STUDY GUIDE ON
Caring for the Environment

Colonel Richard Munn
Director, International Social Justice Commission
# Contents

International Positional Statement on Caring for the Environment

**Introduction** ........................................... 1

**Context** ............................................... 2

**Theological Framework**
  - God’s Creation ........................................... 3
  - The Earth ............................................... 4
  - Our Future ............................................. 5

**Social Outcomes** ....................................... 6

**Conclusion** ............................................. 8

**Discussion Points** ..................................... 8

**Resources** ............................................. 8

**Biblical Teaching** .................................... 9
The Salvation Army believes people are made in the image of God. He has entrusted us to reflect his personality by caring for the Earth and everything in it.

The Salvation Army recognises environmental degradation as one of the most pressing issues facing the world today, affecting us all. Its effects fall disproportionately on the most vulnerable, particularly in terms of health, livelihood, shelter and the opportunity to make choices. The very survival of humanity depends on the health of the whole ecosystem.

In addition to being compelled by lived experience, The Salvation Army also accepts the scientific evidence that demands action on all levels to lessen the effects of environmental damage. It is committed to sustainable environmental practices which are required to safeguard the integrity of creation.
Ecology means ‘the study of the balance of living things in nature’ and is a prominent academic discipline, with international interest.

There is broad consensus that we are in an ecological ‘quiet crisis’ – one without sudden visible upheaval, yet with cataclysmic consequences.

The data for environmental degradation is the subject of fierce debate, within and without the scientific community. Thus, public attitude is not uniform – ranging from fear of impending disaster, to disregard.

One response is inertia, a disbelief that anything can ever be done. The other is to naively hope for a miraculous techno-fix. The Christian community, in general, is seemingly indifferent, or politically wary about the issues.

In fact, Christianity has been accused of fostering ‘a bad view of nature’ by the Biblical assertion that humans have ‘dominion over nature.’ The allegation is that such a world view results in the destructive treatment of nature.

In contrast, St. Francis of Assisi and the Franciscan order profoundly fuse creation and spirituality – leading some to propose Francis as ‘the patron Saint of ecology.’

The tension is not new. During the industrial revolution, William Blake describes ‘dark, satanic mills’ in contrast to a ‘green and pleasant land.’
There are 5 main interlocking areas of environmental concern:

- **Population Growth**: As the global population increases, so does the demand for food and energy. At what point does the demand become more than the earth can provide?

- **Resource Depletion**: This is the irreplaceable capital which humans have not made, but found:
  
  - **Fossil Fuels**: Coal, oil and natural gas are the energy life-blood of industry, and the foundation of modern societies and the international economy. Once they are gone, they are gone forever.
  
  - **Water**: Declared to be a ‘human right’, and self-evidently fundamental for life and health. Potentially more important than oil as a scarce resource in the next century.
  
  - **Deforestation**: Continuing at current rates, the impact is global rather than just local. Forests are ‘the lungs of the planet.’

- **Biodiversity Reduction**: Human intervention in natural environments has accelerated species extinctions. Habitat loss, introduced species and overexploitation are the main causes. When the intricate balance of an ecosystem reaches a tipping point, species can disappear.

- **Waste Disposal**: How to dispose safely the waste by-products of production, packaging and consumption. Wealthy nations recycle more of their waste, but this is still significantly more than poorer nations total waste output.

- **Climate Change**: Atmospheric pollution by so-called greenhouse gases, Chlorofluorocarbons (CFCs), damage the protective ozone layer and expose the earth to increased heat from the sun.
THEOLOGICAL FRAMEWORK

God's Creation – Good and Generating

In the remarkable Genesis description of God's creation, each stage is systematically called good. This is deliberate and significant, from the very outset.

The Hebrew words for earth and man are adamah and adam – thus, we share our very essence with the earth, its soil, plants and animals. We are both in creation, and given ‘dominion’ over it. (Wilkinson)

The ‘dominion’ given to humans in Genesis does mean human pre-eminence, but, we can say, as fallen creatures we can use that dominion wrongly.

