming from the same scientists who promote evolution: "If scientists can be so wrong about the origin of life, can we trust them when it comes to claims of an environmental crisis?"

## **Dimension 2: An Obligational Level and Moral Code**

*Latter-day Saint view.* The above worldview for Latter-day Saints has a profound effect on the way they view ethical and moral responsibilities and priorities. There are several ways that this perspective can be understood. One reading is that since the earth was created for our benefit, we have unrestricted use of its resources and that in all things humans have priority over the natural world. This priority may include employment, recreation, or other needs. This rationale is largely unsupported by scripture or by prophetic discourse, yet it is widespread among members of the Latter-day Saint community.

Hugh Nibley has often chided the Saints for this environmental attitude. For example, he writes: "Man's dominion is a call to service, not a license to exterminate. It is precisely because men now prey upon each other and shed the blood and waste the flesh of other creatures without need that 'the world lieth in sin' (D&C 49:19-21). Such, at least, is the teaching of the ancient Jews and of modern revelation."<sup>6</sup>

Another reading for a strong Latter-day Saint environmental ethic is promoted by scholars such as George Handley<sup>7</sup> who argue that humans, as God's children, have responsibility as stewards of earthly blessings. Their thoughts have been articulated in many places and throughout this volume, so I will not elaborate here except to say that this stance offers a strikingly powerful environmental ethic.

*Modern environmental view.* The justification for mainstream environmental ethics is surprisingly weak since it is derived from a scientifically based viewpoint, which typically does not engage in moral judgments. This has been acknowledged by several prominent environmental thinkers.<sup>8</sup> While there is no teleologic reason, still it is argued from a Rawlsian<sup>9</sup> sense of justice that we do not have any intrinsic superiority as a biological entity and therefore must respect the right of our fellow beings to exist. It is also argued from a utilitarian perspective that nature needs protection because its processes and services are necessary to human needs and prosperity. Yet if we live in a contingent and purposeless universe, it is hard to muster reasons why we should preserve anything, for by definition everything is doomed in the end anyway. But any ethical system must be based on a sense of fairness and openness within a context that either things matter in and of themselves or they have utility for humans and therefore should be protected and preserved.

*Comparison.* Latter-day Saint theology provides a strong environmental ethic. Reasons for caring for creation are clear and justified from scripture, prophetic utterances, and from the teachings of Church leaders and scholars. Ironically,

Latter-day Saints as a people have not lived up to their highest teachings. There appears to be little awareness of these teachings among the general populace of the Church, and many members in Utah seemed to have embraced a sociopolitical environmental viewpoint structured by historical antigovernment sentiments formulated in the early history of Utah.

Conversely, some of the most vocal Latter-day Saint environmentalists have failed to capitalize on the environmental teachings promoted in the scriptures and in the teachings of the prophets. Instead they have faulted the Church for its members' lack of attention to embracing the environmental movement's perspective of a scientifically based ethic. For example, Terry Tempest Williams, arguably Mormonism's most articulate environmental advocate, largely couches her arguments for an environmental ethic from the perspective of mainstream environmental discourse. This has had the effect of making her ineffective in communicating her valid concerns about the environment to her own people.

### **Dimension 3: Assumptions about Basic Regularities in Human Needs and Tendencies**

Here both Latter-day Saints and mainstream environmentalists share many of the same needs. Both share a need for love, adequate housing, fresh water, healthy and readily available food, and enough income to provide the basic essentials of life. How these necessities are structured and provided, however, may differ.

*Latter-day Saint view.* Latter-day Saints are taught from an early age to be frugal. Church leaders have repeated that we are to "Use it up, wear it out, make it do, or do without."<sup>10</sup> The Church has an extensive welfare system to ensure the basic necessities of life are available. Home storage and production are encouraged and instruction on how to process, maintain, and keep food is conducted on a regular basis on the ward and stake levels. Members have been encouraged by their prophets to keep their yards,

fences, and holdings in good repair. The Church sets an example of this, and the beauty and care of its temples are exemplary. People are taught to live within their means and to stay out of debt. Again, regular instruction on family finances at the ward and stake levels are conducted regularly. Preparing for the future is seen as an important part of Church culture. Planning for an education and fruitful employment are emphasized at every level. For example, with the Perpetual Education Fund, the Church is helping third world members gain an education to better their possibilities for future employment. In short, the Church encourages development in social, educational, physical, and spiritual areas of life.

