

Religious or Secular, Nature Matters

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Both religious and secular people enrich their lives when they appreciate the importance of nature. There is a feeling of wonder and awe when we hike, bicycle, or paddle a canoe while we are surrounded by rivers and trees and observe nature first hand. For me, the sounds and sights of nature bring experiences which make me feel a spiritual connection of belonging to the universe and an ethical urge to protect and preserve nature.

As a humanist, I believe we are inevitably and inescapably products of nature from the time of our conception to our eventual death and ultimately to our physical return to nature. The recognition of this fact is an important first step to understanding ourselves and nature. An important second step is that we need to become more accepting of the concept of learning to live within the limits of nature.

Nature sustains us. We cannot live without it. Nature on the other hand, can exist without us as it has for millions of years prior to the dawn of human life on this planet. During those early eons of pre-human existence our planet was forming deposits of coal, natural gas, oil, gold, diamonds and other valuable minerals. Nature was forming rich top soil which sustains forests and other flora. Ocean life developed early in our earth's pre-historic times and from this development sprung other resources which presently enable many life forms to survive on this planet.

With the advent of modern technology it is possible and even likely that we may damage and threaten nature, but we do so at our own peril. In a very real sense, the harm or the good that we do to nature will determine how nature in turn shapes our lives and provides for our needs.

Humans have been slow in recognizing that while the resources of nature are vast, they are not inexhaustible. Fresh water, clean air, mineral wealth, abundant food supplies and other life-sustaining resources are not limitless.

For many years, people have too frequently believed that problems such as climate change, erratic weather patterns, alternating periods of drought and floods, depletion of our fish stocks, and increasing global desertification of land were simply unfortunate events which were happening to us as though they were truly acts of God. However, with better science we know these events have their own natural causes which are exacerbated by human actions or inactions. They are part of nature's own rhythms and nature's response to human actions.

According to many physical scientists as well as social scientists, these problems are, in large measure caused by humans and will, in the end, have to be solved by human-made solutions. When we come to understand the rhythms of nature we realize that everything, both good and bad that occurs in nature is more predictable than we had previously thought.

The more young people can be educated about both the strengths and the limitations of nature, the more responsible they will become as future protectors of nature. A first step is education. While most formal education occurs in schools, much is also handed down through parents, community values, the public media, and through accurate advertising and responsible business practices.

While we cannot all be environmental scientists, it is possible through education to raise awareness of citizens about some of the most immediate problems threatening the natural world and consequently threatening us too. Developing sources of safe clean energy and using energy responsibly are more important today than ever before.

Most important is the recognition that ordinary citizens can make a huge contribution in arriving at solutions to environmental problems. No one industry or one country, or one leader alone can provide all the solutions needed to keep nature healthy and working for all of us.

We share with other human beings nature's resource with our fellow citizens, but we also share the responsibility of keeping nature as healthy as possible. We share the planet with our children and with future generations. We share a moral and practical responsibility to leave this earth and nature in at least as good a condition as we found it when we were children ourselves.