



Mission possible

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Andy Atkins says it's time for Christians and churches to use what God has given us to protect his creation.

My favourite biblical psalm is 104. I am constantly thrilled by its lyrical picture of the beauty and abundance of nature, and by its clear location of us humans as fellow inhabitants of that landscape – all provided for by, and dependent upon, one and the same loving Creator God.

It's a picture of harmony within creation. But, my goodness, we humans messed up that harmony. We are now in a well-documented global crisis of climate change and rapid biodiversity loss. So, what should we 21st-century Christians and the Church do?

As a Christian conservation organisation, this is a question that A Rocha UK must keep asking itself and God, and discern the best answer for the times.

Red alert

We have to start by acknowledging the seriousness of the problem, however shocking and painful.

The 2020 Living Planet Index showed that, globally, between 1970 and 2016 there was an average 68% fall in monitored populations of mammals, birds, amphibians, reptiles and fish. Three quarters of Earth's ice-free land surface has already been significantly altered, with many habitats in sharp decline: since the Industrial Revolution, for example, the area covered by natural wetlands has diminished by more than 85%. This destruction is not simply happening in the Amazon or other far-flung places; Britain is one of the most nature-poor countries in Europe, with loss continuing apace.

Grief and lament are perfectly appropriate responses. But they must not be our *only* responses. We need to face the causes of the problem and identify solutions, including being prepared to experiment to see what works, recognising that in trying to care for nature in a time of accelerating climate change, we are in totally new territory.



Water voles are under serious threat from loss of wetland habitat and predation by the American mink. © Norman Crowson

Cause and effect

Myriad drivers lie behind the precipitous decline in the abundance and diversity of nature worldwide. They range from land clearance for agriculture, urban growth and infrastructure, through mining, over-fishing, pollution and farming practices, to the illegal wildlife trade and, increasingly, climate change. But, overwhelmingly, they are the products of human behaviours and attitudes.

Population growth is clearly one. Yet its impact has been greatly magnified in the last 50 years by massive over-consumption by the rich global minority wedded to a dominant model of economic growth which ignores our responsibility to share Earth with non-humans, and relies on people buying ever more 'stuff'.

Hearts, minds and hands

So, what are the solutions? They include everything from proper enforcement of global and national environmental agreements to regenerating habitats wherever we can – from large-scale rewilding to joining together little pieces of land to make nature corridors for wildlife to move between areas. Critical too will be reducing meat in our diet, so we need less land per head for food, and building new housing in places that minimise damage to nature and maximise gains for it.

How, realistically, can Christians and churches bring about the solutions? Before looking at practicalities, we should recognise the need for much wider understanding that caring for nature is part of mainstream Christian faith: that, as Margot Hodson says (overleaf), it is a fundamental response to the death and resurrection of Christ. Individually, and as church communities, we need to encourage that crucial shift in church culture to come about. With belief driving behaviour, more Christians



Church burial grounds offer much-needed refuge for plants, mammals, invertebrates and reptiles. © David Melville

will then be motivated to use what God has given us for this purpose.

And our 'assets' are much greater than most of us realise.

Earthing it

Churches and Christians in this country together have responsibility for, and influence over, significant areas of land – from domestic gardens, through churchyards, to major private estates. Upwards of 100,000 acres is owned by the Church Commissioners alone, and A Rocha UK estimates that there are at least 500,000 acres of 'Christian-managed' land in the UK.

So, let's start by rethinking how we use any land we have influence over. Can we make our garden more nature-friendly? Can we join with others at church to encourage one or more of A Rocha UK's Target 25 species or habitats (see page 13).

We also have relationships that provide opportunities to join our practical efforts for greater combined impact. For example, A Rocha UK's Partners in Action network links Christian land managers all over the country in a learning community that seeks to manage land better for nature and to cut carbon. What relationships has God provided you and your church with, through which you could better protect his creation? Could you join forces with a green group to improve local space for nature?



Clearing bracken to encourage wildflower generation at St Madoc's Centre, our Partner on the Gower. © Martin Bowering

Have your say

As the biblical prophets called ancient Israel's leaders to account for their actions and urged godly living, so we can speak out for governments and society to respect all of God's creation. We need humility in doing this, and repentance for our own contribution to the problem. By also taking practical action ourselves, we demonstrate our own commitment to change and to seek solutions.

Internationally, Christian networks such as the worldwide A Rocha family have the opportunity to speak up too – for example, at the critical UN summits on biodiversity (COP15) and climate (COP27) later this year.

Solid ground

Finally, and so importantly, as Christians we have hope and faith in a loving Creator God. We pray 'your will be done on earth as it is in heaven'. We believe that doing the right thing is always right – whatever its visible impact – and we persevere in faith and obedience. Applied to protecting all of God's creation, this will bring change and encourage others to join in, precipitating further change.

As the world comes to terms with the seriousness of the loss of nature alongside the climate crisis, Christians and churches have key roles to play. God has given us strong tools for the task. Now is the time to learn how to use them.

Andy Atkins is CEO of A Rocha UK.



Colourful, wildlife-friendly sunflowers can be grown in pots if you don't have a garden. © Regina Ebner