

Scientists call for religious help to save our wildlife

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Leaders of the world's great religions could play a vital role in helping to save the world's dwindling wildlife and wilderness, three eminent ecologists from Sweden and Australia have proposed.

Writing in the journal *Oryx* the scientists point to a strong overlap between regions with high [conservation](#) needs and the world's great religions.

"A greater involvement of religious communities in the conservation discourse, and a greater inclusion of conservation issues in religious ethics, could be beneficial for [biodiversity](#)," they say.

"Our study examines the spatial distribution of different religions in the world and how they overlap with areas important for biodiversity at a global scale," says lead author Grzegorz Mikusinski from the Swedish University of Agricultural Sciences.

"Our analysis indicates that the majority of these focal areas are situated in countries dominated by Christianity, particularly Roman Catholicism. Moreover, there is a large overlap of areas important for biodiversity with Buddhism (Southeast Asia), Hinduism (Indian subcontinent) and Islam (Asia Minor, parts of North and Central Africa)."

Co-author Professor Hugh Possingham from Australia's ARC Centre of Excellence for Environmental Decisions (CEED) and The University of Queensland explains "Stewardship and conservation are closely related

ideas, and this offers hope for mutual progress. Our hope is that members of religious communities, who have for centuries guided people with respect to right and wrong, may feel they have a [moral obligation](#) to conserve the world's natural wealth for [future generations](#) and could become powerful advocates for conservation."

The article argues that most governments have failed to stem the degradation of the world's natural resources, including biodiversity – and now it may be up to religion.

Their paper cites E. O. Wilson, one of the world's most influential ecologists, who once wrote: "Religion and science are the two most powerful forces in the world today... If [they] could be united on the common ground of biological conservation, the problem [of biodiversity loss] would soon be solved".

"These results indicate that Roman Catholics, per capita, have the greatest potential to save global biodiversity where they live," says Prof. Possingham, "The Roman Catholic Church has recently elected a new Pope, Pope Francis – the name linked to the 'greenest' saint of the Catholic Church, Saint Francis of Assisi, an official Patron of Ecology.

"Let's hope that he and other religious leaders will seriously consider the opportunity to engage more actively in the conservation debate. Moreover, conservation researchers must actively encourage religious leaders to participate in such a debate."

Numerous solutions have been proposed to slow the accelerating loss of biodiversity but thinking about biodiversity conservation has still not been incorporated into the everyday activities of most people and nations.

"Conservation scientists need to refocus on strategies that reshape ethical

attitudes to nature and encourage pro-environmental thinking and lifestyles," says co-author Malgorzata Blicharska from the Swedish University of Agricultural Sciences. "Religions are central to basic beliefs and ethics that influence people's behaviour and should be considered more seriously in biodiversity discourse."

Their paper 'Biodiversity priority areas and religions—a global analysis of spatial overlap' by Mikusinski G, HP Possingham & M Blicharska (2013) is published in the journal *Oryx*.

journals.cambridge.org/orx/biodiversity

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