

The modern view of nature has religious roots

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All over the planet, people are fighting to save animals and plants from extinction – even though many species have no utilitarian value for us. In a new book, University of Copenhagen theologian Jakob Wolf takes up this aspect of the climate debate in the context of a religious ethic that spans cultures and religions.

"Some people would claim the modern climate debate is rooted in our desire to survive. But when it comes to the diversity of species, this argument simply doesn't hold water. An orchid from the Cayman Islands, a blue-black pheasant from Vietnam or Javan [rhinoceros](#) has no impact on the [world economy](#) or the global ecosystem. We only become emotionally caught up in their fight for survival because of a reverence for life rooted in our perception of the world as a work of creation and life as sacred and inviolable," says University of Copenhagen theologian Jakob Wolf in connection with the release of his new book in which he has collected a number of essays on phenomenology, science, ecology and theology.

The modern view of nature and the debate about [climate issues](#) and sustainability are based largely on a scientific approach towards the world. However, ethical and emotional approaches to nature also colour these discussions. For example, documentaries about ice melting at the poles appeal to our emotions by showing [polar bears](#) having trouble finding food for their young.

Existence Value

The International Union for Conservation and Nature (IUNC) report 'Priceless or Worthless' (September 2012) describes the 100 most threatened species of animals and plants. It stresses the duty of people to safeguard these species of the world even if they serve no function.

"The desire to safeguard species of animals and plants that we don't have any apparent need for is an aspect of the modern climate debate that is based on a religious ethic," says Wolf.

Every living species represents one unique pathway to success developed over millions of years. What we lose with each passing species can never be replaced," Professor Georgina Mace, CBE, FRS, quote from the report

In the introduction to the IUNC report, Professor Jonathan Bailie, of Oxford University, highlights that these species are of no utilitarian value to us and do nothing but represent what he calls 'existence value'. According to Wolf, the concept of nature and species of wildlife being intrinsically valuable reflects an ethical approach to nature that differs distinctly from a scientific perspective.

"Science describes how the world is but it doesn't tell us how it should be. The concept of existence value clearly expresses a view that prescribes a certain course of action – a duty to protect endangered species. Whereas a scientist observes a flower in the garden and sees photosynthesis, those of us with an ethical view of the world see an irreplaceable work of art that appeals to our admiration and respect. The concept of the world as being something other than, and more than, the sum of matter is largely metaphysical or religious," Wolf says.

Provided by University of Copenhagen

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