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SENIOR THESIS

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A Deeper Look at Environmental Ethics and Our Moral Obligations Toward Creation

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Introduction

Over the past few decades, global environmental awareness and concern has been steadily increasing. In 1985, Michael Soulé helped define the field of conservation biology with his essay “What is Conservation Biology?” which is now considered a classic. Since Soulé’s essay, the field of conservation biology has greatly expanded. We have seen more and more scientific evidence of environmental decline. The phenomena of global warming, tropical forest destruction, increased carbon footprints and the search for cleaner energy have been hot topics in the news. Most environmental crises have been attributed to human intervention and these will continue to be detrimental to the well being of mankind. As members of this planet, we have a responsibility and a need to sustain our ecosystems for both moral and practical reasons (Kareiva 962).

Nature has great instrumental value to human beings in that ecosystems provide us with “goods and services.” Some goods we receive from nature include food, water, medicinal plants, construction materials, as well as tourism and recreation. Ecosystems also provide services such as maintaining the water cycle, regulating climate, conducting pollination and seed dispersal of important plants, maintaining the gases in the atmosphere, and regulating nutrient cycling (Whiting).

Many people would argue that nature also provides spiritual and aesthetic services as well. In a document called “Renewing the Earth,” The United States Conference of Bishops wrote that through nature we encounter the Creator. Appreciation for the created gifts of nature inspires a reverence for God; “For the
very plants and animals, mountains and oceans, which in their loveliness and
sublimity lift our minds to God, by their fragility and perishing likewise cry out, "We
have not made ourselves" (United States Conference of Catholic Bishops III.A). Even
non-religious people claim that nature provides non-material goods like beauty and
serenity.

Unfortunately, overuse and abuse of the earth’s resources has led to some serious problems. The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change’s Fourth Assessment Report released in 2007 stated that there is no doubt that the global air and water temperatures are rising. There is an increasing level of Carbon Dioxide in the atmosphere, which is thought to be linked with climate change (Pachauri, 30-33). Air pollution is known to cause health problems such as low birth weight in children born to exposed mothers (Dadvand 267). Overfishing has led to the complete destruction of coral reef ecosystems, causing them to be overrun by algae in the absence of herbivores (Jessen 1-3). These, and many more problems are caused by our lack of regard for nature. We humans are indeed animals and we need the goods provided by nature to survive. We may have enough resources to provide for us currently, but they are quickly dwindling and we are starting to see the effects of it. If we continue to use resources recklessly, we may be a detriment to the environment to such an extent that we will no longer be able to receive the necessary goods and services to sustain the current and future generations of humans.
The degradation of earth’s ecosystems not only causes practical problems, but also does so in a way that implicates our morals. In 1990, Pope John Paul II wrote a World Day of Peace Message which described how a “lack of due respect” for nature creates as much injustice as weapons and social conflicts. The resources of the earth are for the benefit of all mankind. When some squander those resources, others suffer. He wrote that no society hoping for peace could afford to neglect respect for both human and non-human life. Pope John Paul II claimed that while our responsibility to preserve the earth involves the morals of both secular and religious people, as Christians we have an even greater obligation to do so. He writes:

The commitment of believers to a healthy environment for everyone stems directly from their belief in God the Creator, from their recognition of the effects of original and personal sin, and from the certainty of having been redeemed by Christ. Respect for life and for the dignity of the human person extends also to the rest of creation, which is called to join man in praising God (John Paul II V.16).

As Christians, our call to use nature in a respectful and loving way is clear in the bible. In Genesis I, God declared the things He created “good” even before he made man. God gave man dominion over all creation. While some have taken this line as justification for our actions toward nature, most Christians agree that dominion does not give license for abuse. We were made in the image and likeness of God, thus we are called to rule over creation as God rules over us, i.e. with love (Beisner 23).

While more and more people are realizing the importance of a healthy environment and the growing need to make sustaining changes, environmental
responsibility continually falls towards the bottom of the list in people’s minds. Because so many of us are not directly affected by ecological degradation, we tend to disregard it and put it below our other day-to-day worries. Too often we forget that the things we have, including our daily concerns, would be gone without an earth to live on. It may seem dramatic, but there are already so many people suffering from our irresponsible actions toward the earth, particularly the poor. It is they who are experiencing water too polluted to drink and land too degraded by waste to farm on. In this thesis, I hope to show a portion of the plentitude of goods that can come from nature, and how preserving it is not only good in a practical sense, but also in a moral sense.

