

# Healing the Mormon Environmental Image

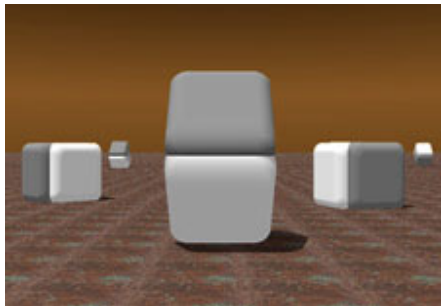
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By Steven L. Peck, Ph.D.  
Brigham Young University  
Department of Biology  
Provo, UT 84602  
[steven\\_peck@byu.edu](mailto:steven_peck@byu.edu)

In the early eighties as a BYU student I had ear-marked part of my paycheck to help save the whales. Since then, ‘save the whales’ as become so hackneyed that even unswerving environmentalists smile at the kitschy phrase. But at the time I really was concerned with saving the whales (and still am actually). It was being reported in the news at the time that the great blue whale and many other species of marine mammals were on the verge of extinction and urgent action was needed. However, at the same time that I became aware of the whales’ crisis, a movement called *Food for Poland* had just been launched at BYU by one of my heroes, Eugene England, to alleviate Regan’s suspension of aid to the bedraggled satellite of the Soviet Empire. The movement became the *causa sine qua non* for student activists. I was torn. I wanted to help, but what about the whales? On my meager student budget, I could not afford both causes and the logic that ‘weren’t starving people always more important than any animal?’ tore me in two. How could I in good conscience step away from my responsibility to succor my hungry brothers and sisters in what was an obvious need? I wrestled and twisted on the horns of the dilemma of which cause I should support and I could not seem to feel satisfied at choosing either good at the expense of the other. Finally I decided to pray about it. I suppose I went into the prayer thinking that the Lord would tell me to support the people of Poland. It seemed somehow obviously improper to put these creatures above the spirit children of God. As I prayed however, I was immersed in a profoundly affective spiritual experience. It was as if my mind’s-eye were opened to how God viewed the whales—as if a corner of His mind were present to me. This is hard to explain, but I sensed He loved them. More than that, I knew He knew each of them as individuals, as if He knew their names and cherished them deeply—not as possessions nor pets nor useful creatures nor lesser beings of any kind. He seemed to esteem them as fellow beings. Fraternal creatures of dignity and worth. I stood up weeping and wrote a check to the *Save the Whales Foundation*.

The vision (and that is how I represent it to myself, recognizing its personal and incommunicable aspects and meaning) has dimmed in impact and memory, but I have never forgotten the experience and while I recognize this was not your revelation, I wanted to share it because it profoundly changed the way I looked at nature and its creatures and motivated my interest and eventual decision to become an ecologist. I wish I could say that I have lived up to that experience, but I have fallen short in many ways. But I now feel somehow I need to embrace that experience more fully. It deserves my attention and reverence. Reverence.

We are in the midst of an ecological crisis. Throughout the world ecosystems are under staggering threat, maybe the most devastating threat to life since the Cretaceous extinctions that snuffed out the dinosaurs. The climate is changing under the influence of human inputs, the ocean fisheries are disappearing, forests are being cleared for development at an alarming rate, coral reefs are dying, and many species and entire ecosystems are under threat. These threats are well documented and scientifically established. I am not going to outline these threats as there are many good sources for this information. You should, however, also be aware that I know of no ecologist or environmental biologist who would disagree with this dire assessment. But this seems to be somewhat of a surprise to many members of the church. This I think must change and what we most need is change in perspective—of seeing that the unfounded animosity that exists between environmentalists and some members of the church is unnecessary and unhelpful. Consider the cube in Figure 1. The two colors in the central blocks look clearly like two different colors that, even now knowing intellectually that they are largely the same color (hold a pencil between the upper and lower block), I cannot see it that way. There are two points we can take from this. One is that often differences are more apparent than real. And that many times differences are constructed.



