

Will riding my bicycle bring world peace?

Reflections on creation care and peacemaking

Ray Vander Zaag

With the rise of environmental awareness and concern, churches have become engaged both in thinking theologically about creation care and in encouraging practical action for stewardship of the environment. While the broad Christian community has understood creation care and environmental stewardship as an increasingly important element of its witness and discipleship, Anabaptist churches have linked creation care with their distinctive emphasis on peacemaking and nonviolent living. As their understandings of peace have evolved from more narrow emphases on nonviolence and nonparticipation in war, to a broader, more integrated understanding of active peacemaking, Anabaptists' peace convictions have come to include bringing shalom through careful use of the environment.

What kinds of links connect environmental stewardship and conflict? In what specific ways can our actions to care for creation contribute to reduced conflict and increased peace in the world?

Underlying this understanding is a comprehensive peace ethic that views the original creation as characterized by abundance, interdependence, and harmonious relationships among creatures and between them and their environment. This peace ethic sees Christ's work as one of restoring that shalom. On the surface, it seems logical to believe that if we care for creation, there will be

peace: all people, regardless of their location and economic, ethnic, or social status, will have access to a healthy, abundant environment. All will enjoy good food to eat, fertile fields and forests and waters to sustain their livelihoods, the energy and material resources needed for warmth and shelter, and unspoiled places for recreation and praise of the Creator.

In these pages, I will examine more closely questions about the links between creation care and peacemaking. What kinds of links

connect environmental stewardship and conflict? In what specific ways can our actions to care for creation contribute to reduced conflict and increased peace in the world? Under what conditions does environmental scarcity produce conflict? What does exploration of the concept of environmental peacemaking tell us about our understanding of peace and our witness to peace?

A great deal depends on how we define and conceive of *creation care* and *peacemaking*, and whether our scale of analysis is local or global. Our definitions and scale of analysis will in turn shape our sense of how to respond to the linkages between creation care and peacemaking. I will provide three levels or scales of analysis, beginning with a focus on narrow definitions of peacemaking and small-scale contexts, and moving to progressively wider analyses. As will become clear, these three cases are not distinct types but rather points on a continuum, chosen to help us gain understanding of the issues involved.

Local scarcity and local conflict

The link between creation care and peacemaking that is easiest to understand and respond to would occur when a local community practices poor environmental stewardship, which leads to the scarcity of a specific local environmental resource (water or productive land, for example), which in turn leads directly to violence between groups within that community, who compete for this now-scarce resource. An example from my own experience as a development worker in Haiti was the widespread deforestation of the hilly countryside there, which has led to increasing erosion and declining farm productivity, which in turn has contributed in some communities to violent confrontations between land-hungry small farmers and larger landowners.

The link between poor environmental stewardship and scarcity. In this relatively simple case, the first link we need to examine is the link between poor environmental stewardship and environmental scarcity. Historically, many have viewed increasing local scarcity of land, water, forests, food, or other resources as simply the result of increasing local populations, the so-called neo-Malthusian dilemma of exponential population growth on a fixed resource base. According to this view, much environmental scarcity is a result not of deliberate or malevolent poor steward-

ship but simply of unintentional overuse by growing populations with growing consumption levels.¹ This analysis raises the question whether such consumption-induced scarcity should be judged as poor stewardship, particularly with respect to poor countries where people faced with limited opportunities overuse resources in an attempt merely to survive.

In contrast, a second view would see these types of environmental scarcity as the product of local and/or international

A great deal depends on how we conceive of *creation care* and *peacemaking*, and whether our analysis is local or global. Our definitions and scale of analysis will shape our sense of how to respond to the linkages between creation care and peacemaking.

economic, political, and social structures established by powerful groups. These structures leave ordinary people little choice but to use local resources in unsustainable ways.

Despite their differences, both views imply that environmental destruction is rarely caused by the deliberate and direct wasting or destroying of natural resources but rather occurs because of intermediary social structures.

Both understandings raise intriguing issues for our approach to creation care. The first view, in which scarcity is linked to unintentional overuse, raises the question, are limiting human fertility and population growth

elements of creation care? Perhaps more relevant for most of us reading this article, whose ecological footprints are larger than would be our fair share, that analysis also raises the possibility that creation care involves addressing our levels of resource consumption, not just avoiding intentional harm to the environment. More on that later.