**The Practicality of Preserving Nature**

The activities of nature are ignorant of the well being of mankind. There is a saying among environmentalists, “nature bats last.” It means that while humans can do things like pumping toxins into the environment, destroying forests, and wiping out whole species, eventually our actions will make us vulnerable to the laws of nature. When we stop respecting nature and abuse its resources such things as water and air pollution, global climate change, and extinction cascades occur. In his article on “The Sovereignty of Nature,” Paul Wapner writes, “there are certain absolute features of nature that cannot be compromised without risking the loss of valuable environmental services or spoiling parts of the earth we find beautiful or otherwise valuable” (Wapner 171).
Humanity cannot provide for itself; we rely on the ecosystemic goods and services provided by nature. A very general definition of ecosystem service is provided by the Millennium Ecosystem Assessment (2005) as “the benefits people obtain from ecosystems” (qtd in Fisher et al. 2051). These services include “ecosystem organization, operation, and outflows [that are] consumed or utilized by humanity” (Fisher et al. 2051). For example, wetlands provide water supply, protection from floods and soil erosion, fisheries, disease control, eco-tourism, and more. Tropical and temperate forests provide us with timber, climate regulation, nutrient cycling, pollination and seed dispersal, medicinal plants, and recreation (Fisher et al. 2058). Everything we use in our day-to-day lives was at some point derived from a good or service from nature.

Mass extinctions are a serious problem that the earth’s ecosystems are facing right now, and humans, for the most part, are the main cause behind it. One huge cause of extinction is introduced species. Humans have been the cause of introduced species for centuries. Ships carrying goods to be traded often stopped on islands to hunt, rest, get rid of excess waste etc. These trade ships often carried rats, insects even goats and pigs which were then introduced onto the islands. Native island species are especially susceptible to damage from introduced species because they have typically not evolved with a lot of competition nor in the presence of predators. Goats are known to be one of the most destructive introduced species because of their overgrazing and the diseases they carry. Many island species have gone extinct because of the ecosystem degradation caused by overgrazing. Fortunately, in the
past century many of the feral populations of goats on islands have been eliminated (Carrete, 840-842).

Ecosystems are complicated, and harming one part of an ecosystem can lead to a complicated trophic cascade that can result in a total decline or shut down of said ecosystem. Robert G. Anthony describes a great example of the large-scale effects of trophic cascades is shown in the sea otter-kelp forest system. Sea otters became nearly extinct due to the maritime fur trade. Small populations were able to recover due to protection, but then in 1990 there was a large-scale collapse of the sea otter populations in Southwest Alaska. This created scattered populations of sea otters, allowing a comparison of environments with and without the otters. The near shore ecosystems of the declining otter populations that had once been thriving kelp forests were now barren. It turns out that sea otters eat sea urchins, which in turn eat kelp. With the otters in decline, the urchin populations skyrocketed resulting in overgrazing of the kelp forests (2725).

The cascade doesn’t stop there, the decline of otter populations have the potential to alter at least three ecosystem level processes including changing primary production, the absence of a three-dimensional habitat (the kelp forest), and changes in water flow because of the buffering effect the kelp has on currents and waves. In otter dominated environments mussel and barnacle population densities are higher due to higher levels of particulate organic matter in the water column. There are also greater numbers of fish in the otter dominated habitats. Shorebirds rely greatly on the abundance of prey available in the kelp forests,
including a variety of fish and sea otter pups. Since the abundance of fish relies on the density of sea otters, declining otter populations can also negatively impact shorebird populations (Anthony et al. 2725).

This is just one example of how far reaching the effects of a single declining species can be. However, trophic cascades can be even greater in that they can create such large-scale problems that they start to negatively impact the wellbeing of humans. We can continue to use the sea otter example: lower densities of fish due to an absences of sea otters can influence the fishing industry which can in turn affect our economy. If an ecosystem collapses, the goods and services we receive from that ecosystem die with it.