Of paramount importance in Latter-day Saint culture is the family. The emphases on the importance and eternal nature of families are stressed. Mothers are encouraged to stay at home with their children. As a result, Latter-day Saint families tend to be larger than their counterparts in other faiths.<sup>11</sup> Latter-day Saint women tend to have children at a rate about 30 percent higher than the national average. Issues of overpopulation rarely concern the general Church membership who believe that bringing children into the world is one of life's greatest privileges and responsibilities.

*Modern environmental view.* The environmental movement is concerned with the long-term health of the world's ecosystems. The fundamental object is to live sustainably so that the things that we enjoy can be enjoyed by future generations. The environmental movement then encourages prudent resource use, recycling, and the protection of ecological systems. It assumes that the world is in a state of crisis due to the assault of a growing population and indiscriminate resource use. The environmental movement seeks to protect what remains and encourage people to live within the carrying capacity of the earth. It recognizes that many ecosystems worldwide are under threat from global warming, habitat loss, species extinction, invasive species, and other anthropogenic changes. Mainstream

environmentalists are aware that the earth has a given carrying capacity and that currently the human ecological footprint is high, due both to large populations using limited resources and the increased use of resources through the spread of Western culture. Population control is often closely associated with the environmental movement. Nearly all of the texts which are used in environmental science classes have a chapter on overpopulation and its effects. Most of these texts do not consider the nuance of population numbers vis-à-vis the impact of individual members of the population (for example, Western cultures have a much higher ecological footprint than do typical indigenous cultures).

*Comparison.* Ironically, the teachings of Latter-day Saints and the modern environmental movement have many outlooks in common such as frugality, the importance of reuse, the care of resources—in other words, wise stewardship over our earthly blessings. Why is it that these two groups continue to be at loggerheads?

Latter-day Saint scriptures teach that the abundance of the earth is here for our use. Many assume that the Lord's statement, "For the earth is full, and there is enough and to spare" (D&C 104:17), is made without qualification<sup>12</sup> and that concerns about population are not an issue. Population issues are one area where dialogue between Latter-day Saints and environmentalists is desperately needed because it remains an area where the two sides do not see eye-to-eye.

This claim of unlimited abundance is often interpreted by some members to mean that there are no limits set on using and procuring natural resources. In addition, wealth is often mistakenly interpreted as a consequence of righteous living. Beyond the population issue, however, it is ironic that many environmentalists see Latter-day Saints as part of the problem rather than part of the solution, when the Latter-day Saint view does support (and even mandates) a strong environmental ethic. But part of the problem is again that Latter-day Saints have not lived up to their teachings. Hugh Nibley has been very vocal but

largely ignored in his attempts to show the Saints the disparity between their beliefs and their actions. As a result, there is a perception within the Latter-day Saint community and the mainstream environmental movement that the two groups have opposing goals and interests.

#### **Dimension 4: Assumptions about Pervasive Social and Ecological Patterns That Channel and Constrain Tendencies and Needs**

Both groups in America are heavily influenced by the values of Western culture. Most people own two or more cars, which are used to commute to work, shop, and provide access to recreation and entertainment. Large homes are situated with poor access to work and shopping areas and have led to what has been called urban sprawl. Economic realities constrain much of the interactions of people and their environment. Western culture is extremely "packaging heavy," meaning that there are few food items, household goods, tools, automobile parts, or toys that do not come heavily packaged. This significantly increases the amount of waste produced and increases the stress on ecosystems that provide the raw materials for this packaging. Solid and liquid waste are handled by standardized methods over which individuals in this culture have little control. Recycling is unevenly practiced across the country, and Utah and other western states—excluding California, Oregon, and Washington—lag considerably behind in recycling efforts compared with other parts of the United States.

*Latter-day Saint view.* In addition to the constraints of Western culture, Latter-day Saints are busy. The symbol of the beehive for the state of Utah is an appropriate choice. A typical active member may have Church responsibilities that can take from five to thirty hours a week, depending on the type of calling (with some leadership callings sometimes requiring the higher time commitment). In addition to this, they are expected to pursue their genealogy, attend a two-hour session at the temple as often as possible



(typically about once or twice a month), visit from two to five members of the Church as home or visiting teachers to ensure the families' needs are being met, assist in neighborhood service projects, hold a family home evening on Monday nights, be involved in community activities and projects, and attend stake and regional conferences. In large families where the husband is the sole breadwinner, the need to work longer hours creates an additional burden on many members. Finally, the number of Latter-day Saint women needing to work outside their homes has increased, as the demands of large families are more difficult to meet by a single wage earner in today's economy. These demands constrain the amount of time Latter-day Saints can spend in other pursuits, including environmental concerns.

