

“OH SAY, WHAT IS TRUTH?”

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Are Latter-day Saints good stewards of earthly resources, or is it true as I was taught in ecology courses in the late sixties that “Christianity made it possible to exploit nature in a mood of indifference to the feelings of natural objects”?¹ Does modern scripture teach us more about stewardship and the need to care for earth’s resources, or do we rely solely on Genesis 1:28, where we are told simply to exercise “dominion” and “subdue” the earth?

On July 18, 1994, I was in St. George at the Washington County Commission chambers. The public meeting had been called to discuss events occurring at Tuacahn where construction of a

locally supported heritage arts center had been delayed because of desert tortoises, a federally listed threatened species. Road construction to the center had begun without appropriate federal permits, and two tortoises had been killed. Civil penalties for the “taking” of the two tortoises amounted to twenty thousand dollars. As the Utah field supervisor for the Fish and Wildlife Service, I was there to explain the federal government’s position and to answer questions regarding the taking.

The chambers were filled with angry local citizens who wondered how this worthwhile effort could be stopped by an animal as insignificant as the desert tortoise. The meeting seemed to last forever. I listened while individuals, including local and national leaders, derided the law, questioned the actions of government, and criticized environmentalists who were destroying the local economy and private property rights. Typical comments such as “what good are they?” and “what is more important, people or animals?”

and “why do we waste time and money protecting tortoises?” left no doubt where the people stood on the issue.

After I was called names and labeled a communist, I sat in the chambers as my fellow Saints filed out around me. I remember one well-dressed woman approaching me and putting her hand on my shoulder; she tried to convince me to get out of this work before it destroyed my health. Rather than quit, I continued working with the Washington County Commissioners to finalize a Habitat Conservation Plan (HCP). The HCP allowed the continued development of twelve thousand acres of tortoise habitat on private property with a loss of some two thousand tortoises in exchange for the development of the Red Cliffs Desert Reserve. The reserve set aside some sixty thousand acres of mostly public land; allowed for the continued protection of tortoises, other desert wildlife, and open space; and concurrently allowed for economic development to proceed throughout Washington County. Today, the reserve is generally accepted as being a positive effort for the area.

The experience in Washington County was not atypical of emotions and comments often heard in other areas of the state involving Utah prairie dogs in Cedar City, Colorado pikeminnow and razorback suckers in the Green River near Vernal, and June suckers in the Provo River and Utah Lake. Because of these events, I find myself compelled to try and convince members of the Church of the value of all living things and our need to be good stewards over earthly resources.

In the book of Moses, the Lord speaks with Moses face to face and shows him, through the Spirit, “the workmanship of mine hands” (Moses 1:4). Moses spiritually discerned every particle of the earth, including the inhabitants thereof (see Moses 1:27–28). Moses asked the Lord to tell him concerning the earth, its inhabitants, the heavens, and “by what thou madest them?” (Moses 1:30). Without directly answering the “how” of creation, the Lord simply tells Moses that His creations “are many” and “they are mine” (Moses 1:37).

In turn, Moses teaches us that Jehovah created all living things, including those that “creepeth upon the earth” (Moses 2:30), that they were all created “spiritually before they were created naturally” (Moses 3:5), and that all things were “prepared for the use of man” (Moses 3:9). Is it not clear that all living things, including creeping things, were necessary for the functioning of the earth? I am sure Moses did not ask the Lord why He created predators, tiny fish that are hardly edible, songbirds, flies, snakes, and lizards. Neither would he question the Lord by asking, “What good is it?” Why then do *we* question the purpose of the Lord’s creations? If we took the time to reflect, perhaps we would see that our world won’t function without ants and other insects and without a wide diversity of plants and animals, including innumerable bacteria and viruses. We may not understand each plant or animal’s contribution to this life, but if we believe the Lord created it, then each must have a purpose.

In an essay entitled “Subduing the Earth,” author and historian Hugh Nibley explained it best. Lordship and dominion are synonymous. “Man’s dominion is a call to serve, not a license to exterminate.”² In his search of apocryphal writings, Nibley explains how “God’s rule is before all a rule of love: ‘I love my creatures far more than you ever could!’ the Lord tells Esdras in a vision.”³ If we don’t understand and love the earth’s creations, how can we ever be creators ourselves?

