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## A Creation Perspective on Economics, Ecology and Environment

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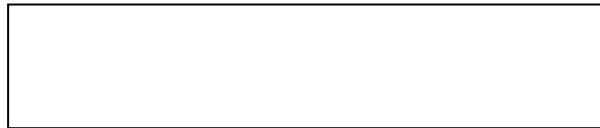
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**A CREATION PERSPECTIVE ON ECONOMICS,  
ECOLOGY AND ENVIRONMENT**

by

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## A Creation Perspective on Economics, Ecology and Environment

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Today most literate people are well aware of the problems afflicting the Earth's biophysical environment: problems of species extinction, habitat destruction, land degradation, and pollution of the waters and the atmosphere. The blight of Waldsterben - forest death - for example, has cast its grey shadow across southern Germany and much of central Europe, as well as in Asia and North America. In Germany the Greens have been very successful in the political arena, reflecting the general concerns of the people about environmental matters.

In November 1992, five months after the first Earth Summit had convened at Rio de Janeiro, a document entitled "World Scientists' Warning to Humanity" was released. It was signed by more than 1600 of the world's senior scientists, including many Nobel Prize-winners. The document began:

*Human beings and the natural world are on a collision course. Human activities inflict harsh and often irreversible damage on the environment and on critical resources. If not checked, many of our current practices put at serious risk the future that we wish for human society and the plant and animal kingdoms, and may so alter the living world that it will be unable to sustain life in the manner that we know. Fundamental changes are urgent if we are to avoid the collision our present course will bring about . . . A great change in our stewardship of the Earth and life on it is required if vast human misery is to be avoided and our global home on this planet is not to be irretrievably mutilated* (UCS 1992).

What has brought the Earth to the brink of environmental crisis? Paul and Anne Ehrlich summed up the physical causes in their symbolic equation,  $I=PAT$  (Impact = Population x Affluence x Technology) (Ehrlich and Ehrlich 1990). The significance of this equation is that the human impact on the planet is seen not to be due to burgeoning human

population growth (P) alone, but also to the increasing level of affluence (A) and hence consumption, particularly in the so-called "developed" nations, together with the escalation of human technological capacities to modify and impact on the environment (T). In other words, human impact on the environment is largely the result of what collectively might be termed *economic growth*. David Suzuki declared that ". . . the rapid degradation of the planet's life-support mechanisms and the unsustainable depletion of potentially renewable resources are driven largely by the workings of the world economy. Populations are impoverished by transnational corporations without concern for the long-term survival of local communities and ecosystems" (Suzuki 1998).

It is not only the Greens who have become concerned about environmental despoliation. From as early as the 1930s, some Christians have advocated environmental responsibility from a religious standpoint. Among the most significant is Lutheran theologian Joseph Sittler, who believed that the abuse of the environment is effectively an insult to the Creator, and that caring for the planet is a matter of obedience to God, not just providing for humanity's needs (Sittler 1954). Bakken *et al.* (1995) report his address to the third Assembly of the World Council of Churches (WCC) in New Delhi in 1961: "Declaring that a 'doctrine of redemption is meaningful only when it swings within the larger orbit of a doctrine of creation,' and Christology is irrelevant unless related to our earthiness, including hunger, war, and the care of the earth, Sittler claimed . . . a theological basis for an ethic that joined ecology, justice, and peace, and placed it squarely on the agenda of the ecumenical movement." Following Sittler, Baer (1966) declared, ". . . wantonly to destroy the rational and holistic qualities of our environment is to sin against the very structure of the world which God has created."

1967 was a landmark year in the environmental discussion. On March 10 of that year, *The Historical Roots of Our Ecologic Crisis*, a controversial and catalytic article by historian and Protestant layman Lynn White, was published in the respected American journal, *Science*. In this often misunderstood article White propounded his thesis that

apparently placed the blame for the world's environmental ills at the feet of the Judaeo-Christian tradition and its allegedly Bible-based doctrine of Creation. White claimed that in the medieval era the Bible had been understood to mean that the natural world was created largely for the purpose of meeting human needs. Most Christians had believed that Genesis 1:26-28 conferred mastery over nature on humanity. In the context of this viewpoint, the western, Christianized world acquired the technological capacity to subjugate nature, with disastrous consequences. Protestant theologian Jürgen Moltmann, aware of White, came to a similar conclusion: "The Christian belief in creation as it has been maintained in the European and American Christianity of the Western churches is therefore not guiltless of the crisis in the world today" (Moltmann, 1985).

