

environment
a christian response

the environment

should I vote
green?

recycling

are plastic
shopping bags really
that much of a problem?

We're thinking about our natural environment as never before. Even the most environmentally insensitive of us have fleeting thoughts about it; and for some younger people, environmental degradation is as serious a worry as was the threat of nuclear war to their parents. It's complex, there are many unanswered questions, and most of us don't even know where to begin.

This booklet is an attempt to show what Christianity has to say about environmental issues.

- We'll start by sketching the different approaches to environmental thinking.
- We'll outline what the Bible says about the natural world.
- We will endorse the kind of environmental thinking we think makes the most sense.

While we don't pretend to have all the answers, we hope this booklet will be a kick-start to act.

should I **WORRY** about
global warming ?



what should I
do when I hear
about the
destruction of
rainforests ?

1. environmental voices

Many different 'environmental voices' clamour for our attention, and we can miss the way they often have different starting-points about what in the environment matters most. We could list the major views as follows:

- **Humanity matters most** (*'anthropocentrism'*). This world is good because it benefits humans. So rainforests should be preserved because they might give us new medicines, or because of their beauty for us.
- **Animals matter most** (*'zoocentrism'*). Since animals have a 'right' to live in the environment too, we should defend it also for their sake. So rainforests should be preserved because they are the home to thousands of animal species that can live nowhere else.



- **Living things matter most** (*biocentrism*). Plants and microorganisms also have a moral claim to protection. So rainforests should be preserved because each and every living object in it is a wonder that should not be extinguished.
- **Complex ecological systems matter most** (*ecocentrism*). Entire ecosystems are entities in their own right which must be preserved in all their complexity. So rainforests should be preserved because each is a unique and complex array of life and terrain that is irreplaceable.

The first bullet point is a conservationist view, where the natural order is 'conserved' for ongoing human life and use.

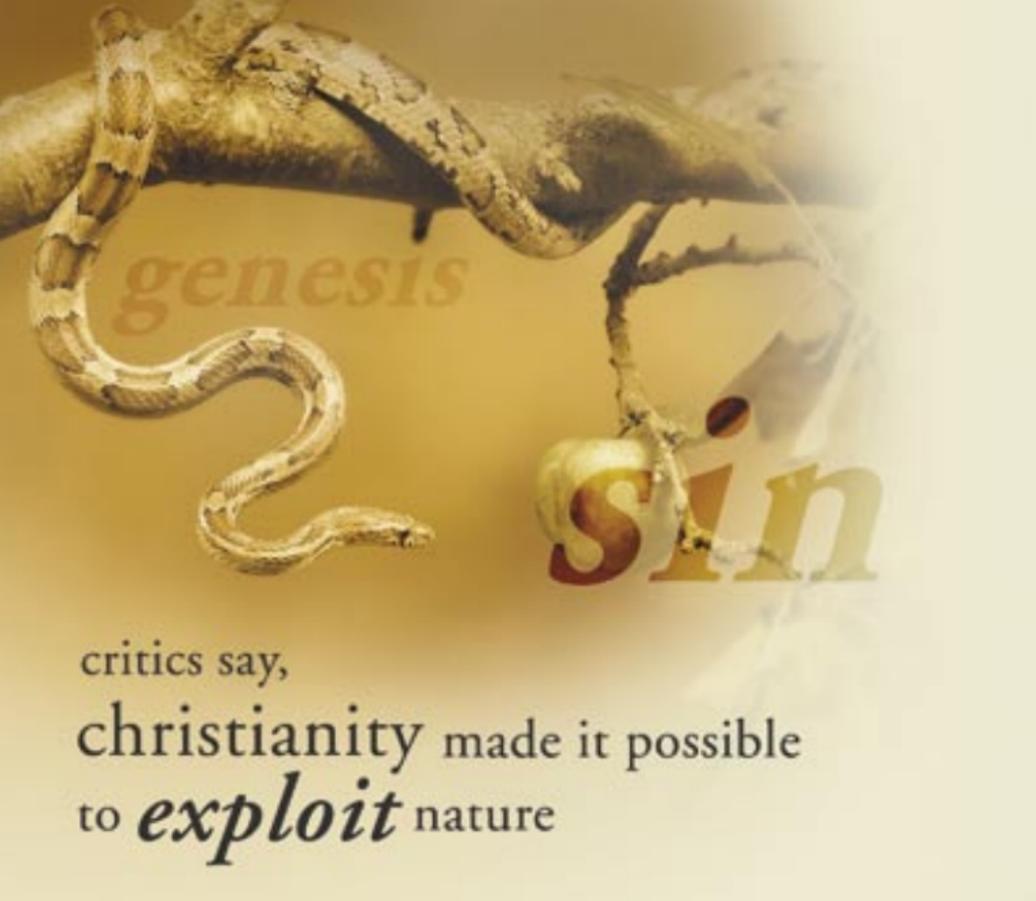
The last three bullet points are a preservationist view, where aspects of the natural order are 'preserved' for their own sake. The whole spectrum of views can serve