Saving species is more than just giving primacy to plants or animals over the uses of man. It’s about functioning, viable ecosystems. The Endangered Species Act of 1973 is not simply about saving individual plants and animals. Instead, the act’s purpose includes saving “the ecosystems upon which they [plants and animals] depend.” When once asked if saving four odd-shaped, dinosaurlike native fishes of the Colorado River was worth \$100 million, I simply replied, “Is saving the Colorado River worth \$100 million?” Many people recognize that the

effort to protect endangered, threatened, and sensitive species is also an effort to protect the rivers, lakes, air, and land for all its uses, including our own. To some, the question of species protection remains esoteric and the actions taken seem to be based on voodoo science. To me, the balancing of resource use with environmental protection is stewardship.

Truth is defined in Doctrine and Covenants 93:24–25: “And truth is knowledge of things as they are . . . and as they are to come; And whatsoever is more or less than this is the spirit of that wicked one who was a liar from the beginning.” While this standard seems very rigid and exact, can this same scripture be applied to decision making in more general terms? Is it difficult to picture a continuum or line with truth somewhere in the center and the ends or extremes of an issue as the “more or less”? For example, if we need to develop water from a pristine stream, we have to decide how much water is reasonable to take. We can take it all and leave the streambed dry, thereby destroying all aquatic and riparian life, or we can leave it completely alone and not satisfy our need. On occasion we may need to leave a stream undeveloped or take it all, but the truth, or the way we actually should develop, usually lies somewhere in between.

When a decision is made to develop a resource, we begin to hear voices at both ends of the “use” spectrum which get louder and more ardent as we move more or less from some balanced center. Stewardship, or our responsibility to care for and balance the use of earthly blessings, places us squarely on that line, listening to both extremes and trying to determine what the appropriate level of use is.

We know that the earth was prepared with all the resources we need and that it was given to us to choose how and what to use: “For the earth is full, and there is enough and to spare; yea, I prepared all things, and have given unto the children of men to be agents unto themselves” (D&C 104:17). While it is clear the Lord has given us a full bank account, it might not be clear to all of us

that He did not intend for us to waste or to allow us to be selfish in our use. Similarly, we are to be agents and thereby work out the extent or degree to which we use those resources. The Lord warns us not to use the resources for selfish reasons (see D&C 104:18) and clearly states the way resources should be allocated: “But it must needs be done in mine own way . . . that the poor shall be exalted, in that the rich are made low” (D&C 104:16).

After thirty years of applying and administering laws that protect living resources, I have seen many different views by private landowners, government leaders, and conservation groups. The debate of public good versus private property rights, wilderness versus public and private use, and the government’s role in framing that debate all help determine the sideboards for what the appropriate level of use should be. As the debate gets louder at the extreme ends of the continuum, we know that neither end is appropriate and some level of compromise must be reached.

I would like to describe those sideboards of the use debate. Then I would like to provide what I believe are the primary principles behind balanced use. The first view is what I refer to as the “simplistic” view of the earth, its purpose, and our role as inhabitants. It is founded in early Old Testament admonitions to Adam to subdue the earth, and to have dominion over it (see Genesis 1:28).

Demonstration of this view came in a phone call I received several years ago. The man, knowing I administered the Endangered Species Act (ESA) in Utah, identified himself as a Republican block captain from Santa Clara, Utah. He told me that he was opposed to the ESA and said further that the government should have no right to protect endangered species on private property. As we talked further, I explained to him that under the federal statute, endangered animals were fully protected, even on private property and that it was against the law (with severe penalties) to harm or harass a listed species, let

alone kill it. He told me the law was wrong and that if he found any tortoises on his land, he would kill them. I asked him why he was so upset over the ESA, and he told me that tortoises were stopping the construction of a freeway through Santa Clara. I told the man that I thought Santa Clara was one of the more scenic cities in Washington County and couldn't see how a freeway would ever fit between the tall old trees that lined the narrow streets and framed the historic homes. I also cautioned the man against killing tortoises because criminal penalties for violating ESA included considerable fines and jail time. He informed me that he would do as he pleased, and that the people in Washington County should not have to obey federal law. In fact, southern Utah should secede from the Union.