*Modern environmental view.* Most environmentalists are constrained by current Western culture and society. These constraints are often frustrating to environmentalists who are seeking ways to reduce the ecological footprint of Western culture. They must face the dilemma posed by the reality that people are unlikely to give up the comfort and convenience gained during the last one hundred years. Often environmentalists are perceived as being unrealistic and uncompromising in their demands for changes to our current cultural system. Because a growing body of information suggests that current rates of consumption are not sustainable if we are to maintain many of the earth's ecosystems, environmentalists tend to be alarmed, pessimistic, and negative about the future. This reduces their effectiveness in spreading their message, which seems to be filled with undue doubt and despair. This concern has led some environmental thinkers to make inflated and unfounded claims of doom, such as Paul Erlich's assertion that the '80s and '90s would be filled with massive starvation, war, and social destabilization. Some environmentalists' failure to be clear and accurate has created skepticism in the general populace about all claims made by the environmental movement, compromising its effectiveness in communicating genuine concerns.

*Comparison.* While there are many specific examples of Latter-day Saints who are active environmentalists, many tend to focus on other aspects of life, such as the demands that Church membership places on people. As a result many things, such as gaining an environmental awareness, can be a lower priority, and a reasoned and thoughtful response to environmental claims remains unexamined by many. From my experience, students in my environmental science class raised in typical Mormon households are not often knowledgeable about the scientific claims of environmentalism. Political conservatism formulated by popular talk radio personalities, ultraconservative political figures, and polemical Internet sites with inaccurate science reporting and presentations of antienvironmental thought and data (which are rarely screened to ensure data quality) seem to be the primary source of their information. An undercurrent of an unreflective environmental negativism informed by these political philosophies seems pervasive with my students, family members, and ward members among whom I have lived. For example, on the topic of global warming, I am often greeted with surprise when I point out that there are few scientists now studying the issue who do not believe it is occurring. (Although there are a number of scientists not working in the areas of climatology, biodiversity, or ecology, who will sign their names to long lists claiming that global warming is not a problem, researchers actively studying the problems are unified about the reality of global warming.) Understanding good science is important for helping Latter-day Saints understand the extent of the current environmental crisis.

**Dimension 5:  
A Level of Concrete Practices and Rules  
Informed by All the Foregoing Dimensions**

*Latter-day Saint view.* Active Latter-day Saints often structure their existence around living good and righteous lives. Where they perceive ethical norms, they are usually committed and diligent

about trying to bring those things into their daily religious practice. I am convinced that if caring for creation were couched in terms that made ethical sense, the Latter-day Saints could become leaders in the environmental movement. As it is, recycling is not seen as a priority, global warming is ignored, and wilderness protection and species preservation are seen as unnecessary and unwanted government interventions.

It will take good information by committed members of the Church to lead the way to this change in behavior and perception. Such leadership is starting to bubble up, and I am optimistic that when the Latter-day Saints became better informed about the environment, they will rise to the occasion and make a difference in averting much of the growing degradation of earth's resources. This must be couched in gospel terms and not in those terms prevalent in mainstream environmental discourse, with its foundation in a naturalistic-materialistic view of humans' place in the universe.

Even though a Latter-day Saint environmental ethic will not be based upon materialist foundations, it is important that members be acquainted with the science behind the environmental movement. Latter-day Saints should understand that science is our best assessment of the current condition of the earth. It will be scientists working in ecology and environmental studies that will help us understand the threat to earth's continued maintenance. To act as good stewards, we need good information. The climate of mistrust of science by many members of the Church needs to be addressed and examined. Caring for creation is an attitude that should be prevalent in Latter-day Saint culture and belief systems. The following might be seen as first steps toward becoming more environmentally aware:

1. Understanding the importance of caring for creation from a gospel perspective.
2. Having an attitude of stewardship in considering actions.