to protect the environment, but each approach can give odd results:

- Anthropocentrism can result in environmental destruction if we only notice the way its resources help us.
- Zoocentrism might prevent the culling of some common animal even if rare plants are at stake.
- Biocentrism can find it very difficult to decide between protecting a rare frog, a rare plant and a common bird.
- Ecocentrism can so value the overall system that individuals and species within it are neglected or willingly left to die.

How may we decide between these alternatives (or others not listed here)? The Bible both agrees and disagrees with each of these views. Overall, it suggests an approach to the environment that is hard to reduce to a single theory, but which is very helpful nonetheless.



2. the bible

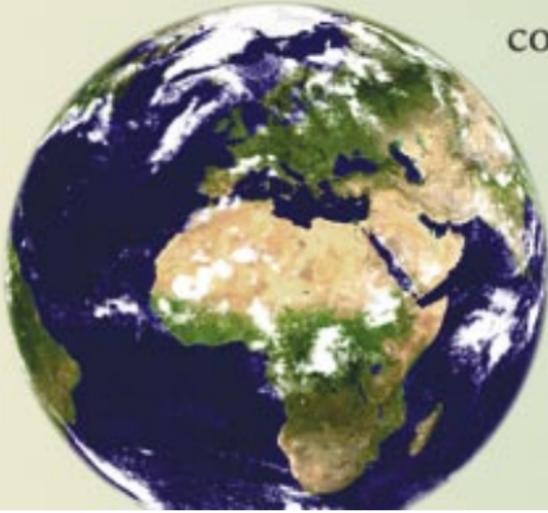
Anyone who has looked into environmentalism knows that some think Christianity is the main villain behind modern destruction of the natural world.

This view was put very forcefully in a famous 1967 article by Lynn White. White said that before Christianity, "man had been part of nature", but under Christianity's influence (particularly in Northern Europe), humanity became the ruthless "exploiter of nature". Christianity's insistence that nature is not sacred and that only human beings are in the image of God meant, according to White, that "Christianity made it possible to exploit nature in a mood of indifference to the feelings of natural objects."

This article, and its very bitter tone, has shaped the attitudes of many environmentally sensitive people toward Christianity. Of course, it is easy to point to Christian people who abuse the

creation

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to 'rule' his creation...



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environment
?

environment. But it may be easier than White admits to find people from other backgrounds who are equally abusive to it. More to the point, White does not really pay enough attention to the surprising environmental awareness evident within the pages of the Christian Bible.

White reacts to the way God appoints humanity to 'rule' his creation in Genesis 1:28. The language here is indeed very forceful: "Be fruitful and increase in number; fill the earth and subdue it. Rule over the fish of the sea and the birds of the air and over every living creature that moves on the ground." God also allows people to use plants and animals for food [Gen. 1:29 & 9:3]. But has God therefore commanded people to rape, pillage and exploit the environment?

Certainly not, because in Genesis 2 (another account of the creation of the world, from a different perspective) we see the way humanity 'rules'. God plants a garden, and the first humans "work it and *take care* of it" [Gen. 2:15]. The man Adam is seen naming the animals, and