Stung by White, theologians rushed to reinterpret the Scriptures so that the "dominion" of Genesis became "stewardship". By 1979 Rifkin could argue that the term ". . . 'dominion', which Christian theology has for so long used to justify people's unrestrained pillage and exploitation of the natural world, has suddenly and dramatically been reinterpreted [as stewardship] . . . and one would be hard pressed to find a leading Protestant scholar . . . who would openly question the *new* interpretation . . ." (Rifkin 1979) (emphasis mine).

The 1990s saw the publication of a number of studies in which social data were examined for possible connections between religious affiliation or belief and environmental concern (e.g., Eckberg and Blocker, 1989, 1996; Kanagy and Willits, 1993; Hornsby-Smith and Procter, 1995; Blombery, 1996; Black, 1997). Generally there have been some suggestions of an association between religious profession and negative environmental attitudes, although sometimes the link has been weak and in a couple of instances no link has been demonstrated at all. The results obtained by Eckberg and Blocker (1996) provide an example of a study in which some connection was found: for Americans there was a positive correlation between biblical literalism and lack of environmental concern. Another American study by Heather Boyd showed that amongst 'religion variables', "Fundamentalist tradition stood out as the Christian variable

of importance. It predicted lack of support for environmentalism. Concern with the 'end times' and evangelizing people for eternal life in heaven, combined with suspicion of the environmental movement as both a liberal and a secular movement may lend itself to a lack of concern for the environment" (Boyd 1999).

Australians are perceived to be less religious than North Americans, but nonetheless there is evidence of a negative religion-environment connection in Australia. 'Tricia Blombery, working from the University of New England, New South Wales, published her conclusions in 1996. "It would appear that although Australians show a high level of concern for the environment, the majority are reluctant to make any personal sacrifices in order to protect it. Overall, it is the non-religious and those who deny a personal God but who believe in a higher power who are more likely to be willing to pay higher prices, pay higher taxes, or accept cuts in standard of living in order to protect the environment . . . Perversely, it is those most committed to the creation stories and the sacredness of nature as God's creation who take the least action and who are least willing to make personal sacrifices for the environment. However, they aren't much more reluctant than the total group. Although Australians show a great deal of concern for environment issues and accept collective responsibility for the remedy only the minority are prepared to put this concern into action." In other words, if Australian Biblical literalists are not very environmentally-conscious, they aren't much worse than the rest of the population. Blombery (1996) concluded: "It would appear from these results that what little influence religion has on attitudes to nature and the environment, it has a negative influence when it comes to a personal commitment of resources." Similarly, Alan Black's 1997 Australian study indicated that Biblical literalists have significantly lower rates of adoption of environmentally-protective behaviour than do people who hold a more liberal or secular interpretation of the Bible. This conclusion was based on assessment of such activities as choosing household products they think are better for the environment; reusing or recycling something rather than throwing it away; attending meetings or signing petitions aimed at protecting the environment, and contributing to an environmental organisation (Black 1997).

From these studies one might reason that the causes of the lack of practical environmental concern are much broader than religion. However this is not to say that religion might not become a powerful factor in generating such concern. In 1970 Francis Schaeffer expressed this hope: “. . . a truly Biblical Christianity has a real answer to the ecological crisis . . . it offers the hope here and now of a substantial healing in nature of some of the results of the Fall . . . It is the biblical view of nature that gives nature a value *in itself* . . . because God made it . . . This is the true Christian mentality . . . What God has made, I, who am also a creature, must not despise.” Schaeffer further urged that “. . . the Church ought to be a ‘pilot plant’ . . . exhibiting . . . through individual attitudes and the Christian community’s attitude . . . that in this present life man can exercise dominion over nature without being destructive (Schaeffer 1970).” Moltmann (1985) insisted that “. . . the *relevance* of belief in creation must prove itself in ideas about the present ecological crisis and in suggested ways of escape from that crisis”.