It is not only the direct targeting of species that we need to be concerned about. Habitat loss and degradation is another serious problem that can lead to complex consequences for both the organisms that live there, and us. As the size of natural habitats decrease, species at higher trophic levels, i.e. top predators, decline rapidly. This is especially distressing because many top predators are keystone species, meaning their significance in the ecosystem is disproportionate to their abundance. Typically, top predators have large area requirements so their numbers tend to be few and far between; however, they have a very great impact on the ecosystem. As habitats are destroyed for agricultural purposes, or perhaps degraded by pollution, the top predators are affected first and a cascade such as with the sea otters can follow (Dobson et al. 1915-1918). While in the last couple decades, there have been efforts to restore habitats and create protected areas,
there are still problems preventing complete restoration, such as edge-effect. This means that if a preserved area is not large enough, it may not be able to function properly and provide us with goods and services due to erosion on the edges of the area from things like wind and rain. There is also the problem stated above, that many top predators have large land requirements that our restored and protected habitats simply don’t meet.

Climate change has had a huge impact on a variety of ecosystems around the globe, especially on coral reefs. The warming of the ocean has caused catastrophic amounts of coral bleaching. Corals, along with multiple species of cnidarians, mollusks, and other taxa engage in symbiotic relationships with dinoflagellate symbionts often called zooxanthellae. These symbionts are necessary for the survival of the corals and their other hosts. Unfortunately, these zooxanthellae are extremely sensitive to changes in their environment such as temperature increases, which can damage their photosynthetic machinery causing overproduction of oxygen radicals and often expulsion from their hosts. The loss of zooxanthellae from corals is known as coral bleaching. When the symbionts are expelled from the corals, the corals die. Bleaching can and has wiped out whole reef ecosystems. As we saw in the sea otter example, the decline of one species often has a great effect on other species in the ecosystem. When the corals die, all of the taxa that lived in the reef suffer. They must find another reef or die (Baker, 2-4).

At this point, some readers may be thinking, “this is great information, but I’m not killing endangered species or cutting down forests. How does this relate to
me?” One of the greatest threats to the environment is wasteful use of resources. America is one of the most wasteful countries, and as Americans we contribute to this danger on an individual level. Freshwater is a crucial component for life, but only three percent of the earth’s water is fresh, and most of it is frozen in glaciers. Fresh water is also home to the highest concentration of life on earth. On average, Americans use 99 gallons of water a day. If we continue at this rate, we may degrade the meager 11 percent of ecosystems left that provide us with freshwater in the next 50 years (Safeguarding Fresh Water).

Water isn’t the only resource in over-consumption. Eighty point six percent of the world’s energy consumption comes from fossil fuels, and The US is the second largest consumer of this non-renewable resource (Our Energy Use in Numbers). Use of fossil fuels has gotten a large amount of press in recent years due to the consequences of overuse. Not only are we facing the possibility of running out, but using fossil fuels for energy also emits large amounts of carbon dioxide into the atmosphere. Carbon dioxide is associated with global warming due to its greenhouse effect. While recent research suggests that water vapor may have a greater greenhouse effect than carbon dioxide, CO$_2$ has been shown to have a temperature increasing effect correlated with climate change. Global climate change poses many possible threats to humans including droughts, flooding, and extreme weather patterns, which in turn impact food production, species migration, and infectious diseases (Climate Change).
Though we tend to forget it because of our remoteness from nature, we are animals and we rely on goods and services from the environment to survive. We rely on ecosystems for fresh water, timber, climate regulation, and so much more. More than 50 percent of modern medicines worldwide come from wild plants and animals. There is so much to gain from a healthy earth, and so much to lose if we continue to exploit it.

**Environmental Ethics**

In the previous section we discussed the practical worth of the environment, or its utility to mankind, but nature also has intrinsic worth. Not only does the earth have value that we assign to it based on its usefulness, it also has worth in and of itself. This intrinsic worth is just as great as its utility, and its existence implies certain moral obligations for humankind. These two divergent avenues of thought lead to an unbalanced appreciation of creation: Utilitarian perspectives lead to anthropocentric viewpoints and intrinsic value perspectives lead to ecocentrism. In this section we will take a closer look at why neither of the aforementioned perspectives lead to a moral and healthy attitude toward creation. We will delve into our moral obligations toward creation and why they exist by looking at examples from the bible, saints, and religious leaders.

