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## **Ecosystem services and faith-based bird conservation**

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A Rocha is an international Christian conservation organization founded in 1983 with national member groups working in 19 countries. Field projects frequently focus on bird research and conservation and there is a history of long-term involvement with the local communities in the areas where we work. Within our multi-cultural organization the concept of ecosystem services has met with a wide range of responses. This is not because they are opposed to metrics per se – many of the Millennium Ecosystem Assessment criteria are helpful as indicators of ‘success’ and align well with Christian concerns for human well-being within a flourishing environment. The range of responses has to do with how arguments for conservation are made in very different local or national contexts, and Christians around the world view the idea of human benefit from nature in very different ways. In our work to engage those communities in nature conservation we encounter views that occupy a spectrum that runs from ‘dominionists’ at one end who argue that nature’s only meaning is to meet human needs to ‘transcendentalists’ at the other who imply the world would be better off without people (Wardekker *et al.* 2009). Both extremes have their secular counterparts who perhaps draw more deeply on these traditions than they realize. But among the A Rocha teams all would agree that the criterion of ‘human benefit’, no matter how widely defined, is an insufficient measure for the value for life on earth, even for the most rigorous of humanists, let alone Christians.

Christian environmental convictions both endorse and relativize the idea of ecosystem services. The foundational biblical idea is that ‘The earth is the Lord’s’. While people are blessed by creation and given all good things to use, the benefit that people derive from the earth lies firmly within God’s intention for his wider creation to flourish. We are given responsibility for biodiversity, which is seen as an expression of God’s wisdom. But a profound service that ecosystems offer is their worship of the Creator through their very being, and how they witness to the character of a loving God as people discover their complexity, wonder, power and beauty. These biblical perspectives are of great practical significance in the Global South where both biodiversity and Christian groups exist in profusion and where both are dealing with the devastating environmental consequences of utilitarian commercial logic.

But there are some Christian reactions to the concept of ecosystem services that may be original or surprising to those who are more familiar with the secular critiques such as those advanced recently by Mace *et al.* (2012) and Wenny *et al.* (2011). For example, ecosystem services as the principal justification for nature is potentially a lethal idea for our work of persuading influential evangelical audiences in North America that conservation is a vital part of their normal life and work. It has been embarrassing to our colleagues there, and exasperating to their fellow believers around the world, to note that in many Christian churches in the USA materialism and individualism have found their way into the heart of the sub-culture. We have perceived this as

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an alteration to the authentic DNA of Christian belief and believe it gives rise to what could be called genetically modified versions of the gospel such as 'prosperity teaching', a global export which is particularly influential in deeply poor parts of the world such as West Africa and Latin America. So imagine how a way of seeing 'nature' which argues for its value from 'human benefit' alone can become the justification for truly damaging ideas about the environment. In short, if ecosystem services becomes the dominant paradigm in secular conservation thinking also, it will provide a most unfortunate ally for those stoking this ancient heretical fire and give intellectual support to those who are advancing a view of creation that is far removed from authentic Christian belief.

An even more important consideration that arises from Christian perspectives also needs to be mentioned. Biodiversity is concentrated on less than 2% of the planet and much of that is in the Global South. It is sadly the case that Christians from wealthy parts of the world are sometimes involved in the work and decision-making of corporations that cause widespread ecosystem damage through their commercial activities and investments. That is why the effort to re-align the attitudes of Christians in the West with biblical ideas is a vital contribution for global biodiversity conservation and A Rocha has been actively engaging with business and finance leaders who are Christians to plead biodiversity's cause within our common and shared faith framework.

It is also frequently the case that local communities in biodiversity hotspots are deeply religious in the formal sense. Their beliefs and ideas are critically important if conservation objectives are to be achieved. While the concept of ecosystem services may have some abstract relevance, deeply held beliefs hold far greater transformational value of and in a remarkable number of significant areas within biodiversity hot-spots. It is the arguments for conservation that arise from within faith communities, and not least the Christian community in many cases, that are likely to be those which are deeply telling.

It has undoubtedly been Christian convictions about the need to address human poverty and to care for creation that have been the real drivers of A Rocha's work over the last three decades. So we need to find out all we can about birds and ecosystem services. But when we have done so, we will have only added one tool to the many that we need if we are to make a fully rounded case for their conservation to those who most need to understand and implement it.

## References

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