Lynn White argued that the root cause of the environmental crisis was religious, and that therefore the solution to the environmental crisis must have a religious dimension. In this regard, perhaps he was right, but one might ask, did he identify the right religion? If not Christianity, then what religion has contributed to the problems, and what religion might contribute to the solutions? Numerous commentators over the last decade or so have come to a similar conclusion: that the predominant religion of the world today is a secular one, and they have variously termed it the religion of progressivism, the religion of the market, the religion of economics, or simply, *economism*. John Cobb, a theologian, regretted that “. . . in many ways economists have become the ‘theologians’ of our world. Because the aim of society, and of so many individuals within it, is now defined primarily in economic terms, economists are the ones who guide us and provide the theory that informs their guidance. Most people, if they look to Christian theologians at all, do so for quite limited purposes” (Cobb 1999). Cobb characterized economism as

the "assumption that the national good is measured by economic growth . . . the commitment to increase production and consumption of goods and services, and the subordination of other concerns to this end " (Cobb 1994:28, 39). "Even though economism does not dominate the spirituality of all peoples, it is the 'religion' that governs planetary affairs" (Cobb 1994:27). The concepts of economism are the bases for decision-making at all levels of government. Cobb viewed capitalism and socialism as " . . . two sects in a larger quasi-religious movement based on commitment to economic growth as the organizing principle of personal and social life and as the basis for dealing with all important problems of humanity" (ibid.:45) Thus he saw the end of the cold war and the victory of capitalism over socialism as the unification of a "false religion". "This is how the situation appears to those of us who believe that economic growth is a false god, an idol. The true options are not two forms of devotion to this false god. They are between worship of this false god and worship of the true God" (ibid.:46). "Economics became a science studying how growth could be maximized and its disruptions minimized. Neoclassical economics became the theology of those who saw economic growth as the savior of humankind from destitution, drudgery and misery" (ibid.:49).

David Loy, a Buddhist, has been even more scathing: "Our present economic system should also be understood as our religion, because it has come to fulfil a religious function for us. The discipline of economics is less a science than the theology of that religion, and its god, the Market, has become a vicious circle of ever-increasing production and consumption by pretending to offer a secular salvation. The collapse of communism - best understood as a capitalist 'heresy' - makes it more apparent that the Market is becoming the first truly world religion, binding all corners of the globe more and more tightly into a worldview and set of values whose religious role we overlook only because we insist on seeing them as 'secular'" (Loy 1997). Loy believed that



indoctrination about the importance of acquisition and consumption is necessary for the market to thrive, evidenced by the enormous expenditure on manipulative advertising. ". . . Market capitalism . . . has already become the most successful religion of all time, winning more converts more quickly than any previous belief system or value-system in human history . . . the battle lines become clear. All genuine religions are natural allies against what amounts to an idolatry that undermines their most important teachings" (ibid.).

Robert Bellah, in *The Broken Covenant*, put it this way: "That happiness is to be attained through limitless material acquisition is denied by every religion and philosophy known to humankind, but is preached incessantly by every American television set" (Bellah 1975).

Seventh-day Adventist behavioural scientist Greg Schneider described the market as "the primary fallen power, the dominant idol, that determines our existence today." He expressed the opinion that "Christians who take the Bible seriously should be able to see through the idolatry of the market", but regretted that "most Christians do not read their Bibles in a way that unmasks the idolatry of the market" (Schneider (2001).

Australian economist Clive Hamilton described the obsession with growth as a *fetish*, ". . . that is, an inanimate object worshipped for its apparent magical powers". In the West ". . . there is unchallengeable consensus that the overriding objective of government must be the growth of the economy . . . The answer to almost every problem is 'more economic growth' . . . For decades we have been promised that growth will unlock possibilities that previous generations could only dream about . . . But, in the face of the fabulous promises of economic growth, at the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century we are confronted by an awful fact. Despite high and sustained levels of economic growth in the West over a period of 50 years . . . the mass of people are no more satisfied with

their lives now than they were then. If growth is intended to give us better lives, and there can be no other purpose, it has failed" (Hamilton 2003:2,3). Yet "economic growth - the product of population growth and consumption per person - is insistently propelling this process of environmental decline" (ibid.:177).

