

MY CONGRESSIONAL TESTIMONY, SLIGHTLY EDITED FOR THIS CREATION'S CORNER

“It is an honor and privilege to be here today. I direct my comments to you as a Christian and as a conservation biologist. I have been invited to speak out of my concern for the stewardship of biodiversity that was wrought into existence and is sustained by God. Many Christians consider themselves to be stewards of God’s creation and their stewardship to be an act of worship. Others see stewardship of creation as an act of responsibility for their children and grandchildren. In both cases, we stewards are not the owners, but rather act on behalf of the One above or those to come to maintain and assure the fruitfulness of God’s Creation.

A responsible steward must have sufficient foresight to anticipate and to prevent problems from emerging. Lost, threatened, and endangered species, as a result of human impact, testify to our past failures as stewards. Yes, we must address problems when they are recognized, but it is the responsibility of our elected representatives in Congress to make meetings like this unnecessary. As stated by theologian Steven Bouma-prediger,

“all creatures are designed to sing praises to God.... To see a tree as only so many board feet of wood and a river as only a place to fish are forms of myopic utilitarianism that reduce all value to human terms. A focus only on human use – even if wise use – is a stunted viewpoint that fails to acknowledge intrinsic value in a world not of our making” (from *For the Beauty of the Earth: A Christian Vision for Creation Care*, 2001, Baker Academic).

H.R. 2933 strips essential protection from present and future species. Habitat destruction and degradation is the primary factor responsible for more than 80% of U.S. species listed on the Endangered Species Act (Wilcove et al. 1996. *Rebuilding the Ark: toward a More Effective Endangered Species Act for private land*. Washington, D.C.: Environmental Defense Fund). By the time species qualify for ESA listing, their viability is already seriously threatened, and they often survive in degraded, marginal habitat. The remnant populations of most endangered species could still be recovered by removing the factors that threaten them. Often this will require suitable habitat currently unoccupied by the species for reintroduction and/or recolonization. Rather than assuring adequate habitat for recovery, H.R. 2933 limits habitat protection to “absolutely necessary and indispensable landscape” presently occupied by the species. A minimum viable population requires a minimum dynamic habitat. But a minimum viable population is hardly the fruitful population described in Genesis 1:22. Are we not stealing the birthright of God’s creatures when we fail to provide them with the essentials necessary not just to survive, but to flourish? Resource managers base their production goals on maximum sustained yields; yet when God’s creatures stand in our way, we set minimum viable populations as an acceptable standard.

The Endangered Species Act is an act in process. It demands adaptive management and adaptive legislation. The steward’s role -- your role -- must be to craft win-win solutions for all stakeholders and to transform ESA into an act supported by property owners who see value in preserving and enhancing the fruitfulness of their piece of Creation -- Not the current common practice of shoot, shovel, and shut up. We live in the richest nation the world has ever known. We have a national heritage of conservation that has persisted even through the worst of

economic times. Surely, we can and must have the political will to commit the necessary resources to live sustainably within God's creation. Humanity was placed in Eden to serve and care for Creation (Genesis 2:15). Adam's first task in the Garden was to name the animals (Genesis 2:19-20). It is this act of loving servant leadership that must characterize our lives today.

As we step back and evaluate our job as stewards, let us remember that we have one chance to do the job right. A real danger lurks here. Webster's New Collegiate Dictionary defines blasphemy as "the act of insulting or showing contempt or lack of reverence for God" or "the act of claiming the attributes of deity". If we deny the fruitfulness of God's creatures, have we crossed an unacceptable line? In our arrogance, we have created a committee that we call "The God Squad" to decide whether a species is worthy of continued existence. Section three of the current bill extends this policy by inserting an economic impact argument as a primary determining factor in evaluating whether to list a species. Creation's stewardship is replaced by our greed as the justification for our action. It is the steward's job to care for Creation. Only the Creator has the right to determine when it is time to call a species "home".

The bill in question? It was defeated.