**Figure 1**<sup>1</sup>

I became an ecologist because I love complexity and I love nature. When I look out at nature there is much going on that is not only invisible to us, but that is deeply hidden in the relationships that form among the living and the nonliving things of our planet. These relationships form the structure and fabric within which we live. They touch us constantly, the oxygen we breathe and the ecological processes that sustain our lives are an almost alchemical process, combining sunlight, soil, air, and water. We and all of nature move through cycles and cycles within cycles. These things are happening all around and within you (you may not want to know this, but you are about three pounds of bacteria and are

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<sup>1</sup> Michael Morgan *Vision quest* (26 June 2003) *Nature* 423, 919-920

quite an amazing ecosystem yourself). But much of this astonishing complexity is taken for granted, ignored, and even despised. That is why I want to talk about reverence today. And I hope today to challenge members of church to think a little more deeply about their relationship to nature and its processes. I think we have not lived up to our best self or our best doctrines. There are a lot of reasons for this and I'm not going to try and dissect them. Today, I am going to take a page from positive psychology which considers the cause of our current state of mental misalignment irrelevant, let's just work on getting better. And there is work to do.

When I was a graduate student in ecology people were often surprised that I was a "Mormon Ecologist." The Mormons, disserved or not, had a reputation of being not only unconcerned with environmental concerns, but hostile to them. In fact, when the Ecological Society of America, the professional society of working and academic ecologists, was going to have their national meeting in Salt Lake City there was an active protest against having it there. This was rooted in the feeling that Utah legislators had an abysmal environmental record and the vocal anti-environmental attitudes of people in many parts of Utah precluded participation of the society in such a State. Some members of the society pointed out the disregard with which Utahans held their environmental resources and how we had failed to preserve our lands to the perversions of development. The evidence they felt supported the view that we just were not environmentally literate or concerned. I wrote a letter published in the society's bulletin pointing out that closing dialogue with Utah was not the answer and we should hold the meetings there, but I could do little at that time to point out an active and vibrant environmental movement among the Mormons.

In the mid 1990's, Max Oelschlaeger in his book *Caring for Creation* claimed, ". . . the only denomination that has formally stated its opposition to ecology as part of the church's mission is the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. p. 204"<sup>2</sup> At about the same time Marshall Massey claimed that the church was formally committed to environmental inaction.<sup>3</sup> A number of LDS scholars have responded to these kinds of statements<sup>4</sup> and the explicit claims of Mormon environmental inaction and even ecological antagonism are no longer common in print.<sup>5</sup> However, in my experience the perception remains strong in many environmental circles, and it is widely believed to be true, that Mormons are not environmentally aware or concerned.

Sadly, I understood their perception. I remember growing up in Moab, one of the worse curses you could fling at someone was "Your mother is an environmentalist." Those were fighting words. Oddly I had many friends in graduate school who were both Mormon and

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<sup>2</sup> Oelschlaeger, Max. 1994. *Caring for Creation: An Ecumenical Approach to the Environmental Crisis*. Yale University Press.

<sup>3</sup> Massey, M. 1991. "Where Are Our Churches Today? A Report on the Environmental Positions of the Thirty Largest Christian Denominations in the United States" *Firmament* 2, 4:4-15

<sup>4</sup> Handley, George 2001. *The Environmental Ethics of Mormon Belief*. *BYU Studies* 40 (2) 187-211.

<sup>5</sup> Although see respected animal behaviorist Marc Bekoff's letter to the editor in *High Country News* (February 16, 2004) "Are Mormon's Really Green" in which he says, "Indeed, while there are many wonderful individual Mormons who hold admirable positions on environmental issues, as a whole, I don't see how Mormonism can be rated highly for promoting and enforcing a comprehensive environmental ethic that respects animals for the amazing beings who they are, individuals who are very important — some might say essential — for maintaining the integrity of innumerable precious landscapes and ecosystems."

concerned environmentalists (As an aside, I use that word purposely because I find many of my students who are environmentalists trying to distance themselves from the word because they think it carries too many negative connotations and baggage, of the sort I experienced growing up in Moab. But I find I want to unblinkingly face the word and redeem the word through new association). Even so, I remember some discouragement when I put a sign at an National Ecology Meeting that said, “Mormon Ecologists let’s Meet!” and provided my hotel room phone number and no one called. My point is that while much of the sense that Mormons are not environmentally minded may be misconceptions or conflation with Western attitudes and modes of thinking. In many ways the perception is correct.