So, ‘dominion’ is not a synonym for ‘domination,’ let alone ‘destruction.’ We hold creation in trust and have to manage it responsibly and productively for the sake of both our own and subsequent generations. (Stott)
We must treat nature with respect, empowered to harness it for warmth, shelter, energy, food – but, never with wanton destruction.

‘If we treat nature as having no intrinsic value, our own value is diminished.’ (Schaeffer)

Summary: If people take good care of the land and follow the commands of God, the land will be fruitful.

The Earth – Fragile and Resilient

In the early Genesis narrative, we read of the very earth convulsing at the shedding of Abel’s blood. In the purity of this pristine time, there seems a clear and instinctive link between creation and sin.

This is seemingly addressed in the Noahic covenant. God makes a promise that embodies all creation – humans, animals and the earth. As with the story of Noah’s ark, our human well-being is intertwined with the well-being of all creatures and the earth.

Human tool-wielding makes the ark, a means of salvation for the creatures of the earth. Here is a kind of metaphor for how we can express our dominion.

Subsequently, Israelite covenantal laws include obligations to plants, to livestock, and to nature. (Ex 23:10-12)

However, the record is also clear – humans violate this covenant of goodwill, and commit ecological sin, acting like the owner of creation, self-centred to the detriment of other life, and damaging creation.

In Isaiah, God rebukes those who buy up the available land and create destitution. Remarkably, such community injustice results in a lost fertility for the land itself. (Is 5:8-10)

We live in a sacramental universe writes William Temple – a primary means of revelation, and one beautiful means of grace.
In the delicate balance of nature, God includes a quite remarkable capacity for recuperation and regeneration. This is especially expressed in seasonal rebirth, vegetation reproduction, the water cycle, soil regeneration and species resilience.

The earth functions organically, steadily working to heal and renew what gets disturbed. But industrial systems function consumptively, not building healing or renewal into its practice.

There is fragility between the fine interconnections of creation. There comes a tipping point, when the land is desolate, a species disappears and habitat destroyed beyond recuperation.

Our Future – Reconciliation and Responsibility

Our central human task in relation to the earth is ‘to tend and keep it.’ (GN 2:15) This is highly significant – it balances and restricts the idea of ‘dominion’ and ‘rulership.’

The actions ‘tend and keep’ are also for the benefit of the object, not only the doer. The ‘tilling’ is a kind of service to the earth, as well as human provision and preservation.

However, too often our accomplishment is earthbreaking, instead of earthkeeping. (Loren Wilkinson)

The sin of Adam, the Fall, means that not only do humans experience separation from God, separation within themselves and separation from each other, but also separation from nature. Indeed, ‘nature is divided from nature.’ (Francis Schaeffer)

Although the whole creation is ‘fallen’ and under ‘the dominion of darkness,’ nonhuman creation is not sinful. Only humans need forgiveness of sins. But human sinfulness creates alienation between humanity and the rest of creation.

Colossians 1 speaks of the reconciliation of all creation in Christ, who holds all things together.
THEOLOGICAL FRAMEWORK

Romans 8 references all creation waiting with ‘eager longing’ for the revealing of God’s children. The atoning work of Christ is interwoven with creation which is ‘liberated’ from its sufferings, the result of human sin. The final turn of phrase, ‘right up to the present time’ is tantalising, and suggests the wise and responsible use of human ‘dominion’ can begin now to reconcile the earth.

God created the earth, entrusting its care to us, and He will ultimately recreate ‘the new heaven and the new earth.’

We can anticipate the day when God will make broken creation whole again, redeeming all created things and renewing the earth. This does not absolve us of our responsibilities. Good earth-keeping is essential to the Christian faith. (Salvation Army – Canada)

A major passion for ecological health may arise from the duties we owe to future generations of humans.

SOCIAL OUTCOMES

Environmental concern is the direct result of human ingenuity and progress. Large-scale harvesting of fossil fuels inaugurated the considerable accomplishments of the industrial age and changed the world beyond recognition. However, we now stand before an unforeseen result, one that disregards national boundaries – global environmental degradation.