Robert Nelson noted that "Many (economists) have observed that the value system of economics, like most value systems, shares important qualities with religion. . . . At the heart of the religious side of economics is a conviction of the powerful value gains of economic growth. Economists might be said to be the "priesthood" for a secular religion of growth" (Nelson 1995: 143). According to this secular religion, "The source of evil . . . is poverty, and poverty can be solved by growth. In finding the solution for evil, economists are addressing a subject that has also been central to the history of religion. Economists are, in effect, expressing a secular faith. This "economic theology" might be regarded as one belief system within the larger "religion of progress", as it has been described, that has characterised much of the thinking of the modern age "(ibid. 143). Nelson considered virtually all the major systems of economic thought of the past 200 years - Marxism, socialism, capitalism - to be branches of this religion of progress. " . . . They found no disagreement that satisfying all real material needs would greatly transform the world for the better. For them, the explanation of why people cheat, lie, steal and otherwise behave badly is the pressure of material deprivation. In other words, poverty is the original sin, and the road to secular salvation is economic growth that eventually ends scarcity and banishes evil" (ibid.144).

Most economists, politicians, business persons and indeed citizens seem to agree: growth is sacred, and bigger is better. Their collective goal is to ensure that growth, that is, production and consumption, is always on the increase. Implicit in this goal is the assumption that economic growth represents true human progress.

At this point it may be instructive to turn to the science of ecology for some alternative understandings of growth. In the living world, growth is also a continuous process. But

in every living organism, and in every living community, growth culminates in a state of maturity in which there is no further collective growth. Every organism and every community has a growth phase which is followed by a no-growth maturation phase. Every organism grows through its early life until it reaches physical maturity. Then growth gives way to maintenance. Similarly, in a forest, new trees grow to replace old trees that die, but the total mass of the forest does not increase. There is a biophysical limit to growth. But the forest survives for thousands of years as a dynamic, sustainable society, recycling its resources and utilising its wastes.

Our economies are largely dependent on biophysical systems, yet we have this notion that economic growth must continue indefinitely at an exponential rate. Some economists even see economic growth as part of the solution to environmental problems. Former World Bank economist Herman Daly was moved to comment, "I believe that we are fundamentally creatures, although special creatures with self-consciousness, mind, and limited creativity . . . as creatures our limited creativity is subject to the restraints imposed by the rest of the created order, namely, finitude, temporality, impossibility of creating or destroying matter/energy, impossibility of perpetual motion, impossibility of speeds faster than light, impossibility of spontaneous creation of living things from non-living things, and so on. Given these biophysical limits of creaturehood, plus the moral limits imposed by our responsibility as Creation's steward, it seems to me ironic in the extreme that we have built our economy on the premise that it must grow for ever, that there are no boundaries imposed by the rest of creation, either from its biophysical structure, or from our ethical responsibility as the 'creature-in-charge'" (Daly 1999:169). David Suzuki, a non-Christian, claimed that "global economics is . . . fatally flawed . . . it assumes that endless growth is possible and necessary and represents progress; it does not value long-term social and ecological sustainability, it rejects caring, co-operation, and sharing as irrational, while promoting selfishness; and it cannot incorporate the reality of spiritual needs. It is breathtaking hubris to force this single, monolithic concept of salvation into every part of the world" (Suzuki 1998).

The ethical stance of economics towards the natural world is essentially one of anthropocentric utilitarianism. The components of the biophysical environment are viewed as resources available for the satisfaction of human needs and wants. Economics is about finding the most efficient ways to satisfy those wants from the resources available. Actions are justifiable on the basis of want satisfaction - producing the greatest good for the greatest number. Modern or neoclassical economics embodies the idea of each person acting individualistically as an economic agent - *Homo economicus*, or rational, economic humans - including " . . . all the anthropocentrism, individualism, materialism and celebration of competition implied by it" (Hamilton 2003: 128). The objective of each economic agent is to maximize his or her welfare through market activity, that is, buying and selling. Originally based on the notion of 'utility' as a measure of happiness, it is held that individual happiness depends on the amount of this single variable - utility - that is poured into the consumer. Furthermore, it is believed that the systematic pursuit of self-interests is the best way to advance society's interests (Hamilton 1994). Thus it is though self-interested behaviour that all will benefit the most.

