



**EDUCATED GUESSES:
THE EARTH GROANS
- OUR RESPONSE**

WENDY FOWLER

It is recorded that when travelling through China in the thirteenth century, Marco Polo encountered deep resonating groans emanating from certain desert areas. Some presumed that evil spirits were the source. Scientists today refer to these sounds as “singing sand.” As sand grains trundle down the slopes of certain sand dunes, they produce a deep, groaning hum that resonates for kilometres, and sometimes continues long after the tumbling stops. They are not quite sure just how it happens.¹

In his letter to the Romans Paul refers to all of creation groaning (Rom 8:22). His personification of creation enables us to empathise with the plight of plants, animals, mountains and sand dunes, with the lament of the heavens, the land and the waters. Indeed, he claims that all creation waits earnestly, as if on tip-toe, for the earth to be renewed.² But why do we find creation in this position? The classical evangelical analysis, drawn from Genesis 3, is that “the disobedience of the first couple from whom Genesis traces the descent of the whole human race... [has] had grave consequences for all mankind”³ and humankind’s ongoing misuse of the creation since the very beginning has led to the compromised situation that we now find ourselves in. But Christ’s death and resurrection give us hope as we anticipate the time when death and decay will cease. Nevertheless, even in the present when the creation is compromised as it is, it continues to bring praise to God and declare his glory. This is beautifully depicted in the first part of Psalm 19.

¹ The heavens declare the glory of God;
the skies proclaim the work of his hands.

² Day after day they pour forth speech;
night after night they reveal knowledge.

³ They have no speech, they use no words;
no sound is heard from them.

⁴ Yet their voice goes out into all the earth,
their words to the ends of the world (NIV).

These extraordinary verses are speaking of our universe, suspended in space and fixed in time, and demonstrate the innumerable, unfathomable works of the Creator and their immutable witness to his existence. Creation’s testimony is clear *even though there are no words*.

¹ Shannon Fischer, “Singing Sand Dunes Explained,” *National Geographic News*, 31 October 2012. Online: ngs@newsletters.nationalgeographic.com. Accessed 13 Feb 2013.

² *Haystack Bible Commentary*. Online: <http://hbiblecommentary.wordpress.com/2009/11/01/rom-819-the-creation-waits-in-eager-expectation-for-the-sons-of-god-to-be-revealed/>. Accessed 8 Feb 2013.

³ Gordon J. Wenham, *Genesis 1–15* (WBC 1; Waco, Tex.: Word, 1987), 91.

The earth then groans, both literally and metaphorically. Added to that, the heavens “declare”—a clever use of personification using various ends of the megahertz spectrum. While scientists may not be able to fully explain the earth’s actual groaning, as Christians we should be more than capable of explaining its personified groaning. What then should our response be as reasonable, accountable and redeemed human beings? More specifically how are teachers to be light and salt in the broader context of education? And what should be our perspective?

Psalm 19 provides us with the perspective that pervades much of Scripture. It is this picture of God’s greatness and glory as Creator and Redeemer that should guide our pedagogy. The beauty, complexity and majesty of creation, even when compromised by death and decay, lead us to the Creator and his word in the second part of the Psalm, who “forgives our hidden faults” (v. 12). Further, in Rom 8:19–23 we come to another realisation: humankind’s plight is also creation’s plight and so the redemption of humanity and the renewal of creation are linked. Hence our perspective must have an eschatological orientation.⁴ Can we, then, ignore creation’s plight? Only at our peril. For not only do we look forward to a new earth, we are called to be stewards of God’s created world in the here and now, and will be held accountable for our faithfulness to this calling (Gen 2:15).⁵

Once we begin to understand that we are stewards of creation we may become disheartened at the enormity of the problems that face us. Such problems include the destruction of arable land by erosion and desertification; deforestation that continues at astounding rates with some 100,000 square kilometres of prime forest destroyed annually; wastage that is at a premium; the extinction of species which occurs on a daily basis.⁶ We are overwhelmed when we consider that there are more refugees from environmental disasters than any other cause in the world today.⁷ Conservation therefore becomes a sociological, ethical and moral issue, not just a scientific issue.

⁴ *Haystack Bible Commentary*.