The list of environmental catastrophes caused by industrial and systemic failures makes for painful reading: the Chernobyl nuclear powerplant meltdown, the Bhopal pesticide gas emission, the Exxon Valdez oil tanker spill, and more.

The earth is an interconnected whole. Our intricately ordered environment is designed to operate in careful balance. When disrupted, an imbalance brings consequences. These are heightened for the poor.

Non-renewable resources do not grow back when they are used up, and they are being used up at accelerating rates.
SOCIAL OUTCOMES

In the inextricable interplay between humans and the environment a key principle is that to exhaust resources means detriment for people. Thus, sustainable development is the necessary watchword.

The responsibility leads to the popular expression ‘not cheating on our kids.’

Ecological degradation has a greater impact on poor and marginalised peoples than on the wealthy and powerful. Hazardous waste dumps and other ecological hazards are more likely to be in poor neighbourhoods (and countries) than elsewhere.

There appears to be a noticeable cultural shift in environmental awareness, care and concern. People seem increasingly concerned about rainforest destruction, the ozone hole, climate change and the possible loss of spectacular species.

People are realising that what we do, and are capable of doing, affects not only ourselves but the entire earth. ‘Planetary health’, ‘global awareness’ and ‘the ecosphere’ are increasingly common concepts. (Wilkinson)

‘The key is to translate these concerns into lifestyle changes and political action.’ (Stott)

The Salvation Army is not generally associated with systemic, intentional proactive environmental initiative or advocacy. Historically there are examples of slum cleaning and the industrial abuse action through the safety match factory initiative. Bramwell Booth was a committed vegetarian based on ecological principle; the mistreatment of animals for meat production.

Today The Salvation Army does have green ‘community garden’ projects in Australia, an eco-friendly rare species protection program in Hadleigh Farm, UK, and is clear in support of climate justice through the International Social Justice Commission statements and research.
Caring for our planet is a responsibility that belongs to all human beings. Christians should lead the way and have genuine responsibility to serve God and our communities in this vital matter.

The Salvation Army has an opportunity to become a leader in this field, and so doing matches our ethos and mission.

TO DISCUSS

1. How have environmental problems directly or indirectly affected your life?

2. Compare the words ‘subdue’ and ‘dominion’ with ‘tend’ and ‘keep.’ How do they apply to our care of the earth?

3. How does the sin of Adam and Eve have consequences for the natural world?

4. The last chapter of the Bible (Rev 22) has clear water, a tree and a city – what might we infer from this?

5. How can The Salvation Army address ecological concerns?

6. What might we put aside or sacrifice in order to pursue a healthy, whole contribution to the ecosystem?

RESOURCES

Francis Schaeffer, Pollution and the Death of Man, Tyndale, 1970
Loren Wilkinson, Earthkeeping in the Nineties, Erdmans, 1991
Gushee and Stassen, Kingdom Ethics, Erdmans, 2016

Salvation Army International Positional Statement - www.salvationarmy.org/ihq/positionalstatements
Salvation Army International Social Justice Commission - www.salvationarmy.org/isjc
United Nations Environment Programme - www.unenvironment.org/
GN 1:10
God called the dry ground ‘land,’ and the gathered waters he called ‘seas.’ And God saw that it was good.

GN 1:12
The land produced vegetation: plants bearing seed according to their kinds and trees bearing fruit with seed in it according to their kinds. And God saw that it was good.

GN 1:21
God created the great creatures of the sea and every living and moving thing with which the water teems, according to their kinds, and every winged bird according to its kind. And God saw that it was good.

GN 1:25
God made the wild animals according to their kinds, the livestock according to their kinds, and all the creatures that move along the ground according to their kinds. And God saw that it was good.