The second view suggests that creation care may be more about changing both local and broader social, economic, and political systems that translate the everyday activities of households and companies into environmental scarcity. I will also return to this question later.

The link between scarcity and conflict. The second link we need to examine is the link between scarcity and conflict. Does scarcity of specific local environmental resources inevitably cause conflict, or is environmental scarcity linked to conflict only under certain specific conditions? An influential scholar advocating the

view that environmental scarcities do produce violent conflict is Thomas Homer-Dixon, director of the peace and conflict studies program at the University of Toronto. He has published many case studies analyzing such scarcity-induced violence. Examples include land scarcities and conflict in Rwanda and the Mexican state of Chiapas, water shortages and violence in Gaza, and conflicts over forest resources in Indonesia.

Yet this purported link is controversial. Some research has found instead that countries and regions with abundant natural resources have experienced both the slowest rates of economic development and associated higher levels of social conflict, because of the unequal distribution of the benefits of these resources.² Resource-poor countries, in this explanation, are forced to diversify earlier into manufacturing, which leads to more stable economic and political structures, and to less conflict. Furthermore, “objective deprivation,” the mere fact that people are poor,

The geophysical nature of global resources produces a contradiction: the link between each of us and the resource is direct, but our awareness that in each individual case the link is tiny may undermine our motivation to practice environmental stewardship.

seldom produces strong grievances and subsequent violence. Rather, what is important is the perceived gap between actual and “deserved” access (what has been called “relative deprivation”). Even more significantly, this research found that neither type of deprivation is a good predictor of the likelihood of violent conflict; more important is a combination of sufficiently strong identity-based collectives that can organize violent action, and sufficiently weak political systems that provide little opportunity for nonviolent expression of grievances.

All this analysis suggests that the links between poor creation care and violent conflict are usually indirect, and that creation care may not be the most important or direct way to make peace at this level. Instead, the critical social, economic, and political structures that translate scarcity into violence may be the areas where peacemaking—understood as social transformation—will be most effective. Particularly if we are outsiders in a situation of local environmental scarcity and local violence, our peacemaking efforts are probably best directed at strengthening or reforming those social

processes, so that the human factors causing poor use of environmental resources can be addressed.

Global resources, scarcity, and conflict

If it is difficult to find a direct link between environmental care and conflict in smaller-scale contexts, the dynamics are significantly different when our perspective shifts to the global scale. Here creation care involves environmental resources that flow unhindered across all borders, and global-scale ecological systems that have an impact on people everywhere on the earth. Likewise, all people necessarily use these resources. The critical current example, of course, is the global atmospheric system and the key environmental resource that it provides: a stable climate. Recent years have seen this issue emerge as the critical environmental concern of our time, perhaps in part because we cannot dismiss it as a localized problem being experienced somewhere else. Instead, it threatens the health and peaceful existence of the entire human race.

The link between poor environmental stewardship and scarcity. The link between use of this global environmental resource and scarcity is direct. When I emit greenhouse gases, that act contributes directly to the reduced supply (increased scarcity) of a stable global climate system. And every time I ride my bicycle instead of driving, I help conserve this vital resource.

But while the link is direct, the level of my individual local contribution is small. My actions are minuscule in proportion to the size of the problem, so I am tempted to think that my choices won't make any difference. The inherently geophysical nature of global-scale resources therefore produces a contradiction: the link between each of us and the resource is direct, but our awareness that in each individual case the link is tiny may undermine our motivation to practice good environmental stewardship.

As we noted in the case of local-level contexts, overuse may not be deliberate or malevolent. The overuse of our atmosphere as a waste deposit site for fossil-fuel emissions is not necessarily a deliberate spoiling of our environment. The increase in greenhouse gas emissions is more a result of the exponential expansion of the human economy to the point that it unintentionally overwhelms the capacity of global ecosystems to absorb its by-products.

In fact, carbon dioxide, the primary greenhouse gas, is not in itself a pollutant but a necessary component of the atmosphere, and what produces climate change is the upsetting of the greenhouse gas balance. And so it has been difficult to mobilize political and popular understanding about the need to take action on climate change, because the problem is an unintended disturbance of the equilibrium of this natural system. And, like issues of local resource scarcity, this issue raises the challenging proposition that the sustainability of our environmental footprint on the global ecosystem is a key creation care issue.