How can we awake from this? Let’s turn to the scriptures and see what advice it offers. In psalms 6:6 it says, *Go to the ant, thou sluggard consider her ways, and be wise.* I think the LDS people have often been sluggish when it comes to environmental thinking. But I have high hopes, (like that ant that moved the rubber tree plant) that we are sluggish in a way that suggests we are about to awake to new possibilities. But before considering the ant let’s make a small departure.

One of my favorite scenes in the *Lord of the Rings* is when in the *Two Towers* Merry and Pippin stumble into Fanghorn Forest and meet Treebeard an Ent, one of the shepherd of the trees<sup>6</sup>. The forest is being destroyed by an evil wizard, Saruman. He explains that the Ents have been sluggish and slow to act. Speaking of Saruman he says:

“Only lately did I guess that Saruman was to blame, and that long ago he had been spying out all the ways, and discovering my secrets. He and his foul folk are making havoc now. Down on the boarders they are felling trees—good trees. Some of the trees they just cut down and leave to rot—orc-mischief that; but most are hewn up and carried off to feed the fires of Orthanc. There is always a smoke rising from Isengard these days.

‘Curse him, root and branch! Many of those trees were my friends, creatures I had known from nut and acorn; may had voices of their own that are lost for ever now. And there are wastes of stump and bramble where once there were singing groves. I have been idled. I have let things slip. It must top!’”  
p. 76

He then adds speaking of the Ent’s sluggishness:

“ . . . If I could make them understand the need; if I could rouse them: we are not a hasty folk. What a pity there are so few of us.”

Treebeard calls an Entmoot, the Ent a grand council of the Ents, and the Ents get roused. Suddenly the Ents are fully awake and ready to take action:

“The old Ent now took the hobbits back and set them on his shoulders again, and so they rode proudly at the head of the singing company with

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<sup>6</sup> Tolkien, J. R. R. 1954. *The Two Towers*. Folio Society, London.

beating hearts and heads held high. They had expected something to happen eventually they were amazed at the change that had come over the Ents. It seemed now as sudden as the bursting of a flood that had long been held back by a dike.” p. 91

In the end the Ents do what no army in middle earth could have accomplished—they demolish completely Saruman’s terrible fortress and army. I am hoping that we Mormons are like that. That through a sort of Entmoot of ground-root efforts that the LDS will awake to the threats we are facing and the effect will be the emergence of a truly great force the care for nature and our planet.

I’ve been thinking a lot about what we need to awake this slumbering giant. What form will it take? I’ve been exploring deeply of late many of the ways that people of faith express that faith in a care for the creation and would like to suggest some ways to focus our entmoot, but before I do let me share some of my wanderings. First from the witches.

Starhawk’s, book *Earth Path* offers the following blessing on a compost pile. (There really is something very magical and trusting about even thinking of offering a blessing on a compost pile)

“We offer gratitude to the great cycles of birth, growth, death, decay, and regeneration. We are grateful to all the beings how have made the great transformation, leaving the remains of their bodies here. We are grateful to all the hungry mouths that consume the dead. Blessings on the termite, the beetle, the ant, the spider, the worm. Blessings on the fungi and the bacteria, those that need the air and those that avoid it. Blessings on all the life in this pile that will transform decay to fertility, death to life. May I always remember that the cycle of life is a miracle. May I continue to feel a sense of wonder and joy in the presence of death and life. May I remember that waste is food, and may my eyes be open to opportunities to close the circle and create abundance and life.”<sup>7</sup>

There is something deeply beautiful about that.

What assumptions go into such a blessing?

First, that God cares about such things as compost piles.

It shows an awareness of our dependency on the little things on earth—an acknowledgement that these diverse things matter to our health and wellbeing. The blessing requires some education of the workings of nature.

It shows a deep reverence for the ecological cycles that make life even possible.

It takes seriously that our spiritual lives can merge with nature and its care.