We can examine several viewpoints that support the moral nature of caring for creation. We previously discussed environmentalism from a utilitarian perspective. In short, we need to take care of the earth because it is useful to us; if we neglect the earth, we will suffer the loss of nature’s goods and services necessary for human survival. This utilitarian view can be distorted into a sort of
anthropocentric environmental ethic. In this kind of ethic, value is assigned to nature from its use to humans. Ergo, something is only valuable if it is useful. For example, if we looked at trees from this point of view, we would say trees are valuable because they provide lumber, paper products, and oxygen to humans. Trees would not be looked at as valuable simply for existing. I believe this type of ethic is on an extreme end of a continuum.

On the other extreme end of this continuum lies ecocentrism. In this ethic, humans are outside of the equation. Nature has its own value apart from the value we assign to it, and in fact we should not assign value to it at all. In this view, nature is not made for human use; humans are simply other animals living on earth. This view also typically criticizes Judeo-Christian traditions for holding the “dominion of man” view on creation.

Andrew J. Hoffman writes that this dichotomy between ecocentrism and anthropocentrism was first brought to light in the U.S. in the early 1900’s. Around this time, San Francisco had suffered its largest earthquake in history, which resulted in immense fires. The mayor, making a secure source of water his top priority, suggested building a dam in Yosemite National Park’s Hetch-hetchy valley. This led to a political debate that took seven years to resolve. On the side for the dam stood the first head of the U.S. Forest Service, Gifford Pinchot; on the opposing side stood the naturalist writer, John Muir. Muir argued that the dam was an offense against God, writing, “[the] valley is a grand landscaped garden, one of nature’s rarest and most precious mountain temples” (Hoffman, 143). He called the supporters of the dam, “temple destroyers,” and “devotees of ravaging
commercialism,” who “instead of lifting their eyes toward the God of the mountain, lift them to the almighty dollar. With his pathos he was able to appeal to the moral conscience of Americans, and he gathered supporters of the idea that nature has more than pragmatic value, it has great spiritual value as well (Hoffman 143-144).

Pinchot held that nature was only good as a source of resources for humans. He is a great example of utilitarian philosophy, writing, “The turning of Hetch-Hetchy into a lake will not be a calamity. In fact, it will be a blessing. It is simply a question of the greatest good to the greatest number of people” (Hoffman, 144). In the end, President Teddy Roosevelt sided with Pinchot, but Hoffman writes that this debate marked the first time that nature’s intrinsic value was formally acknowledged. Since then, no such encroachment into national parks has happened again.

This debate perfectly shows the argument from both an ecocentric and anthropocentric perspective. John Muir, representing the former, believed that human development should only take place if it does not harm the integrity of ecosystems (Hoffman, 144). Both ecocentrism and anthropocentrism are extreme views that separate man from nature. Anthropocentrism makes man superior to creation, while ecocentrism places nature above man. The dichotomy between the two has continued since the Hetch-Hetchy incident to present day. We can see it in debates about oil drilling in Alaska, in decisions about Fracking, and many other ecological issues.

Many ecocentric environmentalists have blamed the Christian interpretation of Genesis for the destruction of our ecosystems. However, Hoffman argues for a
different root to these distorted attitudes toward nature. He claims the problem lies in a dualistic view of man and nature as described in the philosophy of Renee Descartes. Hoffman writes, “there is only man-the-subject and nature-the-object, and between them, there is only the question of which of the two has priority” (147). He continues by claiming that anthropocentrism culminates in existentialism, and ecocentrism in naturalism; both reduce the meaning of man’s existence to nothing. Existentialism is centered on man’s freedom from nature and from the world. Ironically, the famous existentialist Albert Camus, claimed that man’s only real freedom is in choosing not to exist. Naturalism, on the other hand, sees nature as everything, and man is subject to it. Hoffman argues that these dualist views became imbedded in our culture due to the Protestant Reformation, which was rooted in Cartesian metaphysics. The Reformation called for individuals to form their relationship with God based on their individual interpretations of the bible, resulting in a separation from the individual as subject, from God and from nature as objects of interpretation (148-149).

Both of these dualistic views, ecocentrism and anthropocentrism, are extremes that separate humans from nature. I propose another perception of man and his relation to nature which Andrew J. Hoffman calls theocentric environmentalism, and which I believe has been exemplified in the bible, and in the writings of saints and religious leaders.