The link between scarcity and conflict. A link between environmental scarcity of global resources and violent conflict is difficult to isolate. A healthy global climate system is not a resource that can be captured or controlled through military action, and one cannot point to examples of violence directly linked to conflicts over greenhouse gas emissions. Yet the news is full of stories about environmental effects of global climate change. Rapid climate change is disrupting farming, forestry, and fishing systems in many places in the world, and the evidence suggests that poorer and less stable regions experience the largest negative impacts. It is quite conceivable that these disruptions will produce violent local conflicts. Some researchers, for example, have posited that regional climate change is a key factor in the current conflict in Darfur, because it has led to changing opportunities for grazing and thus to population migrations.

As the case in Darfur suggests, however, global environmental change does not produce conflict directly or immediately. Rather, global patterns produce local environmental change, which are then translated through complex and interrelated global and local economic, political, and other social structures, to produce the possibility of conflict. In the conflict in Darfur, other analysts point out that politics and government are intervening key factors: these entities have failed to address the problems of environmental stress and have probably made the situation worse by responding militarily to political disputes.³

A reverse case scenario. In fact, some suggest that the direction of causality frequently runs in the opposite direction: conflict often causes environmental destruction. Environmental resources are rarely used sustainably in situations of conflict and injustice,

as—for example—when exploited and impoverished people overuse their land and forests simply to survive during times of crisis. For this reason, in some contexts working to resolve and transform the causes of violence and injustice between conflicting groups may be the most effective way to promote creation care.

Not resource scarcity but inequity as the cause of conflict

Both the local and the global-scale analysis suggests that it is not resource scarcity in itself that causes conflict but rather unequal and unfair access to and control of resources. Access, control, and property rights are always defined in the context of social relations, through negotiation and debate in the political arenas of the household, the community, and the state. The implication is that, in most cases, creation care initiatives are only indirectly linked—through human social structures and processes—to

Conflict often causes environmental destruction. In some contexts, working to resolve the causes of violence and injustice between conflicting groups may be the most effective way to promote creation care.

conflict and peace. Actions to reform and heal these broken and unjust social structures and processes are likely the most important and direct ways to work for both creation care and peace.

This perspective is a key principle from my academic discipline, human geography. A geographical outlook sees social outcomes (such as conflict or peace) always as the result of *human* transformation of the natural environment. Geographical or environmental impacts are rarely purely natural or direct. In

our efforts to understand environmental conflict, this perspective would emphasize that abundance or scarcity in the created environment rarely affects and constrains human societies directly, except in short-term ways. Rather, the impact in the longer term is almost always mediated by human social structures: the economic and political systems, cultural norms and worldviews that shape access, effects, and opportunities.⁴ In fact, given the overall size of the world's human population, and the technological manipulation of natural resources that is the cultural norm in most societies, the health of the environment itself and its ability to provide a healthy home for humans are products of human economic and social structures.

Global citizenship and the world's shalom

This final section will expand the scope of analysis once more, from the previous narrow emphasis on actions that directly protect the environment or stop violent conflict, to broader, more holistic or integral understandings of creation care and peacemaking. With a more comprehensive analysis, we can again establish a stronger link between creation care and shalom making, though both will be seen as outcomes of a more primary focus on discipleship and service rather than as primary goals in themselves.

The first two sections of this article suggested that creation care is a matter not just of avoiding deliberate harm to the environment. Much environmental scarcity is a result of unintentional overuse rather than deliberate misuse, as growing populations and consumption levels put increasing pressure on local and global environments. Here in Manitoba, we have not deliberately caused algae blooms in Lake Winnipeg by intentionally overloading it with phosphorus and other nutrients; we have simply followed accepted practices for buying dishwasher soap, farming hogs, growing wheat and canola, and making our lawns attractive. Globally, we have not intentionally acted to disrupt climate patterns; we have simply taken advantage of the benefits of relatively abundant and easy to extract hydrocarbon energy supplies, in order to provide cheap and efficient transportation and power systems for our homes, factories, and farms. Yet cumulatively these activities are producing damaging consequences for our environment.