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<sup>7</sup> Starhawk (2002), *The Earth Path: Grounding our Spirit in the Rhythms of Nature*, Harper San Francisco, New York

Is there room for such attitudes within our LDS traditions? I think so. I think how a more reverent attitude toward the sacred nature of creation. Could we carelessly use and abuse our wonderful lands and natural resources, if we sensed within them a deep and important sacredness? If we truly asked blessings or gave thanks for the cycles and processes of nature could we easily exploit or abuse nature as we have so quickly and carelessly done up till now? Could we glibly argue that certain of our companion species are less important than a new mall or housing development? Such attitudes as we find in this blessing on a compost pile would go far in sensing how important and how fragile our life support systems are and how important their care is.

There is something absurd in blessing a compost pile—maybe as absurd as making a sacred covenant with the creatures of the earth. In Genesis, after Noah disembarks from the ark, we read the following:

- 8: And God spake unto Noah, and to his sons with him, saying:  
9: And I, behold, I establish my covenant with you, and with your seed after you;  
10: *And with every living creature* that is with you, of the fowl, of the cattle, and of every beast of the earth with you; from all that go out of the ark, to every beast of the earth.

The Lord then establishes his covenant that he will never destroy the earth with water again and sets a rainbow to mark this covenant. Then the Lord adds:

- 15: And I will remember my covenant, which is between me and you *and every living creature of all flesh* and the waters will no more become a flood to destroy all flesh. (italics mine).

Why should I take serious the idea that the lord made a covenant with Noah AND with the creatures of the earth? I don't take literally the idea that there was a world-wide flood and an ark loaded with a sampling of at least one of each sex of every species<sup>8</sup>. Why take literally that God made a covenant with the beasts of the earth? As I read the story of the flood, don't think that I'm suppose to take lessons about physical geology and biodiversity from the story, but something deep about the Lord's concern for what are often called the lesser things of earth. Embedded deeply in our theology there is the claim of human supremacy and the Lord's ultimate concern for us, his children. But notice in this story the Lord, makes his covenant with Noah, his children, "for perpetual generations," as verse 12 of Genesis 9 tells us, AND every living creature. Us AND them. This suggests to me that while, we may be our Heavenly Father's ultimate concern, we are not His *only* concern. That these creatures do matter to him—after all he commanded Noah to make sure they made it on the ark. So for me, the thing to take a literalist reading on is not the story elements borrowed from Near Eastern flood narratives, but the heart of the story is one that shows a relationship of care between creator and all creation. That's the *raison d'être* of the story being told here. The ark

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<sup>8</sup> See for example White, C. and M. Thomas, 2007. "On Balancing faith in Mormonism with traditional Biblical Stories: The Noachian flood story" *Dialogue* 40 (3) 85-111, and Jeffery, D. E. 2004. "Noah's flood: modern scholarship and Mormon traditions" *Sunstone Magazine* October 2004, 27-44.

and the great deluge are metaphorical, but the Lord's care is genuine, deep, and important. His creation and its creatures matter.

Back in 1900 this was made explicit within the Church. A day was set aside to promote kindness to animals. Quoting George Q. Cannon:

“Sunday, February 25, is the day assigned for special instruction in our Sabbath Schools upon the subject of kindness to animals. There years ago the Deseret Sunday School Union Board appointed the last Sunday in February of each year to be observed as ‘Humane Day.’ The desire was and is that on this particular day lessons concerning the proper treatment of living creatures should be impressed upon the minds of the children. . . . We earnestly recommend that this year ‘Humane Day’ be generally and appropriately observed, and that superintendents and teacher put forth special efforts to have the lessons on kindness and humanity made as impressive and interesting as possible (*The Juvenile Instructor* 35:124, Feb. 15, 1900.” Quoted in Stratton 2004.<sup>9</sup>

Moreover, it is interesting in the Noah story that the event that seems to have precipitated the Lord's anger was a kind of designing greed. Reading from Robert Alter's translation of Genesis chapter 6 verse 5:

“And the LORD saw that the evil of the human creature was great on the earth and that every scheme of his heart's devising was only perpetually evil.”<sup>10</sup>

The words “scheme of his heart's desire” might be something we can find going on here, now, in relation to the natural resources that seem so abused and unequally distributed on the face of the earth today. President Kimball echoes these feelings saying:

“But when I review the performance of this people in comparison with what is expected, I am appalled and frightened. Iniquity seems to abound. The Destroyer seems to be taking full advantage of the time remaining to him in this, the great day of his power . . . I have the feeling that the good earth can hardly bear our presence upon it . . . The Brethren constantly cry out against that which is intolerable in the sight of the Lord: against pollution of mind, body, and our surroundings.”<sup>11</sup> p. 56

When I introduced sluggishness of the Saints in environmental concerns we were directed to consider the ant. The ant was mentioned in the blessing above. Let's look at the ant for a moment to see if there are lessons to be learned. I'm careful here. In looking for lessons in

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<sup>9</sup> Stratton R. D. 2004. *Kindness to Animals and Caring for the Earth: Selections from the Sermons and Writings of Latter-day Saints Church Leaders*. Inkwater Press. Portland, Oregon.