GN 1:26-28
God said, ‘Let us make man in our image, in our likeness, and let them rule over the fish of the sea and the birds of the air, over the livestock, over all the earth, and over all the creatures that move along the ground.’ […] [28] God blessed them and said to them, ‘Be fruitful and increase in number; fill the earth and subdue it.

DT 13:13-15
If you faithfully obey the commands I am giving you today—to love the LORD your God and to serve him with all your heart and with all your soul— [14] then I will send rain on your land in its season, both autumn and spring rains, so that you may gather in your grain, new wine and oil. [15] I will provide grass in the fields for your cattle, and you will eat and be satisfied.

JER 11:4-5
‘Obey me and do everything I command you, and you will be my people, and I will be your God. [5] Then I will fulfill the oath I swore to your forefathers, to give them a land flowing with milk and honey’—the land you possess today.’
PS 8:4-6
What is man that you are mindful of him, the son of man that you care for him? [...] [6] You made him ruler over the works of your hands; you put everything under his feet:

PS 24:1
The earth is the LORD's, and everything in it, the world, and all who live in it; [2] for he founded it upon the seas and established it upon the waters.

PS 65:9
You care for the land and water it; you enrich it abundantly. The streams of God are filled with water to provide the people with grain, for so you have ordained it.

IS 55:10
The rain and the snow come down from heaven, and do not return to it without watering the earth and making it bud and flourish, so that it yields seed for the sower and bread for the eater.

The Earth – Fragile and Resilient

GN 4:10, 11
The LORD said, “What have you done? Listen! Your brother’s blood cries out to me from the ground. [11] Now you are under a curse and driven from the ground, which opened its mouth to receive your brother’s blood from your hand.

GN 9:12-15
God said, ‘This is the sign of the covenant I am making between me and you and every living creature with you, a covenant for all generations to come: [13] I have set my rainbow in the clouds, and it will be the sign of the covenant between me and the earth. [14] Whenever I bring clouds over the earth and the rainbow appears in the clouds, [15] I will remember my covenant between me and you and all living creatures of every kind. Never again will the waters become a flood to destroy all life.

EX 23:10-11
‘For six years you are to sow your fields and harvest the crops, [11] but during the seventh year let the land lie unplowed and unused. Then the poor among your people may get food from it, and the wild animals may eat what they leave. Do the same with your vineyard and your olive grove.
IS 5:8
Woe to you who add house to house and join field to field till no space is left and you live alone in the land.

IS 24:5-6
The earth is defiled by its people; they have disobeyed the laws, violated the statutes and broken the everlasting covenant. [6] Therefore a curse consumes the earth; its people must bear their guilt. Therefore earth’s inhabitants are burned up, and very few are left.

Our Future – Reconciliation and Responsibility

GN 2:15
The LORD God took the man and put him in the Garden of Eden to work it and take care of it.

GN 3:17
To Adam he said, […] ‘Cursed is the ground because of you; through painful toil you will eat of it all the days of your life.

HOS 4:1-3
The LORD has a charge to bring against you who live in the land: […] the land mourns, and all who live in it waste away; the beasts of the field and the birds of the air and the fish of the sea are dying.

PS 115:16
The highest heavens belong to the LORD, but the earth he has given to man.

ROM 8:19-22
The creation waits in eager expectation for the sons of God to be revealed. [20] For the creation was subjected to frustration, not by its own choice, but by the will of the one who subjected it, in hope [21] that the creation itself will be liberated from its bondage to decay and brought into the glorious freedom of the children of God. [22] We know that the whole creation has been groaning as in the pains of childbirth right up to the present time.

COL 1:15-17
He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn over all creation. [16] For by him all things were created: things in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or powers or rulers or authorities; all things were created by him and for him. [17] He is before all things, and in him all things hold together.
REV 21:1-3
Then the angel showed me the river of the water of life, as clear as crystal, flowing from the throne of God and of the Lamb [2] down the middle of the great street of the city. On each side of the river stood the tree of life, bearing twelve crops of fruit, yielding its fruit every month. And the leaves of the tree are for the healing of the nations. [3] No longer will there be any curse.