The opposite view regarding the need to protect living things can be found in today's popular culture and extreme or violent environmental groups. This view today can be seen in individuals and actions of those belonging to the ALF (Animal Liberation Front) or ELF (Earth Liberation Front). Similar attitudes were supported by groups and rock bands in the nineties called "straight-edge," which expressed the idea that animals have rights equal to those of humans and that being vegetarian or vegan is the only way we should live. While being vegetarian (not eating animals) or vegan (neither eating animals nor using their products such as milk, eggs, and leather) is a choice that most of us can live with or tolerate, it is the companion view, that violence is acceptable, that is untenable.

This view can best be described in the lyrics of a popular straight-edge band, Earth Crisis. They state: "Your actions serve as your voice. Your selfishness destroys the earth, so you've left us with no other choice. For the fetus, for the cat, for the cow, for the rat. For innocent victims we will attack, we will attack, we will attack."⁴ These lyrics advocate violent means, blood for blood, and retribution for any person who kills an animal for any use.

So how do we, recognizing the competing demands on earth's resources, make our own voices heard in the use debate? As individuals we normally have little say in decisions related to growth, zoning, or natural resource use. We as a culture, however, have an influence over elected officials, public servants, and the general acceptance of actions taking place in our part of the world. The Church does not need to take a position on environmental protection. Individual Church members, however, do need to become involved in local, state, and national environmental issues and exercise their agency as stewards. "For it is expedient that I, the Lord, should make every man accountable, as a steward over earthly blessings" (D&C 104:13). Does that mean we will be judged by how we kept our yard or whether we shared our earthly blessings with the poor? I hope so. Isn't it possible that the Lord will need to know how we took care of our little stewardship in this life if He is going to trust us with creations of our own? What understanding of stewardship principles do we have, and do we have any record of trying to make this world a better place to live? The following principles, I believe, can help us exercise our stewardship and do it in keeping with gospel teachings:

1. The Role of Government

Pioneers who settled in the West, and in particular the Latter-day Saint pioneers, were known for their independence and belief in private property and the rights associated with owning private property. I also believe many of those same Western or independent attitudes lead to a general distrust or aversion to government and the laws passed to restrict the use of or control of private property and the things we work so hard for.

Today we hear of the "Sagebrush Rebellion" and "Shovel Brigades" to protest federal laws and actions that some feel are a threat to their continuing way of life. Indeed, wilderness inventory, wolf and grizzly bear reintroductions, and air and water quality standards invoke concerns

on the part of many people that the federal government is coming to take away all individual rights and private property.

At the same time, the Church, through the 134th section of the Doctrine and Covenants, has clearly indicated the purpose of governments, even our own.

“Governments were instituted of God for the benefit of man” (D&C 134:1). The laws should secure “the right and control of property” (D&C 134:2), but at the same time “enact . . . laws . . . to secure the public interest” (D&C 134:5). Further, “every man [or woman] should be honored in his [or her] station” (D&C 134:6) and we should show “respect and deference” to the laws that have been enacted, and “men should appeal to the civil law for redress . . . where . . . the right of property or character is infringed” (134:11).

I’m not saying citizens should not question government’s methods or expenditures when correcting a land-use problem. But saying a problem doesn’t exist won’t correct the problem. Latter-day Saints everywhere watch new housing developments going up and ask, “Where will we get the water, where will we raise our food, where will my children find a place to live?” With increasing numbers of people to share the earth’s resources, future decisions will become increasingly difficult and will require some regulation by government.

2. Protecting Earth’s Biodiversity

Some fourteen species of cutthroat trout can be found in the Intermountain West. Two of those species, the Colorado and the Bonneville, are native to Utah and exist in a number of different forms depending on their location. We have Bonneville cutthroat in Bear Lake, we have others in high mountain streams in the Deep Creek Mountains and in the Wasatch Mountains, and we even had one subspecies that existed in Utah Lake. Each adapted to its own unique environment. Why so many varieties of the same fish? Is it so difficult to see that fish became adapted to different environments with different tempera-

tures, food supplies, and living space? For the same reason it should be apparent why we want to save all those genetic forms as we seek to restore rivers, lakes, and small mountain streams and to reintroduce the native fishes which were lost due to habitat loss, overuse, or pollution.