<sup>10</sup> Alter, Robert. 2004. *The Five Books of Moses: A Translation with Commentary*. W.W. Norton & Company. New York.

<sup>11</sup> Nibley, H. 1994. “Stewardship of the Air.” In Norton, D. E. and S. S. Ricks. *Brother Brigham Challenges the Saints: The Collected Works of Hugh Nibley-Volume 13*. Deseret Book Company. Salt Lake City, Utah.

nature there is a long, failed tradition to look for messages from God in the workings of nature. In the Middle Ages every aspect of nature was taken as a message from God or thought to reveal His purposes. Natural theology is a dangerous activity, for as Darwin noted, if we are going learn the nature of God from the beauty of nature, what to we learn about Him from the existence of Ichneumonid wasps that lay their eggs in the flesh of a living organism for their larvae to eat alive? The sacredness of nature is inherent in it, and not for what lessons are drawn from it just as its worth goes far beyond what can be extracted from it. I think Mary Oliver captures this in her poem *How the Grass and the Flowers Came to Exist, a God-Tale*:

“I suppose  
the Lord said:  
Let there be fur upon the earth,  
and let there be hair upon the earth,  
  
and so the seeds stuttered forward into ripeness  
and the roots twirled in the dark  
to accomplish His desire,  
  
and so there is clover,  
and the reeds of the marshes,  
and the eelgrass of the sea shallows  
upon which the dainty sea brant live,  
  
and there is the green and sturdy grass,  
and the goldenrod  
and the spurge and the yarrow  
and the ivies and the bramble  
and the blue iris  
  
covering the earth,  
thanking the Lord with their blossoms.”<sup>12</sup>

She suggests to me that perhaps we should interpret such scriptures as, “All things denote there is a God” and “All things . . . witness that there is a Supreme Creator” as a relationship of the objects of creation themselves and how they link to the creator rather than a statement about inferences that we can make based on observing their behavior. This ‘denote’ then brings in the connotations of a relationship with God rather than providing empirical evidence, or a kind of natural theology.

How do we denote there is a God? Are we not part of the creation? Perhaps by joining the elements of the universe in a sense of mutual reverence and recognizance. By recognizing nature as something that in and of itself stands in a relationship with God, as we do. This attitude as is expressed in the witches blessing on a compost heap creates then a relationship of reverence for nature and its cycles.

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<sup>12</sup> Oliver, Mary, 2004, *Blue Iris: Poems and Essays*, Beacon Press, Boston

I think this lack of reverence is the root of why the Saints have not risen to be the environmental leaders that their doctrines so clearly demand (This has been so well articulated by others such as George Handley, Matthew Gowns, Richard Stratton and others that I will not elaborate here). When nature is seen only in terms of its economic worth, or as a commodity, it is hard to hold an appropriate reverence for its deep worth. Can we easily exploit that which we revere? Those things we do hold as sacred like family relationships, scriptures, our meeting houses and temples and such we would be very slow to attach economic value to. Those things we reverence we protect, we honor, and we enjoy.

Is nature worthy of reverence? Can we recognize it as a gift for our use, but not our abuse? Much as a spousal relationship is a balance of use and being used by, when a relationship becomes one-sided or damaging to one spouse at the sole gain of the other it ultimately harms both. Analogously, in nature we must recognize that its parts and processes provide essential services and that if we hold its components and processes in reverence, both it and we can be blessed and benefited.

How do we cultivate that this reverence to nature?