Hoffman claims the key to theocentric environmentalism is a philosophy that came from long before Cartesian metaphysics, called the Magisterium. The Magisterium, which is God’s living word, describes, along with other things, the
proper relationship between humans, nature, and God. In the Catholic tradition, the Magisterium is not open to personal interpretation or question. It came before science, and before individual reason, and is therefore higher than any subjective ideas about the world. It regards God’s truth as the truth, a truth that is much higher than human truth. This metaphysics, unlike the dualistic Cartesian philosophy which only describes man and nature as separate entities, defines man and nature in regards to their Creator. In this respect, humans and nature are siblings sharing the same Father, and sharing a mutual love and respect. CK Chesterton writes, “The main point of Christianity was this: that Nature is not our mother: Nature is our sister. We can be proud of her beauty, since we have the same father; but she has not authority over us” (Hoffman 151). It is God’s hand in creation that relates us to nature. There is no longer the idea of man in nature with one being superior to the other, there is only man and nature in God. Hoffman writes,

“To take His hand is to see that our deepest and truest relation to nature is not...the relation that turns on the question of whether man dominates nature or nature dominates man, but the indirect relation to nature of the three-term Christian metaphysic of God, the relation that joins us to nature in God” (151).

Many theologians, including St. Francis of Assisi who, in his Canticle of the Sun calls all of creation his brother and sister, have described this relationship between man and nature. Pascal, writing, “In short, [nature] is the greatest perceptible mark of God’s omnipotence that our imagination should lose itself in that thought,” (Hoffman 150), believed that nature held God’s majestic imprint. These writers saw nature as they saw humans, as creations of God.
As mentioned earlier, some have blamed aspects of our current environmental decline on the dominion of man over creation spoken of in Genesis. These activists claim that man simply existing, is causes environmental degradation; that humans should stay out of nature. As Christians, we know this is simply not the case. In Genesis 1:4 God says, “behold, I have given you every plant yielding seed that is on the surface of all the earth, and every tree which has fruit yielding seed; it shall be food for you.” We are clearly meant to use the resources of the earth. Indeed, God instructed mankind to rule over and subdue nature, but this mandate is far from license to abuse. We can see in the two great commandments, to love God above all else, and to love our neighbors as ourselves, and in all the moral ordinances and statutes in Scripture, what is meant by righteous dominion. Beisner writes, “there is no excuse for tyranny which violates [God’s] law” (27).

In Genesis 1 after each day of creation, God declared what He had made as “good.” He declared creation good not out of its use to humans, but out of his divine judgment of it (Beisner 24). However, it was not until God created man that He said it was “very good.” Only after God entrusted His creation to mankind could He rest. We were made in the image and likeness of God, and we are called to rule over creation as God rules over us, i.e. with wisdom and love (John Paul II, I.3). Psalm 115:16 states “The heavens are the heavens of the Lord, but the earth He entrusts to the sons of men.” In his essay, Beisner writes that God entrusted creation to the stewardship of humankind, but in this dominion over earth, men are accountable to God. We must look at the exemplification of God’s own dominion and reflect it. We are called to beget life in our own image, and to turn all of Earth into a garden (25).
When Adam and Eve went against God’s plan by choosing sin, all of creation suffered. Both man and nature were tainted by the darkness of falsehood, and death. As Christians we believe that through Christ’s death and resurrection harmony was restored, and God the Father was “pleased... through (Christ) to reconcile to himself all things” (Col 1:19-20). In doing so, God has made clear to us “a plan for the fullness of time, to unite all things in him, all things in heaven and things on earth” (Eph 1:9-10).

These examples show the discord that occurs when we disregard The Father’s plan. Pope John Paul II writes, “If man is not at peace with God, then Earth itself cannot be at peace” (I.5). Therefore, we are called to continue God’s plan for creation; to continue the harmony, which governs both nature and man.

The most obvious saint in this regard is St. Francis of Assisi, patron of the environment. He is most known for his Canticle of the Sun, in which he invited all of creation to praise God with him; he called each creature brother and sister. Pope John Paul II named St. Francis the patron saint of those who promote ecology because he “offers Christians an example of genuine and deep respect for the integrity of creation” (V.16). The Pope continues to say that Francis shows us that being at peace with God allows us to build up that peace and create a fraternity with all of creation which includes all of man kind (V.16).

St. Francis of Assisi is not the only saint to recognize the beauty and importance of nature. St. Augustine of Hippo, while admitting that we cannot fully understand God’s plan for unity among creation, said that all aspects of creation, even that which may be harmful to us, are beautiful and good. He writes, “All
natures then, inasmuch as the are, and have therefore rank and species of their own, and a kind of internal harmony, are certainly good” (qtd. in Beisner, 29).