⁵ Lynn White, “The Historical Roots of our Ecological Crisis,” in *The Care of Creation: Focusing Concern and Action*, ed. R. J. Berry (London: Inter-Varsity, 2000), 31. This article does not allow for an exposition of the various interpretations of the word “stewardship” and/or “dominion” and their perceived negative connotations. Suffice it to say that Genesis 1 has been blamed for the environmental disregard that Christians have displayed in the past and still do today.

⁶ Calvin B. De Witt, “Creation’s Environmental Challenge to Evangelical Christianity,” in *Care of Creation*, 61.

⁷ Michael S. Northcott, “Ecology and Christian Ethics,” in *God’s Stewards, The Role of Christians in Creation Care*, ed. Don Brandt (Monrovia: World Vision, 2002), 46.

If these environmental problems are as bad as they sound then it is reasonable to expect Christians to have reached some kind of consensus around this important subject. Tangible, concerted effort was sorely lacking in the twentieth century until the 1960s and 70s, although in 1994 “An Evangelical Declaration on the Care of Creation” did raise some Christian awareness.⁸

So to whom do we turn for assistance? Who are the leaders in this field? As educators, it is our business to seek out these groups but it is also our responsibility to lead. John Hitchen encourages such leaders (opinion formers) to be servants and stewards.⁹ In short, whatever we do must be done humbly and should reflect the mind and gospel of Jesus Christ, whether it be conservation, teaching, preaching, changing diapers, grading papers or gardening. And not one is greater than the other. Not one leader, not one movement or action. And lest we should see ourselves as superior to the rest of creation, Sue Monk Kidd reminds us that we may have special abilities enabling us to be caretakers or stewards of this earth but that “everything has a purpose all its own, that its value lies in its own ‘beingness’, not in its usefulness or on how well it benefits humankind.”¹⁰

So how should these perspectives colour our pedagogy and practice? In the field of education we cannot always bring an explicit biblical perspective into the classroom. How do we act as salt and light with children who walk with heads bent low over the latest and smallest electronic gadgets? How do we open their precious ears and lift up their cast down eyes to as exquisite a detail as the emerald-feathered tui that roosts high in the kowhai, clicking and warbling and expertly mimicking others. One way, I suggest, is to faithfully teach about creation and conservation. We discover some of the biblical principles of conservation and we live these out while teaching them. We become acquainted with

8 Peter Harris, “Environmental Concern Calls for Repentance and Holiness,” in *God’s Stewards*, 15.

9 John M. Hitchen, “Confirming the Christian Scholar and Theological Educator’s Identity through New Testament Metaphor.” *ERT* 35 (2011): 227.

10 Sue Monk Kidd, *The Dance of the Dissident Daughter: A Woman’s Journey from Christian Tradition to the Sacred Feminine*, (New York: Harper-Collins, 1996), 162; quoted in Randy Hammer, Kristin Hammer Evans and Suzanne Blokland, *What’s so Amazing about Polar Bears? Teaching Kids to Care for Creation* (Cleveland: Pilgrim, 2011), 32.

conservation organisations within our geographical areas. We get help from experts in the field. We practise what we preach. The New Zealand Curriculum offers rich opportunities for just this kind of teaching.

An obvious learning area in the curriculum is the Social Sciences, e.g. Level 2, “Place and Environment: Understand how places influence people and how people influence places.”¹¹ Another would be Science, Level 3: “Investigate the water cycle and its effect on climate, landforms and life.”¹² Additional curriculum areas which may be included under the topic of conservation are English/Literacy, The Visual Arts, Technology and Mathematics and Statistics.¹³

Some of these learning areas lend themselves superbly to a particular approach in education, namely Inquiry Learning. By utilising Inquiry Learning, the student’s appetite for the subject is thoroughly whetted to create sufficient beginning knowledge and a strong desire to pursue the topic. Inquiry Learning begins by asking the big or fertile questions which are then thoroughly investigated. Information is gathered, sifted and sorted and finally succinctly presented by the students. In the case of the social sciences, a concluding step of Inquiry Learning would be to consider appropriate social action around the topic being investigated.¹⁴

So, why bother with this topic? Because we know that “The evangelical words of creation permeate the universe.”¹⁵ They saturate it. De Witt paraphrases Rom 1:20 “Creation’s evangelical declaration is so forceful that God’s eternal power is clearly seen and God’s divinity is manifest, leaving everyone