The very complexity we have in the environment strengthens it. Like a diversified portfolio protects the investor, increasing diversity in species or complexity in the environment tends to build stability and strength.

3. The Nature of God’s Gift

It pleases God that he has given us this earth, and all living things on it (see D&C 59:20). Plants and animals are not just here for practical uses (food and clothing) but:

- ✿ to please the eye (v. 18)
- ✿ to gladden the heart (v. 18)
- ✿ for taste (v. 19)
- ✿ for smell (v. 19)
- ✿ to strengthen the body (v. 19)
- ✿ to enliven the soul (v. 19)

Is there Christian doctrine anywhere, other than this modern-day revelation, that sheds such light on our Father in Heaven’s personality and His feelings about why He has surrounded us with the beautiful, tasty, nourishing, and spiritually uplifting things of this earth? Stop for a minute and think. Our Creator actually cares that our food tastes good and that we enjoy the beautiful things around us; this “pleases” Him.

4. Our Stewardship

Every one of us is “accountable, as a steward over earthly blessings, which I [the Lord] have made and prepared for my creatures” (D&C 104:13). When the Lord referred to “creatures” instead of “man,” could there be an inference that part of the reason for creation was to bless the lives of other living things on this earth as well as humans? Do all living things have spirits? Will all living things be resurrected? Brigham Young noted that “all forms of life were to multiply in their sphere and element *and have joy therein.*”⁵

While there is no indication that man should not use animals for all the necessary reasons, knowing that the beasts of the field and other living things are important to God may at least temper our tendency to discount their worth. Maybe, even better, we could be thankful and use them “with judgment, not to excess, neither by extortion” (D&C 59:20).

5. Helping the Poor

Being good stewards means that we use the resources of this earth to bless the lives of others, especially the poor and the needy (D&C 104:16). There is no room in the Lord’s kingdom for greedy. While we point to Doctrine and Covenants 104:16 as assurance that we have enough resources to take care of us in the future, we should recognize that there is a contingency on that use, which includes exercising our agency wisely. Profligate use of the earth’s resources is contrary to the counsel in the 59th section to use judgment, not to excess. Further, the Lord showed by parable (Lazarus and the rich man) and by modern-day revelation that spirit prison, not paradise, might await those who use the earth’s resources for selfish reasons (compare Luke 16:23 with D&C 104:18).

6. The Danger of Incomplete Knowledge

Some people swim at the surface all their life. They never dive down to see what lies at depths. Some call it superficiality, others ignorance. Some don’t know and don’t care because all they need is at the surface. Yet what they don’t know can hurt them, as the quality of their environment slowly degrades due to the lack of concern or stewardship. A practical example of this principle can be found within ten miles of Brigham Young University.

Efforts to protect the June sucker and its habitat (Utah Lake) have met with mixed success. Numbers of native fish have increased through artificial spawning, hatchery and cage culture, and expanding available habitats (refugia), but little habitat improvement has been accomplished

to date. Carp, a non-native competitor and predator, now constitutes over 90 percent of the lake’s biomass and physically eliminates the production of valuable aquatic plants. Enhancing the quality of Utah Lake and the Provo River are long-term efforts requiring additional water, improved water quality, non-native fish control, and probably some habitat manipulation.

The June Sucker Recovery Implementation Program is expanding its efforts to recover June suckers in Utah Lake, but doing so requires community support. Who can look at Utah Lake and say we have been good stewards of that resource? In a recent article in the Daily Herald, I commented about how we need to do more than recover the fish; we need to save the ecosystem on which it depends.⁶ E-mails in response to the article are summarized as follows:⁷

- ✿ “We are going to pay to grow trash fish. Is this what I am reading?”
- ✿ “Sounds like a job! I wonder what it pays?”
- ✿ “I wonder what the caveman did when his trash fish started to thin out and go away?”
- ✿ “I understand trying to save the Bengal tiger or the African elephant, but the June sucker? Give me a break! The environmental nuts have created an outrageously expensive program called the Endangered Species Act.”