I think the first step is coming to understand and get to know nature. To reverence something requires an intimacy and acquaintance. Notice in the witches' blessing there are specific references to ecological processes. This knowledge is a result of the last hundred years of ecological study on the processes and activities of nature. I have studied ants and their beauty captivates me and fills me with wonder. Look at the breathtaking complexity of the stunning creature found in Figure 2.



Figure 2<sup>13</sup>

Ants appeared in the world about 100 million years ago during the Cretaceous Period from a wasp-like ancestor. There has been a temptation among the saints to read the scriptures as a scientific text. This is a terrible mistake. There is something beautiful and important in

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<sup>13</sup> [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Image:Bullant\\_head\\_detail.jpg](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Image:Bullant_head_detail.jpg)

viewing the creation as embedded deeply in time. The Jewish writer Abraham Joshua Heschel writes in his book *The Sabbath*:

“Creation, we are taught, is not an act that happened once upon a time, once and for ever. The act of bringing the world into existence is a continuous process. God called the world into being, and that call goes on. There is this present moment because God is present. Every instant is an act of creation. A moment is not a terminal but a flash, a signal of Beginning. Time is perpetual innovation, a synonym for continuous creation. Time is God’s gift to the world of space.”<sup>14</sup> p. 100

To picture the creation as the wave of a wand, I think devalues it and may suggest why saints have sometimes not appreciated the immense work that has gone into the marvelous diversity we see around it. The thought that millions of years have been required for the creation goes far in helping us appreciate the uniqueness and preciousness of creation. I will not go into detail into my thoughts on evolution and Mormonism because there are many now writing who have shown how the two not only can be reconciled but actually enhance and sustain one another<sup>15</sup>.

If we look at close-ups of ants we are struck that such beauty is running around on our sidewalks. That millions, or rather about 100 thousand trillion, of such creatures are, even as we speak, running around fulfilling the measure of their creation around the world is astonishing.

As we look at nature, we are looking into deep creation through an eye fashioned out of the elements gleaned from corpses of burned out stars. If we could peer into the deep history of our eye we would see the history and beauty and magnificence of creation. Not a nature fashioned by the quick wave of a hand, but of something that has required just about 13.7 billion years. For example, oxygen and carbon had to be forged in an earlier generation of stars to create the building blocks of life. These chemicals were then fashioned using the time demanding processes of natural selection into the variety and wonder of those things we see around us. All this happened through fits and starts, long delays, and many amazing steps. Evolution proceeds much like a group of ants trying to move a caterpillar to their nest. If you’ve seen this you’ll notice it’s not a straight-line process and seemingly against the odds of many individuals pulling in seemingly random directions the caterpillar gets into the nest.

It appears from the fossil record that even our own bodies were forged in deep time. In Figure 3 we see the skull of *Homo ergaster*, a human-like being who lived along the shores of Lake Turkana 1.5 million years ago. From the neck down it would take an expert to tell it was not a member of our species. If we were forged in the same crucible as the rest of creation, then we have a deep connection to all living things. Remember, it was not Adam’s body that made him central (many think it came straight from dust, not the convoluted path that seems indicated by the fossil record, but I’m biased I like apes better than dust), but

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<sup>14</sup> Heschel, Abraham Joshua, (1951) *The Sabbath*, Farrar, Straus and Giroux, New York.

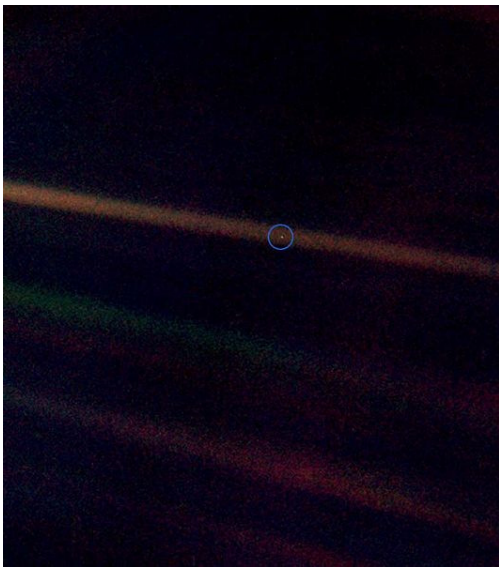
<sup>15</sup> See for example Stephens, T. D., J. Meldrum and F. B. Peterson. 2001. *Evolution and Mormonism: A Quest for Understanding*. Signature Books, Salt Lake City, UT; and Evenson, W. E. and D. E. Jeffery. 2006. *Mormonism and Evolution: The Authoritative LDS Statements*. Greg Kofford Books, Draper, UT.

what made him important was that his was the first body into which was placed a spirit child of God. Even so, our bodies matter deeply in LDS theology. They ultimately will be fused with our spirits in the resurrection. If we really are connected to nature in the way I suggest than we are even more connected to the natural sphere than we often acknowledge. How much more we ought to respect the creatures with which we share this world.