Other Christian thinkers wrote about creation as well. Martin Luther believed things in creation are good but often abused by unworthy men. He writes, “A wicked tyrant... may wear gold ornaments. Is the gold responsible for its use? It is the good creature of the Lord our God and fitted to served righteous people. But the precious product must submit to accommodating the wicked world against its will” (Beisner, 33). This is similar to St. Aquinas and his view on the transcendentals. The transcendentals are, as the Schoolmen described them, “passions or properties of being” (Maritain, 162). They are unity, truth, and goodness, and together they make up the characteristics of Being. In this sense, all that exists, all that is, has these three qualities. Therefore, everything in nature that simply exists is good. Not just for its usefulness, but in the very fact that it is, in other words, everything that exists has intrinsic value (Maritain, 162-163).

Aldo Leopold wrote an essay entitled “The Land Ethic,” based around the idea of nature having intrinsic value. Leopold writes that we have taken nature for granted in the name of progress. He argues that this higher standard of living we have created is not worth the destruction we have brought to the environment. In the foreword to *A Sand County Almanac*, in which “The Land Ethic” was published, Leopold writes, “We abuse land because we regard it as a commodity belonging to us. When we see land as a community to which we belong, we may begin to use it with love and respect” (viii). Leopold is correct; greed and ambition have blinded us to the harsh consequences of our actions on the environment. In Pope John Paul II's
words, we have a “lack of due respect” for nature which has led us to “the indiscriminant application of advances in science and technology” (John Paul II, I.3-II.6). If we only view nature as valuable for its use to humans, it is natural that we might use it until it is gone or no longer useful to us. However, if we add into the equation, the intrinsic value of nature we may have greater respect for it. This is not to say that humans should not use creation, we should simply use creation more respectfully and responsibly.

Calvin wrote about how man was given eyes to behold and contemplate the created world in order to be led to God. He claimed that, “the end for which all things were created ...was that none of the conveniences and necessaries of life might be wanting to men” (Beisner, 33). This statement is important for two reasons: the first being that Christians, like me, do not hold an egalitarian view of creation. God did not make all creatures equal; it is only to humankind that He shares part of His knowledge and grace. Only humans can claim to be made in the image and likeness of God, and indeed that does set us apart from the rest of creation. However, I hope that this paper has helped to show that while we are distinguishable from nature, we are still very much a part of it, and just as The Father is in union with The Son and The Holy Spirit, we too must seek a unity and harmony with God and all of creation. The second important point in Calvin’s statement regards the inequalities among men. God made creation so that all men would have what is necessary for life. Yet, when we look at our world today, we can see that not all people have what they need to live. In his message for the World Day of Peace called “Peace with God the Creator, Peace with All of Creation,” Pope John
Paul II relates the ecological crisis to the poor. He argues that not only are the things at the root of poverty and the ecological crisis similar, (i.e. greed, selfishness, lack of love, etc...) but also some of the people hurt the most by ecological related issues are the poor.

Pope John Paul II writes that one of the causes of such problems is “a lack of respect for life” (II.7). He says that too often concerns about production and economy overshadow the dignity of workers, the health of the environment, and the good of the people who live near and around it. A fairly famous example is the pollution of the Pearl River by denim companies in China. Multiple denim factories line the river and produce an abundance of waste that was simply dumped into the river. The pollution not only hurt all of the creatures living in the river, but it also hurt the impoverished people who used the water to drink and bathe (Chang). The Second Vatican Council wrote, “God destined the earth and all it contains for the use of every individual and all peoples” (qtd. in John Paul II, III.8). It is clearly wrong that a privileged few should have such great excess, so much waste, and a total squandering of resources while many suffer at the most basic subsistence levels. John Paul II concludes, “Today, the dramatic threat of ecological breakdown is teaching us the extent to which greed and selfishness - both individual and collective - are contrary to the order of creation, an order which is characterized by mutual interdependence” (III.8).

In 1991, the bishops of the United States Catholic Conference wrote a statement about the morality of the environmental crisis. They wrote, “At its core, the environmental crisis is a moral challenge. It calls us to examine how we use and
share the goods of the earth, what we pass on to future generations, and how we live in harmony with God’s creation” (United States Catholic Conference, 1).

