Why a Specifically Quaker Testimony on the Environment? [1]

Since there are many excellent organizations actively working to improve our relation to the planet, is there any need or place for a specifically Quaker organization to address the same concerns?

The fundamental environmental questions we face are essentially religious: What is our place in the world (Creation)? What is our purpose in life? What is good behavior which furthers that purpose and affirms that place?

There must be many in the Religious Society of Friends who have not had the opportunity to explore these questions, so I would like to offer, as food for further thought and discussion, the following factual reasons for Friends' spiritual concern for the environment:

- The innate relatedness of all life, exemplified, perhaps most compellingly by the observations from science that all life is based on the very same code-DNA—which is shared by every plant, animal, virus, bacterium on this planet.
- The profound complexity of the web of life. Our interrelatedness extends far beyond the genetic legacy of our DNA. Human society and economic activity interact with our biosphere in ways which humanity has barely begun to be aware of, much less understand. And as we increase in numbers and activity, our interactions become more overwhelming and hence more needful of our care.
- The enormously disproportionate effect of the actions of humanity. When we were few and powerless our actions had no more effect on our planet than those of opossums or anteaters. But now, with our burgeoning numbers and technological prowess, we have begun to have the dominant effect—overwhelming those of every other living creature. This power brings with it responsibility in proportion.
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The unpredictability of the effect of our actions on the environment. In the face of the complexity of ecological interactions, we must recognize our inability to understand what effects our actions may have. Witness the unpredictable effects of burning fossil fuels, which produce carbon dioxide and threaten climate change.

The need for caution and modesty of action (“walking gently”). Since we are largely ignorant of the effects of our actions, and since these effects can be worldwide and long-lived, we are led to be modest in our actions, not just for our own sake but for the sake of our descendants—and for all living things.

The finiteness of our biosphere and our planet. It has become obvious in the recent past that we live not in an unlimited volume of space but instead in a closed and relatively small sphere, only the very thin surface of which is able to support life.

The intrinsic limits of material resources. Economists are belatedly coming to an observation which has been long held by physical scientists—that not only is there an absolute limit to the sustainable rate of consumption (i.e., the limit imposed by the solar energy we are able to intercept) but also a limit to total consumption of any commodity.

Consumption is limited by the fact that once something is spread around too much it cannot be gathered together again. Imagine for example being given the task to reassemble a pound of rare metal which someone has ground into powder and spread over the entire surface of the planet from an airplane. This is in fact what is happening to copper, tin, and many other relatively rare elements.

The essential requirement to limit our numbers. Given the limits of the space and resources available to us, the need to limit our number is a simple fact of arithmetic, beyond any dispute or any philosophy. The question is not whether, but when, and to what extent we limit our numbers.

The demands of equity and just dealing with the present and posterity. We must recognize that no single small group of humans can ethically or practically monopolize a major part of the world’s resources. The resources of the planet must be distributed not only over space but also over time. We must think of the future generations. To do otherwise is to deny the value of our offspring.

The increase in value of resources as knowledge accumulates. This is perhaps hard to grasp, but is nevertheless a very real effect. It can be compared to the archeologist digging up a rare tomb—the earlier in the development of that art that the tomb is exhumed, the less that humanity learns from it, and so if the explorer is wise, he may in fact elect to do nothing at all with his find, but leave it to the wiser and more skilled colleagues of the future. And so it is with nature. What we use up today for some frivolous purpose might be used by future humans in far more valuable ways that we can dream of.

Materialism as a source of our difficulty. Close to overpopulation as a root cause of human misery is the ancient and persistent error of materialism—the perception that since additional material possessions are crucial for happiness when one is poor, then ever more consumption is desirable when one's condition rises above poverty. What are the true sources of well-being? What are the consequences of pursuit of material goods beyond their real utility? These questions are, of course, universal in every religion, but [why do we need] to have them endlessly repeated generation to generation.

Questions for reflection

A TIME MAY COME when our concern for the environment becomes an integral part of our recognition of who we are called to be as Friends. At present, however, we need to increase our awareness of these special aspects of living our testimonies. As we reflect on how the historic Quaker testimonies can shape our daily lives, consider how the following questions are relevant to our use of food, transportation, housing, and entertainment. As well as applying them in our personal and family lives and in the life of our Meeting, let us ask how they apply in our personal and corporate witness for social justice and peace.

1. When do I take time to deepen my appreciation of being a member of the wondrous community of life on Earth? How do I give thanks for the beauty of Creation and the gift of life?

2. Do my actions reflect concern for the environment?
3. Do I give voice to my concerns? Is my speech on these subjects honest, unpretentious, and open to mutual learning?
4. Do we work together to educate ourselves about the care of Creation, in order to make responsible choices?
5. Do we work to improve sharing of resources with everyone, recognizing that our patterns as consumers in the industrialized world are a major factor in the declining health of the earth's life support systems?
6. Am I careful to avoid spending and investing money in ways that result in others doing things to the earth that I would not do myself? (from Baltimore Yearly Meeting)
7. By sharing things we spread the world's resources. Do I enjoy things without owning them and do I give things away for others to use?
8. Do I resist advertising and the broader forces of our culture that encourage unnecessary consumption?
9. Am I willing to know and pay the full and fair cost of the goods and services I use, including the future ecological and social costs?

- Strawberry Creek (Calif.) Monthly Meeting's Deeper Ecology Study Group

Illustrative activity

DIVIDE INTO FIVE GROUPS: Peace, Simplicity, Equality, Truth-telling and Integrity. Find out what your Faith and Practice says about these testimonies. Ask each group to list environmental issues that relate to that testimony and decide whether Earthcare should be included in their testimony. They could be asked to design a poster for their testimony with Earthcare included in it, or make another type of presentation of their conclusions. Then compare-even argue the cases. Then the leader asks whether a case can be made for a separate Earthcare testimony.

Source: From a 1994 BeFriending Creation article by William Beale

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