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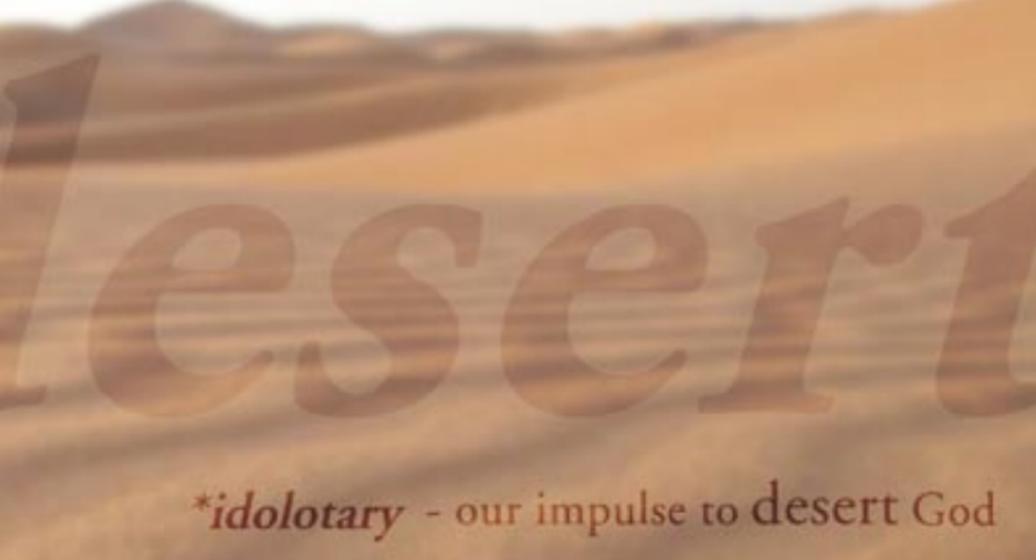
*idolotary**

the woman Eve shares in Adam's task of care.

The contrast between these first two chapters of the Bible is very striking, yet also very honest. Human beings obviously have the capacity to be masters of all they survey: as God puts it later, "The fear and dread of you will fall upon all the beasts of the earth" [Gen. 9:2]. There is no use pretending humans do not have this capacity to rule. But how is it to be used? Not by greedy exploitation, but by service to the land and to the environment.

So, the first two chapters of the Bible show the same striking oddity that we still see in humanity. On the one hand, we are the most sentient, smart, manipulative and powerful beings on the planet; yet on the other hand, we are intimately connected to it, made of its very 'dust' [Gen. 2:7]. At our best, humanity's enormous power is given so that we may both use, and care for, our world. In this way, humans may be seen as God's 'vice-regent' on planet earth, sustaining, nurturing and protecting the order and profusion that he has given to his world.

God's high estimate of us as 'his own image' [Gen. 1:27] is also very striking. Yet God's loving concern for his entire creation is never in question. He declares it all "very good" [Gen. 1:4, 10, 19, 25, 31]; he also gives "every green plant" to all non-human life to eat [Gen. 1:30]; and later, his covenant of protection applies to humans and non-human animals alike [Gen. 9:9-10].



Wholesale destruction of the environment is unthinkable, because God delights in all that he has made.

Sadly of course, the Bible also pictures us not at our best, but at our worst. Humanity's desertion from God [Gen. 3] brings out the worst in us in every respect; and the rest of the Bible shows God rescuing his world from us, and us from our sin. Later in the Bible, our 'greed' is called 'idolatry' [Col. 3:5]. Our impulse to consume the world until we ruin it is, it seems, the same as our impulse to desert God and worship anything or anyone else but him.

These environmental themes, against the tragic backdrop of human sin and ruin, are repeated throughout the Bible. We will list just a few:

- The ancient **law** of Israel had many provisions to guard the natural environment. The agrarian structure of their society made it obvious that the environment mattered. One example: "When you lay siege to a city for a long time... do not destroy its trees by putting an axe to them, because you can eat their fruit. Do not cut them down. Are the trees of the field people, that you should besiege them?" [Deut. 20:19] Although some concession is made in v20 to cut down some trees, there is the recognition here that human concerns do not justify wholesale environmental destruction. Similarly, various laws protect some

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in HIS own way

proverbs

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animals [e.g. Exodus. 20:10; Deut. 22:1-4, 25:4], although human 'rule' of animals is never far from view.