As we become aware of the cumulative environmental effects of our everyday lives, we should certainly make efforts to do less harm. But a commitment to creation care also requires a commitment to a range of broader activities beyond the direct individual environmentalism of driving less or using fewer pesticides, for example. What is also needed is support for systematic study of ecological and social processes, so that we better understand how our innocent actions are translated into longer-term and larger-scale environmental impacts. We need to support government action at the local, national, and international levels, to establish policies and regulations, based on solid environmental knowledge, to prevent environmental harm. And we need to support international development efforts—both direct efforts by public and

nonprofit agencies to assist those living in fragile or vulnerable environments in poorer countries, and policy reform of national and international trade and monetary policies that unfairly disadvantage the economies of poorer nations.

My inclusion of these activities in an ethic of creation care may not be what some church people want to hear. To those who want simple, direct responses, such actions may seem too political or bureaucratic. Yet I would argue that such social engagement is a necessary element of a consistent creation care ethic, and more broadly, a consistent and integral life of service and love of

Social engagement is a necessary element of a consistent creation care ethic, and more broadly, a consistent and integral life of service and love of neighbour.

neighbour. This social engagement can take many forms. For example, perhaps we need to see our citizenship as ministry, as we decide how to vote and participate politically. Perhaps we need to consider using our vocational gifts to follow careers in which we craft new forms of creation care.

In the first two sections I suggested that environmental scarcity is usually only indirectly related to violent conflict, and therefore creation care is also only indirectly linked to peacemaking. Yet this assertion reflects a narrow understanding of peace as the prevention or halting of violence. That understanding needs to be expanded to include the wealth of meaning found in the Hebrew term *shalom*. *Shalom* involves right relationships among peoples and between persons, and between people and the natural order, based on a right relationship with God. Peace and justice—including environmental justice—are linked in this vision of *shalom*. God is a God of peace and justice who is active in the world in a restorative way, to heal these relationships. All forms of brokenness and conflict, including but not limited to physical violence, are appropriate objects of peacemaking activity. All forms of right living build peace, in a pre-emptive way.

When we understand it in this way, peacemaking—or perhaps peace building—is clearly an element in our care for creation. The direct things we do to protect the environment, and the less direct things we do to make our local and global economic and political communities more just, do contribute to restored relationships. All our efforts to live by gospel principles of service and

“doing unto others” contribute, in the long term, to building peace and justice—to restoring shalom—in the world.

Becoming more ecologically minded will teach us important truths that also apply to peace building. Climate change has made clear the ecological truth that all the peoples of the world are in fact neighbours. We don’t live in an isolated enclave; our actions are not confined to our immediate location, and we cannot easily know all their effects. We live, ecologically as well as socially, in a big, interdependent world, and we need to understand that our actions do ripple out and affect people in many places, often in ways we don’t see.

My conclusion, therefore, is that neither creation care nor peacemaking, particularly when narrowly understood, should be the primary goal of our faithful living in the world. I see both more as outcomes or results of a primary commitment to living faithfully in response to God’s command to love God, our neighbours, and ourselves. A foundational commitment to these basic gospel commands will draw us to work out the complexities of right action, and we will contribute in small, cumulative, and interrelated ways both to better care of God’s good creation and to more peaceful relationships among earth’s peoples.

Notes

¹ The idea of ecological footprint is important here. A measure of human demand on nature, it is defined as the biologically productive area a population requires to produce the resources it consumes and to dispose of its wastes.

² See, for example, Richard M. Auty, “How Natural Resources Affect Economic Development,” *Development Policy Review* 18 (2000): 347–64. There are, of course, exceptions.

³ See, for example, Julie Flint and Alex de Waal’s *Darfur: A Short History of a Long War* (London: Zed Books, 2006).

⁴ This assessment is similar to my understanding of the way God works—occasionally directly and personally, but more often through neighbours, communities, and peoples.

About the author

Ray Vander Zaag grew up on a potato farm in Ontario, was a development worker in Haiti for eight years, and now teaches international development studies at Canadian Mennonite University (Winnipeg, Manitoba). Last year he rode 2,400 kilometers on his bike (mostly for pleasure) and about 14,000 kilometers in the family minivan.