In this ecological crisis we, both Christians and those who do not share our faith, can sense the earth’s suffering. We are seeing the adverse effects that turning away from God has on creation. John Paul II claims that remedying the destruction is not only a matter of better management of the earth’s resources, we must dig down and face the root of the problem, which is a profound moral crisis. In order to make positive changes that will reverse the destruction we have brought to creation, we need to make changes in how we view and respect creation. God granted us dominion over nature; He did not grant us license for abuse. We must rule over creation responsibly and respectfully, with love and wisdom, as God rules over us. We must sustain the earth’s resources, not just for our own use, but also for the use of generations to come. We must remember that when God made nature He said it was good, implying intrinsic value in the very fact that it exists; not only in its use to humans. If we can create and live by an ethic based on this moral understanding of creation, we can most certainly reverse this environmental crisis.

**The Salesian Tradition**

The proper moral understanding of and action toward the environment outlined above, falls in line with Salesian Christian Humanism. St. Francis DeSales believed that all things share in the beauty and goodness of God and that the ultimate goal of human life is that beauty and goodness (Daily, 2). The very definition of Salesian Spirituality makes it relatable to current ecological problems.
Salesian Spirituality is "a practical everyday spirituality for living in the modern
day" (What is Salesian Spirituality).

Salesian tradition encourages us to “live Jesus,” to live each moment
following Jesus’ example of humility, gentleness, and charity. The DeSales
University Salesian Center for Faith and Culture defines Christian humanism as
“interest in the human person and the positive affirmation of human life and culture
which stems from faith” (Salesian Christian Humanism). There are several key ideas
that make up this school of thought including “an emphasis on human freedom as
ordered to ultimate beauty, truth, and goodness,” and “a vision of the universe as
ordered by divine providence and oriented toward salvation” (Salesian Christian
Humanism). The Salesian tradition encourages us to bring spirituality into our
everyday actions. The DeSales University Salesian Center writes:

“At its core, the tradition of Salesian Christian Humanism embraces an
understanding of human life as guided always and everywhere by love,
imbued with an imperturbable optimism, lived with humility and gentleness,
and expressed in words of inspired common sense. It promotes a practical
holiness continually attuned to the presence of God, particularly as this is
manifested in prayer, in the teachings of Scripture and Tradition, in the
duties of one’s vocation or state-in-life, and in the present moment of each
and everyday”

In an excerpt on work, Father Brisson, Founder of the Oblates of St. Francis DeSales,
says that all work that stems from God is good, and we are called to receive it with
respect, gratitude, and love. If we bring this action to our daily activities, we will be
able to be in better union with God, and treat all things as sacred. We must give God
thanksgiving and praise for His creations. While we must not become obsessed with
material things, we must remember that matter is good because God created it. Fr.
Brisson says that God’s creations carry His grace within them, thus we must hold a deep respect for material things (Fr. Brisson, 77-79).

The works of St. Francis and St. Jane de Chantal reinforce the beauty in God’s creation. They believed that looking on the beauty of creation inspires us to worship the Creator behind it. If we follow the saints’ example and let all of creation become an invitation to prayer, the way we interact with creation will change (A Salesian Approach to Social Justice).

It is easy to see the connection between the Salesian tradition and how we should view and treat the environment. If we look on nature with respect and gratitude, if we see the beauty in all of God’s creation, if we “live Jesus,” we can solve the moral dilemma at the center of this environmental crisis.

**Conclusion**

We are currently seeing a global ecological crisis from multiple forms of destruction that could potentially shut down ecosystems throughout the world. Some aspects of this crisis include deforestation and destruction of phytoplankton populations, both of which take in carbon dioxide and release oxygen, global soil erosion and desertification due to agricultural industries, pollution of air and water, acid rain, nuclear waste, global climate change, and massive extinction of species (Martin).

Humans need the earth’s resources to survive. Nature provides us with the necessities of life through goods and services. An ecological good is the product of natural ecosystem processes such as oxygen from the process of photosynthesis of plants and food from plants and animals. Ecological services are the interactions
among organisms in an ecosystem, such as nutrient cycling, seed pollination and dispersal and moderation of temperature extremes (Ecological Goods and Services). These products of the earth’s natural environments are essential to the wellbeing of mankind.