- In the **Proverbs**, we see again the way that created things have an order that is to be respected. "A righteous man cares for the needs of his animal" [12:10]. This order can, in some instances, remind us that we are part of an order that is greater than us, and we don't just get to invent how to live. "Go to the ant, you sluggard; consider its ways and be wise! It has no commander, no overseer or ruler, yet it stores its provisions in summer ... How long will you lie there, you sluggard?" [6:6-9] In Proverbs, real wisdom begins with knowing and 'fearing' God. The wise person knows that the structures of our lives are all created, sustained and nurtured by God's just and kind rule. The wise person knows where they fit in God's world. They know how to respond to God, to others, and to God's world.
- Some parts of the Bible simply revel in God's exuberant creation and abundant care of his world. At these points, the focus is off humanity and has moved to a simple celebration of God's genius. So **Psalms 104** retells the story of creation from God 'setting the earth on foundations' [v5] through to his giving food to all the teeming creatures of the earth [v27] and recreating them in life whenever

“Do you watch when
the doe
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death strikes [v30]. In **Job 38-40**, God himself storms into confrontation with the complaining Job, and drives home the point that there is a great deal going on in the world that humans will never know. It simply pleases God to care for animals in his own way. “Do you know when the mountain goats give birth? Do you watch when the doe bears her fawn?” [39:1] “Does the eagle soar at your command and build his nest on high?” [39:24] The many details of God’s good relationship with his creation will never be known to humanity.

- The New Testament has less to say about the environment, perhaps because the Old Testament had made it all clear, and perhaps because much of it is set in towns and villages. Nonetheless, Jesus reiterates some of what we have seen. “If any of you has a sheep and it falls into a pit on the Sabbath, will you not take hold of it and lift it out?” [Matt. 12:11]. He confirms God’s profound and powerful ongoing care for his world [Matt. 5:45, 6:26, 10:29] – or as his apostles put it, God “has not left himself without testimony: He has shown kindness by giving you rain from heaven and crops in their seasons; he provides you with plenty of food and fills your hearts with joy” [Acts 14:17]. But there is also recognition that all is not well in a world whose ‘vice-regents’ have turned on their Master. Until the Lord of Creation rescues

QUESTION: how can we hear
GOD when the Bible
speaks with many voices?

ANSWER: Some people worry about the idea of a 'biblical approach' because of different emphases in different parts of the Bible. But we think that God is able to use all parts of the Bible to reveal important truths to us, so that the sum total of its various emphases can give a general position to work from—a 'biblical approach'.

the creation, and us, from our sin, it is in 'bondage to decay' and "groaning as in the pains of childbirth right up to the present time" [Rom. 8:21-22].

- We should notice **the Bible's overall plot**. Human life starts with a garden—and ends in a city, in a renewed, rejuvenated creation [Rev. 21-22]. This city has "the river of the water of life, as clear as crystal, flowing from the throne of God and of the Lamb down the middle of the great street of the city. On each side of the river [stands] the tree of life, bearing twelve crops of fruit, yielding its fruit every month. And the leaves of the tree are for the healing of the nations." [Rev. 22:1-2] There is no sense in which the Christian's future is divorced from the environment: we remain embedded in God's renewed world, embodied and material. The Christian 'heaven' is not some disembodied place of spirits.



3. Impact on Australia

If we were to take this biblical approach to the environment seriously in modern Australia, what would that look like?

First, we should notice that the overall biblical picture does not quite fit any of the alternatives posed at the beginning:

- Although humankind is rated very highly, the biblical picture is not anthropocentric. God loves his world, including the parts that have nothing to do with humans.
- Although animals matter greatly, they do not trump humans, who remain their 'rulers'. So the Bible is not zoocentric.
- Although all living things matter, a hierarchy of sorts makes it permissible that humans and animals eat animals and plants. The biblical picture is not biocentric.



- Although the biblical authors are able to paint enormous verbal pictures of entire ecosystems, individual humans, plants and animals are still to be cared for. The Bible is not ecocentric.

To use simpler language, we can say that 'conservation' is too human-focused, while 'preservation' does not rate humanity highly enough!

Of course the Bible is, across its entirety, '*theocentric*' - God-centred. All God's creation is in orbit around God; he calls it very good; he will renew the parts that humanity ruins; and he expects humanity to honour himself, each other, and the created world. There is no 'environmental theory' here, just an understanding of the relative importance of things. As the 'wise' person grows in their 'fear' of the Lord so also will they grow in the knowledge of how to value God, other people, and the non-human environment.