3. Learning the facts of environmental degradation from reliable sources.
4. Acting within our sphere of influence to take care of natural resources.
5. Seeking for understanding with others involved in the environmental movement and recognizing that drawing us-and-them lines is counterproductive for fostering healthy views of current needs regarding the environment.

*Modern environmental view.* The mainstream environmental movement must understand that the Latter-day Saint viewpoint is built on a different foundation from theirs. The mainstream movement has aspects that Latter-day Saints may not accept, such as population control, which goes against fundamental teachings. However, much can be agreed upon, such as the protection and care of the earth and its creatures. The steps needed for the environmental movement to engage with Latter-day Saint members in a more productive dialogue include:

1. Recognizing that Latter-day Saints have much to offer in the way of a perspective for caring for creation.
2. Seeking to understand Latter-day Saint doctrines and practices and seeing how they might be used to offer an alternative to standard environmental discourse.

*Comparison.* While Latter-day Saints are not likely to embrace all of the current environmental movements goals and desires, there is much overlap. It is in this area of overlap where dialogue and understanding can begin and where much good can be accomplished. I suggest the following as a way to open more dialogue and understanding between the two groups. Often in the history of the world when two groups of people met, the differences in language, custom, and background caused misunderstanding that led to conflict. However, when the language is learned, the customs respected and appreciated, and the background assumptions made explicit, understanding could be achieved, differences worked out, and

open intercourse established between the groups. I think this sort of understanding is possible for both Latter-day Saints and those in the environmental movement. To this end, I suggest that we recognize, respect, and appreciate each other's differences; work together on common goals and ideals; and read each other's literature, understand one another's method of discourse, and appreciate and respect our differences.

It is my hope that the view that Latter-day Saints are against the environment and its care and that nature is for their unrestricted use will be changed in the environmental community. I hope that the view among Latter-day Saints that environmentalists are litigious fanatics who deny people their freedom to use natural resources as they please will be replaced with an understanding and appreciation for their concerns about the global environmental crisis. I hope that by appreciating one another's differences and by engaging in open dialogue, we can work together on common goals that will protect the environment for future generations and make this world a clean and precious place to live.



## Notes

1. I had a student compile and score the voting records of our state representatives over the last thirty years. I excluded any legislation that dealt with population control. With a few notable exceptions, Utah's representatives had among the poorest records of environmental protection in the nation.

2. D. Browning, "Feminism, Family, and Women's Rights: A Hermeneutic Realist Perspective," *Zygon: Journal of Religion and Science* 38, no. 2 (2003): 317-32.

3. T. D. Stephens, D. J. Meldrum, and F. B. Peterson, *Evolution and Mormonism: A Quest for Understanding* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 2001).

4. M. Ruse, *Can a Darwinian Be a Christian?* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001).

5. I felt this directly in growing up in Moab. I remember my seminary teacher expressing his belief that there were no such things as dinosaurs. On my mission I actively taught that evolution was wrong, and I remember my surprise when I arrived at BYU and found that the book used in the zoology evolution class actually seemed to favor the idea. I also remember, after being "converted" to evolution while studying biology at BYU, being told by a religion teacher, "You will go to hell if you believe in this damnable doctrine." For a more detailed reading of the history of the relationship between science and Mormonism, see E. R. Paul, *Science, Religion, and Mormon Cosmology* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1992).

6. Hugh Nibley, "Man's Dominion, or Subduing the Earth," in *Brother Brigham Challenges the Saints* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1994).

7. George Handley, "The Environmental Ethics of Mormon Belief," *BYU Studies* 40, no. 2 (2001): 187-211.

8. See, for example, Max Oelschlager, *Caring for Creation: An Ecumenical Approach to the Environmental Crisis* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1994).

9. John Rawls, *A Theory of Justice* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1971).

10. W. Eugene Hansen, "Children and the Family," *Ensign*, May 1998, 58.

11. I have found much confusion on the use of birth control among the general populace of the Church. While officially there is no doctrine on birth control, statements from some Church leaders leave some ambiguity on the matter and in conversations with other members of the Church around the country I find members practicing every possible interpretation: from the perspective that birth control is forbidden to the idea that there are no limits (however, abortion is strictly and clearly forbidden).

12. It is clear from the context of the scripture that the earth is full only in the context of a Zion society where there are no poor. The scriptures following this verse discuss our responsibility to care for the poor.