**Figure 3**<sup>16</sup>

It all happened in on this small planet. If you've seen Al Gore's, *Inconvenient Truth* (which I highly recommend) you've seen this picture taken from one of the Voyage missions. That is where I first saw it and it stunned me. There floating in this void of emptiness is our planet. A tiny speck hung in an infinite sea. No wonder that Moses was struck with our insignificance and declared, "Now . . . I know that man is nothing, which thing I never had supposed." But this pale dot is a gift. A gift that needs our immediate attention. It is worth our reverence. It is a holy space.



**Figure 4**<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ergaster>

<sup>17</sup> [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Pale\\_blue\\_dot#The\\_photograph\\_by\\_SYMO](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Pale_blue_dot#The_photograph_by_SYMO)

So where do I think we need to move as a people to heal our environmental image? First, I think we need to take our doctrines seriously. We need to examine closely what the scriptures and our prophets, both ancient and modern, have said about our stewardship responsibilities towards this earthly home. Then act on what we find there. I think as we come to understand how deeply our doctrines engage with the idea of ‘caring for creation’ we will begin to reverence the time and energy that went into creation. Then we will reverence the little things that matter so much to our continuance on this planet. Second we must demand of the political leaders we elect more attention to protecting our ecological heritage. We deserve better. Third, we need to become ecologically literate. We need to come to know (and love) the ecological support system of this earth. As we come to understand how precious and how precarious our ecological support systems are I believe that appropriate actions will follow. Things like recycling, protecting our land, and preserving our wildlands will flow effortlessly from our sense of care and stewardship.

As ant biologist E. O. Wilson has said:

“Life on this planet can stand no more plundering. Quite apart from obedience to the universal moral imperative of saving the Creation, based upon religion and science alike, conserving biodiversity is the best economic deal humanity has ever had placed before it since the invention of agriculture. The time to act, my respected friend, is now. The science is sound, and improving. Those living today will either win the race against extinction or lose it, the latter for all time. They will earn either everlasting honor or everlasting contempt.”<sup>18</sup> p. 99

As Latter-day Saints we have great responsibility for preserving our planet. It is after all our permanent home. We understand that it is not a lifeless sphere to be used and abused. Our responsibility is profound. That we believe the earth was made for our progression in no way allows us to operate from a position of power and disrespect. It deepens our responsibility and the necessity of reverencing those processes that sustain and support the life we have been given. The defining characteristic of ourselves and God may be our ability to act selflessly for the benefit of others. As theologian Charlene Burns points out:

“To say that humanity has responsibility as co-redeemers is not to say that the entire cosmos is about us. It is to say that, since humanity appears to be the first species to evolve with the twin capacities for moral decision-making and awesome destruction, we must extend our theologies beyond the human realm and recall that <<paraphrasing Luther>> “[Humanity] does not live for [itself] alone . . . but also for all . . . nay, [humanity] lives only for others . . . in all [our] works [we] may serve and be useful to others in all . . . having nothing before [our] eyes but the necessities and the advantage of [our] neighbor,” whatever species of life that neighbor may be. This truth, both hidden in and revealed by the evolutionary process, is made known through

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<sup>18</sup> Wilson, E. O. 2006. *The Creation: An Appeal to Save Life on Earth*. W.W. Norton & Company. New York

the suffering of God on the cross, which reveals to us the nature of God—  
Altruism itself.”<sup>19</sup>

Environmentalism seems to be required of us.

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<sup>19</sup> Burns, Charlene P. E. (2006) ‘Honesty about God: Theological reflections on violence in an evolutionary universe’, *Theology and Science*, 4: 3, 279-290