Modern people have new scientific 'tools' by which to know our world (although the ancients may have known it just as well, but in different ways). That knowledge brings a privilege: we know something of human impact upon the world, and have the ability to care for the world in new ways. (If earlier generations of Christians 'failed', it might simply be that they did not know as much about the way the environment works.) And even without technical environmental knowledge, it has



“Balancing development, the equity of humans, and the good of the environment ... approximates the ‘way of wisdom’ in the Bible.”

always been clear that greed is a destructive force that humans must always oppose.

One recent approach to the environment is called ‘sustainable development’. There is much discussion about what people mean by ‘sustainable development’. But broadly, it represents an approach to any new situation that tries to balance development, the equity of humans, and the good of the environment. It is a helpful approach, because it approximates the ‘way of wisdom’ that we saw in the Proverbs and in the Bible as a whole. It wrestles with the knowledge that science brings; and it takes seriously the threat of human greed.

Its critics think it is vague and lacks precision. This is because, unlike some other environmental theories, it does not approach new situations with a ready-made answer. Rather, it tries to take into account the unique environmental considerations in a situation, and then ponders which (if any) of these should be traded for development; and it tries to ponder how best to protect the equity of human beings in the process. It is in the nature of each specific case that this ‘pondering’ will look different, each and every time.

For what might we value and wish to protect in the environment? It depends entirely on the specific bit of it under consideration. We might value the size or extent of some area. We might want to keep the diversity of species there, or retain it in a state relatively untouched by



humans. The rarity and fragility of a place or species might matter to us—or it might be how typical a thing is that matters most. Equally, we might worry about the health effects upon humans living near an environmental feature (e.g. a mosquito-ridden swamp). No theory can pre-empt which of these, or other considerations, will matter more.

‘Sustainable development’ is open to all such considerations, while at the same time trying to leave room for humans to prosper, with some degree of equity. It is an approach that enables us to imagine sacrificing, say, a few percent economic growth because something in the environment matters to us more. It enables us to help protect humans from disease if something in the environment is threatening them. And although it open to abuse (like any way of thinking), it opens a way forward that can meet with general support.

‘Sustainable development’ deserves Christian endorsement, because it approximates the way of wisdom that we have seen in the Bible. Noting both our obvious power over many features of our world, but noting too our utter dependence upon it, sustainable development seeks to wisely reflect, deliberate and judge what is best in a given situation. Its so-called vagueness is its strength: it is open to whatever must be thought about in each new situation.

How, then, may we lives as environmentally wise Christians in Australia today?



a) Politics

Each major political party has an environmental platform, and all claim to care for the environment at some level. But we learn more about what each party thinks by assessing their policy approach to individual issues.

- If a party puts forward a policy promoting economic growth at all costs, and is unwilling to sacrifice any growth for the sake of environmental concerns, then it has strayed beyond the bounds of the biblical picture. Christians are on the lookout for policies that make human greed 'god' at the expense of nature.
- Similarly, a party that promotes preservation of the environment at all costs, as if humans have no needs, also strays beyond the bounds of biblical wisdom. Christians are on the lookout for policies that make nature 'god' at the expense of people.

For information available about a party's environmental position, ask politicians and government officials about particular issues that concern you (e.g. Kyoto, or rainforests, or local water management):

- Your local State and/or Federal member should be able to reply to written enquiries with a reasoned



think locally *act* locally

statement of his or her party's position.

- The relevant Minister's office should be able to describe what is currently happening and what is planned.
- Each party's internet website should have something to say about environmental issues, particularly in their pre-election policy statements.
- The internet is also loaded with various government reports on many environmental issues, if you (or an internet-savvy friend) is willing to hunt for them.

The wise Christian won't take political environmental claims at face-value, but will watch what a party wants to do in reference to particular environmental concerns. (The absence of a clearly stated policy probably means they intend to do nothing.)

b) Local problems

One old environmental slogan went 'think globally, act locally.' But perhaps we need to start with 'think locally and act locally'. Here are examples of what a wise person might wonder about their own environment (although these suggestions are deliberately targeted to urban people, since the



writers are in no position to suggest what rural people might need to think about or do!)

Not everyone can or should pursue these suggestions. Most of us would only be able to pursue one or two. But even a few informed people can help a wider local community.