The utilitarian ethic also governs the relationships of *Homo economicus* with other humans, or rather, "economic agents", who " . . . are objectified as rational calculating machines devoid of social value" (Hamilton 2003: 196). Chicago economist Gary Becker has applied neoclassical economic theory to marriage. His work in this regard began in the 1970s and perhaps culminated in his Nobel lecture in 1992. He determined that people marry when their individual utility from marriage exceeds their utility from remaining single, the sum of individual gains of the married couple exceeds what they can do on their own. "Moreover, a marriage involving love is more efficient than other marriages" in producing 'household commodities' (Becker 1976). "The difference between married output and the sum of single outputs is the gain from marriage, and is measured [in some circumstances] . . . by the vertical distance between the infinitely elastic sections of the derived demand curve for wives and the supply curve of wives" (Becker *ibid.*) Becker defined love as 'a non-marketable household commodity'. He noted that more love between partners increased the

amount of caring and that this in turn reduced the costs of 'policing' the marriage (Hamilton 2003).

Donald Hay, an economist and uniquely Christian among his Oxford colleagues, felt that the implicit ethics of the economic way of thinking "have no basis in Christian ethics and are indeed incompatible with them in substantive respects." The values of economics conflict with "the Christian conception of creation, providence in history and revelation of God's will for mankind" (Hay 1989). Whereas economics sees *Homo economicus* acting individualistically to maximise personal welfare, Christianity sees each person as seeking a union with God in which individual motives have no place. In his encyclical, *Gospel of Life*, Pope John Paul II warned of the dangers of the economic view of humanity, in which "The only goal which counts is the pursuit of one's own material well-being. The so-called 'quality of life' is interpreted primarily as economic efficiency, inordinate consumerism, physical beauty and pleasure, to the neglect of the more profound dimensions - interpersonal, spiritual and religious - of existence" (John Paul II, ca 1995). We are not *Homo economicus*. We are, as Maguire (1993) put it, ". . . *homo sacralis*, inveterate seekers of the transcendent."

The utilitarian ethic of economics commodifies the biophysical world, human relationships, and religious commitment, seeing only objects with instrumental value (Hicks 2001). Education has not escaped. Hamilton (2003: 221), speaking as a non-Christian, commented that "during the last two decades or so education has come increasingly under the influence of market ideology and commercial pressures. The effectiveness of university courses is now measured by the earning potential of graduates, and little importance is attached to the extent to which education can transform students into well-developed human beings who have a deeper understanding of themselves, their societies and the world. Public investment in education would be better directed at enhancing opportunities to live rich lives rather than attain high incomes." In other words, our objective should be to seek rich lives rather than lives of riches. I recall statements made by another: "Beware of

covetousness; a man's life does not consist in the abundance of his possessions"; "I am come that you might have life, and more abundantly" (Luke 12:15; John 10:10).

The implications for teaching of economics, geography, environmental studies and religion become apparent. With Hicks (2001) we may ask, "What goods and services are necessary for genuine well-being and quality of life? The Christian story should contribute some good ideas."

Instead of viewing all created things instrumentally, we need to consider their intrinsic values. Max Oelschlaeger, echoing Schaeffer (1970), cited earlier, declared, "for Christians, nature has intrinsic value because God made it, not simply instrumental value for human beings. . . . The implications for an environmental agenda are clear. Nature must not be treated by Christians as having use-value only: the imperative of the bottom line is a false god" (Oelschlaeger 1994). At the same time, the view of the biophysical world as God's creation acts as a curb on the possibility of sliding towards another secular religion, the religion of environmentalism, in which there is a tendency to see the value of creation as independent and self-derived. Every creature praises God, declares the Psalmist, and it is God who sustains them all (145:10,15,16). The despoliation of Creation may be seen as a desecration of that which God values. Furthermore, Colossians 1:15-20 implies that *all creation* has been redeemed by Jesus Christ. Christians look forward not to the annihilation of creation, but to its consummation (Rodriguez 1994).

Truesdale (1996) amplified the concept of intrinsic value. In the context of human life, he cited J. Robert Nelson's view that 'the value of life is never independent or intrinsically cherishable by itself, for it always remains relative to the providential care and purposeful will of Yahweh.' Thus Truesdale suggested that value is bestowed rather than intrinsic. "No one can disregard another's bestowed value without also disregarding the Divine giver." By extension, the value of Creation is also bestowed by the Creator, and should not be disregarded. The value of Creation is essentially

relational. The view of nature as having instrumental value or independent intrinsic value is subordinate to the value bestowed upon it because it is the Creation of God.