In the past few decades we have felt the backlash from exploiting these natural resources. We have overused and abused nature and we are starting to see the consequences in such things as global climate change and mass extinction. As Paul Wapner says, “nature bats last” (171). We may overuse and corrupt nature, but eventually the environment is going to have to correct what has been done to it. Basically, nature may be able to survive the damage we have done to it, but we may not be able to.

The root of this environmental crisis is actually a profound moral dilemma. Because of greed, and as Pope John Paul II says, “a lack of due respect” for nature and life in general, we are faced with world wide ecological degradation.

While nature clearly has practical value, it also has intrinsic value, i.e. value in the very fact that it exists. St. Thomas Aquinas described everything that exists as having the transcendentals, or properties of being, which includes Goodness, Truth, and Unity. Thus, everything that exists, including nature and everything in it, is good.

Andrew Hoffman claims that because of the Protestant Reformation, our culture tends to view man and nature in a Cartesian dualistic perspective. Neither ecocentrism nor anthropocentrism will be enough to solve our environmental
dilemmas. He says that if we instead perceive the world through a three part metaphysics, which unites man and nature in God The Creator, we will have a balanced attitude toward creation. In this way we should follow the example of St. Francis of Assisi who called on everything in nature as his brothers and sisters to praise their common Creator together with him.

If we look at nature in this way, it becomes obvious that we have a moral obligation to take care of it. While God granted us dominion over creation, our ultimate goal is to fulfill God’s plan of making all the earth a garden and to become united with it and all of mankind in Him. It is imperative that we address these moral concerns not only to protect nature, but also to protect mankind from ourselves. The moral disregard that has led to environmental destruction, has also led to problems among human beings. It is this lack of respect for life that runs rampant in our societies that is at the root of problems such as human rights issues, abortion, and poverty.

Moving toward solutions:

John Paul II writes about how science, philosophy, and theology are all about a well-ordered universe with its own integrity and dynamic balance. In these fields, humans are called to explore the order of the universe while respecting and preserving it. In order to due this, we need to have a balanced perspective of creation, a proper respect for life (III. 8-9).

Selfishness and greed on an individual and collective level, impede solutions to this environmental crisis. In finding solutions to the global environmental crisis
we need to address these two key vices. People and companies often ask questions in regard to nature such as, “Why should I care about the environment, how will it benefit me? It's too expensive to buy food locally or to buy clothes from companies that don't use sweatshops. It will benefit us economically to cut down this forest, or drill oil in this habitat, or build a damn here…” The list could go on. Granted, money and economics are extremely important, and I am simplifying issues to make a point. However, our society tends to put money above all else, including nature, and even God. If we learn to see the good, and intrinsic value in everything and everyone, we will be able to make proper decisions about complex issues.

Actions must be taken on an international scale to coordinate better management and preservation of the earth's resources. Actions must also be taken at a national level; policies that promote and preserve environmental integrity need to be made. Furthermore, actions must be taken at an individual level. We can each promote and educate others on a proper, moral attitude toward nature. In fact, this level of action may be the most important because our actions and attitudes can spread.

Besides sharing the message that God calls us to use creation with love, wisdom, and respect, we can each make changes in our daily lives. We can limit personal consumption and waste by conserving water, reducing energy consumption, and recycling. We can become more educated on specific environmental issues so that we can make the right consumer choices and promote the proper political policies. For example, we can find out where products are
coming from and how they were made so that we do not promote social and environmental injustices such as sweat shops and pollution.

History has shown that humans have a great penchant for progress. Just looking around the earth it is clear we humans have an immense power to create awesome things, a power that other creatures lack. We can see this greatness in architectural masterpieces like St. Peter’s Basilica, in works of art like the Mona Lisa, in our ever advancing medicine, and in our new technological advances we make each day. This power is great indeed, but it can be used in negative ways as well as in positive ways. When we use our energies to make advances that in turn harm the environment, what may seem good now will prove to be harmful later. All the energy used that hurts creation will prove to be wasted. The idea that creation holds intrinsic worth can guide our efforts in the right direction. While all of creation is not equal, i.e. it is not pantheistic; every aspect of nature has inherent value in the very fact that it exists. When we combine our desire for progress and utility with the proper respect for life that comes along with an environmental ethic based on intrinsic worth, we will finally be able to be in union with creation in God.
Works Cited