- The main suggestion is, **go outside and have a good look around.**
- Find out from your local council who is the local recycling contractor. Visit them, ask for information about how recycling works, and make your own assessment about whether it is effective.
- Find out from your local council who is the waste disposal contractor. Visit their facility and find out how garbage is disposed of. Ask them what are the worst kinds of garbage; they'll be the ones to know.
- Find a contour map of your area, and see which watercourses run through it. Go and check them out for yourself to see if there are visible signs of pollution or degradation from urban run-off. Ask your local council if anyone is in charge of waterways management in your area. If there isn't, write to councillors to ask why there isn't. If there is, go and ask them what problems exist.



- Start taking notice of local wildlife in your area. Is there a predominance of one species? Would you expect to see some other species that is absent? Of course this area is difficult for those of us with little knowledge of animals and their behaviour; but you might be able to investigate obvious anomalies. Experts at local wildlife centres, or universities, may be able to guide your observations.

There may be many such ways in which you could become more aware of your natural environment, paying attention to plant life, the state of the air, or any examples of human abuse or respect of nature.

You will make mistakes at first, but over time, you will become more and more knowledgeable. If something worries you, you might be able to check what you find with the CSIRO; or perhaps a University might have someone to help give you a reality-check. The scum on your local waterway might be completely natural! You may end up thanking God for what is, in fact, a very well-managed alliance between humans and the world where you live; or, you might see the need to ask your local community, or local or state government, to take some action.



c) Global problems

What about (for example) Kyoto and global warming, or Brazilian rainforest deforestation, or the possible increase of Australian uranium exports?

These are just three of the many important global environmental issues which Christians might start thinking about. They are hard to grasp, but certainly not impossible to reach conclusions about. Perhaps the trick is to pick one, and make yourself 'expert' on it, as a sort of 'environmental hobby'. Here are some examples of questions worth asking:

- *Global warming*

What evidence supports, and what evidence denies, that there is an overall increase in environmental temperatures due to elevated atmospheric CO₂? Our government thinks that the cost to Australia's economic growth is too great to justify ratifying the Kyoto protocols. Does this argument stand up? Are Australia's current overall CO₂ emissions sufficient to justify limiting them?



- ***Brazilian deforestation***

You should ask: How much forest is, in fact, being lost? What are the pressures on farming communities forcing deforestation? What international efforts already exist to help Brazilians in this area?

- ***Australian uranium exports***

You should ask: What lay behind the Hawke government's limitation of uranium exports to just three mines? On what grounds is that limitation now being questioned? If the output of many more mines were sold, what responsibility does Australia have to ensure that the uranium is used for peaceful purposes, and how likely is it that Australia could exert any control over the end-uses of large exports?

This small booklet, sadly, is only able to touch very briefly upon the many issues that someone could think about. The key point is, though — don't try to think about every environmental issue at once. Start with one at a time, whether local or global. Read about it, look for yourself where possible, and ask: what does biblical wisdom about God's good world say to this particular issue?



Further resources

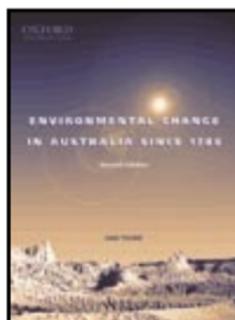
Introductory

50 ways you can help save the planet.

ANTHONY CAMPOLO.

Downers Grove, Ill.:

InterVarsity Press, 1992.

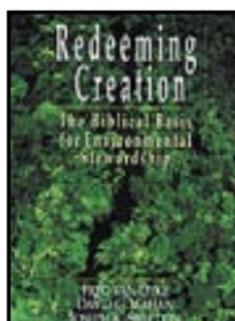


Redeeming Creation: The biblical basis for environmental stewardship

FRED VAN DYKE, DAVID C MAHAN, JOSEPH K

SHELDON, RAYMOND H BRAND

InterVarsity Press, 1996.



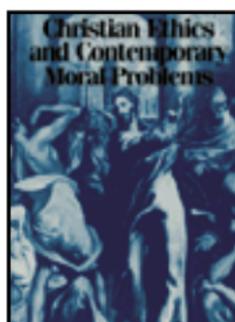
Advanced

Environmental Change in Australia

Since 1788

DR ANN YOUNG

Oxford University Press, 2000.



“Why and how (not) to value the environment”

in Christian Ethics and Contemporary Moral Problems

MICHAEL BANNER

Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999.



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