Are these typical sentiments of the citizens of Utah County? And do they represent the true stewardship model for which we are striving? Since these voices are often loud, even if anonymous, the June Sucker Recovery Implementation Program asked Vanguard Media in Salt Lake City to conduct a scientifically based survey of Utah’s citizens, especially in Utah County, with regard to what they know about the June sucker, Utah Lake, the Endangered Species Act, and how they feel about such protection.⁸

The study indicated that only half (58 percent) of Utahns visit Utah Lake, and water quality is the reason the lake isn’t visited more often, and while half the population believes Utah Lake is important, the majority (83 percent) have never

heard of the June sucker. Finally, 74 percent of Utahns favor the Endangered Species Act.

While this report is encouraging with respect to how the citizens of Utah view the Endangered Species Act and what I believe is one component of our stewardship responsibility, it is also telling that so few people know about the June sucker or the resource values of Utah Lake. Some, obviously the respondents to the newspaper article, don't care about “trash fish,” but the majority at least recognize the need for protecting sensitive, listed species and their habitats.

Elder Neal A. Maxwell often warned us about taking a superficial view of this life, “lest we mistakenly speak of this mortal experience only as coming here to get a body, as if we were merely picking up a suit at the cleaners.”⁹ We, likewise, do a disservice to those scientists who try to protect vulnerable species and their habitats by calling them environmental nuts. When we call a creation of God a “trash fish,” does that not show superficiality?

While I don't expect that everyone will have the inclination to study in depth the wild populations of plants and animals that surround us, I do believe that Church members should honestly seek knowledge from the best books (D&C 88:118) and learn “of things both in heaven and in the earth, and under the earth” (D&C 88:79). And as the Church grows worldwide and faces the poverty and need of the third world, we also need to understand and implement sound environmental principles, including true stewardship.

Finally, I now find that Utah's stewardship efforts are increasing, and I have largely reversed my earliest feelings. Examples include Iron County commissioners working cooperatively with regulatory agencies to remove Utah prairie dogs from private lands to restored public lands; Utah County and cities adjacent to Utah Lake interested in lake clean-up and restoration; Washington County's involvement in the protection of the Virgin River and desert tortoise as well as Utah State government being actively in-

involved in funding habitat restoration and saving sensitive species such as the spotted frog, sage grouse, and various cutthroat species. Two water conservancy districts, Utah County and Washington County, are taking lead rolls in the recovery of several listed fish species. Recent efforts in the area of sensitive species protection have been especially dramatic in Utah when compared to surrounding states; especially notable are recent efforts on private lands, including the church-owned ranch, Deseret Land and Livestock.

The scriptures are replete with advocacy toward taking better care of our earth and planning for the future. We need to read them with a stewardship focus and heavenly admonition. Even as the prophet Isaiah warned, “Woe unto them that join house to house, that lay field to field, till there be no place, that they may be placed alone in the midst of the earth” (Isaiah 5:8).



Notes

1. Paul R. Ehrlich and Anne H. Ehrlich, *Population Resources: Issues in Human Ecology* (San Francisco: W. H. Freeman & Co., 1970), 191.
2. Hugh Nibley, *Nibley on the Timely and the Timeless* (Provo, UT: Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University, 1978), 96.
3. Nibley, *Nibley on the Timely and the Timeless*, 89.
4. Earth Crisis, “Stand By,” 1995; <http://www.darklyrics.com/lyrics/earthcrisis/alloutwar.html#2> (accessed June 30, 2003).
5. Brigham Young in Nibley, *Nibley on the Timely and the Timeless*, 87; emphasis added.
6. Amie Rose, “Proposed Hatchery First Step in Preserving June Sucker,” *Daily Herald*, June 1, 2003, A1.
7. Public comments, “Proposed Hatchery First Step in Preserving June Sucker,” *Daily Herald*, June 2, 2003, <http://www.harktheherald.com/article.php?sid=84885> (accessed July 2, 2003).
8. Vanguard Media Group, *Communications Research Report: June Sucker Recovery Implementation Program* (Salt Lake City: Vanguard Media Group, March 2003).
9. Neal A. Maxwell, “Willing to Submit,” *Ensign*, May 1985, 71.