11 Ministry of Education, *The New Zealand Curriculum*, (Wellington: Learning Media Ltd, 2007), n. p.

12 Ibid.

13 An example in the arts: as students study aspects of nature they could learn to sketch or paint them or learn to appreciate the works of the great artists who endeavour to emulate the Creator – be they romanticists, realists or impressionists. In English, Dr Seuss and Graham Base are excellent examples of quality children’s literature with very strong stewardship and conservation messages. Technology might investigate how functional models are used to explore, test, and evaluate a design concept that has been proposed to reduce pollution. Mathematics and Statistics may be used to carry out a survey and to collate data in the form of a graph.

14 Examples of social action could be a letter to the council, weeding someone’s garden, the establishment of worm farms and/or recycling bins at school, creating art works along a walkway.

15 De Witt, “Creation’s Environmental Challenge,” 63.

without excuse.”¹⁶ But many of our young people are disconnected from creation and its “evangelical words” and so it is part of our calling to gently point them back to its splendour when we cannot give an explicitly Christian voice in the classroom. In doing this we are directing them to the Creator. This *in itself* amounts to proclaiming the good news.¹⁷ Thus we point to what our Father has so richly provided: the universe, the rosebud, the arachnid, the water cycle, the speed of light, the atom. And we do it well! Also, we teach in hope, just as creation which groans, and continues to give glory to the Creator, waits in hope. Once we have the attention of our students, once we have rekindled their awareness of the intricate world that surrounds them, it then becomes possible to progress to appreciation and only then can stewardship be purposefully exercised.

In practice, awareness can involve seeing, naming, identifying, locating. What are the local environmental places of interest? What special projects are being attended to by environmental committees or councils? What are the names of the native trees and shrubs that grow in the school grounds? How do Māori view conservation?¹⁸ Where does one go when one wants to assist with a project or when environmental wrongs are observed? How does one restore a wall that has been defaced by graffiti? What shapes the policies that guide the decision-makers? It begins very simply; as simply as working in Mrs Walker’s garden because she can no longer bend to remove the weeds, to tend the earth, to be the steward.

And so, as “An Evangelical Declaration on the Care of Creation” puts it “we await the time when even the groaning creation will be restored to wholeness, we commit ourselves to work vigorously

to protect and heal that creation for the honour and glory of the Creator – whom we know dimly through creation, but meet fully through Scripture and in Christ.”¹⁹ This is our response.

WENDY FOWLER lectures in the Social Sciences, English and the Visual Arts in the Laidlaw College School of Education. Wendy’s area of specialisation is history. She is passionate about showing God’s workmanship in creation through the arts.

16 Ibid.

17 Eugene H. Peterson says, “From time to time I wonder why there is so little cross fertilization between the people who love the mountains and birds and trees and the people who pray to the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. How did we get so separated into these two camps, the creation people and the Christ people? ... There is no disconnection in our biblical revelation, no division between creation and Christ, no separation in the evangelical gospel between heaven and earth.” Eugene H. Peterson, “Foreword” in *God’s Stewards*, x.

18 As upholders of *Te Tiriti o Waitangi*/The Treaty of Waitangi, it is fundamental that we all explore this avenue, not as lip service but to honour Māori and to enrich our learning. *Kaitiakitanga* or Stewardship: Māori believe that they have a sacred duty, handed down from their ancestors to take care of the environment for those generations that follow. Their *tikanga* (customs) endorse specific rules or codes of behaviour for this undertaking – like issues of “resting” fishing grounds and shellfish beds by imposing ceremonial *rahui* (prohibitions) at certain periods. According to their belief, it is not possible for them to relinquish this duty. See, e.g. Te Ahukaramū Charles Royal, “Kaitiakitanga – Guardianship and Conservation – Understanding Kaitiakitanga,” in *Te Ara – the Encyclopedia of New Zealand*. Online: <http://www.TeAra.govt.nz/en/kaitiakitanga-guardianship-and-conservation/page-1>. Accessed 13 March 2013.

19 This “Declaration” is published in *The Care of Creation*, pp. 17–22. This quote is from p. 18.