The Christian worldview does not see economic growth as the solution to the evils of human society. While on the one hand some determinate economic growth is necessary to attain justice for the more disadvantaged, especially in so-called “undeveloped” nations, on the other hand overconsumption in the wealthy nations is a major factor in the despoliation of God’s creation, both in those countries and beyond their borders. Increasing material consumption beyond basic needs does not bring happiness, and should not be an objective for Christians. Rather, economic activity should be constrained by the understanding of the natural world as God’s creation. Many Christians (and others) should examine their lifestyles with a view to reducing their levels of consumption.

Cobb (1994) argued that since Christians believe that the earth is God’s and that to degrade it is evil, the structure of our economic life should aim to meet human needs without further degradation of the planet. “If we are persons-in-communities rather than individuals-in-markets, the goal of the economy should be the building up of communities rather than the expansion of markets.” The implications are radical, requiring “that Christians help envisage and implement a profoundly different economic order” as an alternative to the dominant paradigm of economism.”

### **Epilogue: What Can I Do?**

In response to questions concerning individual actions which were raised after the presentation of this paper, I have added this epilogue.

There is no specifically *Christian* solution to environmental problems in the sense of some special technology that will help to reduce the human impact on the Earth. The position taken in this paper is that much environmental degradation stems ultimately and cumulatively from the outlook, attitude or worldview – effectively religion – of individuals. Therefore one might reason that an effective solution must include changes to individual attitudes and worldviews – some would say, we must change our religion. This is particularly relevant to affluent societies where for most people day-to-day physical survival is not so much of an issue, and it is largely from the perspective of those societies that I make the following observations and recommendations.

A critical step in making appropriate changes is to assess (or re-assess) what is considered to make one's life worthwhile. Particularly for the Christian believer, the development of an environmental dimension in one's religious faith and practice is an essential component of a balanced theology of Creation. In practical terms, such assessments will involve a consideration of the environmental effect of one's daily lifestyle. This is not a call to return to some pre-industrial lifestyle, but, on the premise that cumulatively a large number of small actions or modifications can have a large effect, many daily actions could be adjusted in such a way as to reduce substantially one's environmental impact.

Some habits/activities that could be adjusted include the following:

- Transport habits. Items that should be reviewed include such things as the kind of private motor vehicle used, the frequency and necessity of its use, how many people are in the car (is this car-trip necessary when only one person is being transported



and there is adequate public transport available?) and holiday destinations (is it possible to have an equally-satisfying holiday close or closer to home?)

- The kinds and quantity of goods one consumes. Ask questions such as: Is this purchase really necessary? Where was this product made? What was the environmental impact of its production? What was the environmental impact of transporting it from its place of production? In general, give preference to locally-produced items, especially food. Eat locally-produced food in season – one might have to forgo fresh strawberries in mid-winter! Avoid excessively-packaged items.
- In the home. Be mean with fuel use. Use solar power where feasible. Avoid wasteful lighting, and wear extra clothes in winter instead of boosting the output of the heating system. Be careful with water use: find ways to reutilise it before pulling the plug. Construct or modify your home to make it better adapted to the local climatic conditions.
- In the office. Reams of photocopy paper are used daily. Errors made in word-processed documents result in printing multiple drafts before the product is eventually completed. One should ask: What kind of forest materials went into the production of this paper, and where were they produced? Is this photocopy really necessary?
- In the schools at all levels. Incorporate environmental components in the curriculum wherever possible – Geography, Biology, Economics, and Religion are all relevant. Establish and maintain recycling programs.
- In the churches. Preach and teach a balanced theology of Creation, especially emphasizing the practical implications of holding a belief that the Earth is God's Creation. It might be that many people might be more concerned about protecting or improving their environment than about falsifying evolutionary theories.
- At the ballot-box. Vote for candidates who advocate and implement policies which reflect an informed awareness of environmental concerns.  
Write to politicians expressing your concerns and ask them to represent these concerns to government.

- In the community. Become an environmental advocate. Don't sit on the fence and leave things to others (mostly non-Christians!). Join an environmental organization.

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