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Understanding the Problem

What is our relationship to the rest of creation? How shall we live rightly on the Earth? This volume illuminates these ancient and increasingly important questions through the prism of biblical and evangelical faith. As Chris Sugden points out in the introductory essay that follows, evangelicals have not much to date put themselves to the task of developing a theological understanding of Christian environmental stewardship. This collection of essays represents one attempt to do so. It emerges from a Forum held in the summer of 1992, at the campus of the Au Sable Institute of Environmental Studies in Mancelona, Michigan, USA, jointly sponsored by the Institute and the Ethics Unit of the Theological Commission of the World Evangelical Fellowship. The composite document that was developed from that consultation is also provided below. Finally, as any good answer must begin with the question, Calvin B. DeWitt illuminates the threats to the environment, and indicates why Christians must be concerned with them. [p. 119](#)

Guest Editorial: Evangelicals and Environment in Process

Chris Sugden

It is hard for evangelicals to take the environment seriously as a mission concern. Evangelicals are 'gospel people', and the gospel is focused on the salvation of people from sin. Ideas that the trees and the land and the rivers, let alone the foxes and the butterflies are worth the time, attention, and resources of the Christian constituency have struggled to find acceptance in evangelical counsels.

The environmental movement has even sometimes been clubbed together with 'New Age' and other heretical concerns as traps to ensnare people from coming to believe the truth as it is in Jesus.

Nevertheless, the last decade has seen a number of evangelical initiatives and writings on the theme of the environment. The Au Sable Institute of Environmental Studies (which co-sponsored the Forum from which these essays are derived), is a pioneer in considering Christian environmental stewardship in North America. *Transformation Journal* carried articles on the environment in the late eighties. A number of evangelical Christians were involved in environmental concerns as scientists or in mission organizations. Evangelical Relief and Development and Mission Agencies had also been involved in environmental projects. A mission project in Portugal focused on a bird observatory. But this World Evangelical Fellowship Unit on Ethics and Society Consultation (held in conjunction with the Au Sable Forum), was one of the first occasions when a global evangelical organization put the issue of the environment on its theological agenda.

A long series of consultations culminated in a Consultation in March 1990 in Seoul, Korea, on Justice, Peace, and the Integrity of Creation. There were a few evangelical

participants, but not many. Among them were Ron Sider, editor of *Transformation*, Calvin DeWitt, director of the Au Sable Institute, and the author of this editorial.

They have written of these in *Transformation* for July 1990. They were frustrated because in response to the legitimate complaint that some understandings of the creation mandate had led people to exploit creation, JPIC statements sought to dethrone humanity from its unique rôle as 'the image of God', and extended that rôle to all. They were frustrated because in response to the despoilation of God's good p. 120 creation, there was no room for seeking forgiveness and reconciliation, just continual mutual recriminations.

At the same time, this writer was challenged by the scriptural insights brought to the problems by Calvin DeWitt. According to scripture, God will destroy those who destroy the Earth. God charges humanity to be stewards. This view does not inform the current view of seeing the world as resources to be consumed. Above all, DeWitt saw the Earth as an evangelical medium, declaring to all people directly and immediately the majesty and nature of God's divine power.

In June that year, the Theological Commission of the World Evangelical Fellowship met in Wheaton, Illinois. Members of the Unit on Ethics and Society present at that meeting agreed that it was important to address the theological challenges of the environment. In August, the Christian College Coalition held a seminar on the environment attended by Peter Kuzmic (who chairs the Theological Commission), Commission members Rene Padilla and Chris Sugden, and Calvin DeWitt. Plans were further developed and it was agreed to focus especially on the challenge and response to this issue in the Two-Thirds World.

A particular point of contention in the environmental debate is the relation between environmental concerns and concern for issues of poverty. Some have argued that environmental concerns are a way for the Western World to avoid the issues of poverty. Therefore, the Bruntland Report, 'Our Common Future', linked the environment and poverty by suggesting that the poor must be assisted because they despoil the environment; they have to live on the most vulnerable and marginal land which they then till to destruction.

The problem of the environment and the Two-Thirds World is thus stated in terms of scientific and economic reductionism. The Two-Thirds World has to react to Western demands to cut down pollution. The contribution that the Two-Thirds World can make in the area of the interdependence of humanity and the environment is ignored and marginalized by this analysis. Where that contribution is recognized, it is usually at the expense of Christian mission which is complicit in repressing the insights of indigenous peoples and their animist faiths.

Therefore, it became very important as a mission issue that theological and missiological reflection be given to the relation between the environment, the poor, and Christian faith. Support was requested and gratefully received from Tear Fund U.K. and *Evangelisches Missionswerk*, Hamburg to enable Two-Thirds World Christians to participate in and contribute to this discussion. (The contribution of Bishop Wayan Mastra from Bali was most appreciated in this regard, p. 121 giving an example of Christian witness among animistic people that preserves the interdependence of humanity and the creation.)

Evangelicals had no set list of speakers and experts on the topic. Thus, a procedure followed by many professional research groups was adopted—a request was sent out for papers. People with a known interest were invited to suggest topics to which they could contribute, or to suggest the names of others to be invited.

We were greatly blessed by being invited to hold the consultation jointly with the Au Sable Institute of Environmental Studies. This institute has a long track record of pioneering involvement in this field. The experience of the campus in the woods in environmentally friendly buildings, field trips to explore the surroundings, and a communion service under the trees above a lake was conducive to the experience of God and nature.

Two serendipities heightened our awareness. A number of participants had attended the Rio Earth Summit. This provided the first opportunity for many to reflect on and discuss its recommendations. Secondly, the day the Forum began, the Institute director condemned a tree as unsafe. It came down (to his regret), but occasioned a tree planting ceremony as part of the conference. Five trees, one for each continent, replaced the one tree struck down.

Those trees will stand many years from now, as will the two trees my family planted in our garden this weekend. A practical response to the essays and report in this volume might be in the next six months to find an occasion to plant a tree to the glory of God and to the benefit of humanity, at your home, in the churchyard, in the seminary grounds.

An International Evangelical Environmental Network was also established at the Forum, initially facilitated by the Au Sable Institute and the Oxford Centre for Mission Studies as the secretariat. Those wishing to associate with this network are asked to write either to the Au Sable Institute, 731 State Street, Madison, Wisconsin, 53703, USA, or the Oxford Centre for Mission Studies, Box 70, Oxford, UK.

Rev. Dr. Chris Susden is the Resident Director of the Oxford Centre for Mission Studies in Oxford, England. [p. 122](#)

Summarizing Committee Report of the World Evangelical Fellowship Theological Commission and Au Sable Institute Forum

**‘EVANGELICAL CHRISTIANITY AND THE ENVIRONMENT’ 26–31
AUGUST 1992**

This report seeks to summarize the substance of the discussions at the Au Sable Forum, 26–31 August 1992. The Forum comprised 60 individuals from 8 countries and 5 continents. They had a wide variety of expertise, academic disciplines, and current professions, but all were closely concerned in different ways with the natural environment.

The report identifies the many points on which there was substantial agreement between the participants. A few points are identified separately, however, either because it was agreed that further consideration was desirable or because there was substantive