

SPECIES EXTINCTIONS

- *A review by Judith Allinson of:*

The Death of Life – Extinction is Forever

by Sean McDonagh, Columba Press £9.50 162pp 2004

Worldwide, 24% of large animals and 12% of birds are in danger of extinction – due to humankind's activities.

Extinction rates **in our generation** have become 1000 times to 10,000 times as great as the natural rate.

Columban priest and author, Sean McDonagh, who worked in the Philippines, has written many books on the Environment and the Catholic Church, and now implores the church to look at this topic.

Judith Allinson reviews McDonagh's book, picks out a list of useful quotations and facts and adds further comments.



A new species of cat - the clouded leopard of Borneo

1987 – McDonagh calls for a Creation Festival

I first read about Sean McDonagh back in 1987 in a colour supplement article where he was promoting the idea of a "Creation Festival" service in the Christian Church. He had just written his first book "To Care for the Earth" linking two themes: firstly how humankind is causing grave environmental problems, and secondly what the church and Christian teaching has said, or ought to be saying about this.

2005: Book on Species Extinctions

Several books on, still in the same format with the same vital idea that "Protecting life ought surely to be the vocation of every Christian today", this book has a very strong title, concentrating on species extinctions: *The Death of Life – the Horror of Extinction*. I feel sorry that the title is off-putting - Perhaps he is trying to shock the church (and us) into action. Even so, do read the book. It is easy to read, is inspiring and has lots of well-researched, useful references.

McDonagh worked with the T'boli people in the Philippines in the 1970s

The Philippines is now designated as one of the worlds 34 biodiversity hotspots (www.biodiversityhotspots.org) (36 by 2022). He has seen the forest of the T'boli people being destroyed by logging, and with it, their culture and identity. He has seen floods and death caused by deforestation upstream. He points out he is part of the last generation to see species such as the Philippine Eagle in the wild.

Quotes from “The Death of Life” by Sean McDonagh

Columba Press, £6.99 162pp

page numbers given on the right

<p>“Species are now perishing at 1000 or even 10,000 times the ‘background’ extinction over the past 600 million years. “ (from Sir Robert May)</p>	10
<p>“Given the <i>caveat</i> about our knowledge of the number of species on the planet, it is now estimated that 24% of large animals and 12 % of bird species are now in danger of extinction” (IUCN – World Conservation Union)</p>	18
<p>“As the extinction of one species has a knock-on effect on at last 16 other species, this projected level of extinction is an extraordinary blow to the global web of life.”</p>	19
<p>Human activity is causing extinction in three ways:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Habitat destruction • The introduction of alien, exotic species into an ecosystem • Human-created pollution 	20
<p>“Experts estimate that nature supplies humans with services worth 26 trillion € each year. This is seen as ‘free’ by those who calibrate economic growth, so few people pay any attention to it. “ from Margaret Wallstrom, the EU Environment Commissioner (J.A. 26 trillion € is about the same as the world economy – from Lomborg page 251)</p>	57
<p>McDonagh laments that “whilst spending 7 years studying for the priesthood, surrounded by a variety of native and exotic trees” at his seminary in Ireland he was taught little about nature or the trees that grew there. “We were not even encouraged to show the basic courtesy that one creature ought to show another by learning its proper name.”</p>	12
<p>Philippines 1900: 70% of the land had forest cover. Philippines 1999: 18.3% of the land had forest cover, only 2.7% is primary forest. “Though the profits from logging were astronomical they benefited only a few elitist families.”</p>	20-21
<p>“Even during my first decade as a missionary in the Philippines I was still blind to what was happening to creation. I remember a particular typhoon ...the swollen river engulfed the homes of poor people close to the river bank. Many people, especially the very young and the elderly, were drowned.... There was huge concern in the parish for the survivors and money, clothes and household goods were collected .. to help them. Many people knew that the logging on Mount Malindang during the previous three decades was responsible for the flash flood, but no one, in public life or within the Catholic</p>	14

Church was demanding the ending of logging and the replanting of the mountain.”	
<p>“Creation-centred doctrines are at the core of the Catholic Faith: These include</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • a belief in God’s action in creation, • the doctrine of the incarnation which proclaims that God became part of creation, • and our belief that we encounter God in a special way in the sacraments which involve created realities like bread, wine, water and oil.” 	13
<p>“5000 languages or distinctive dialects became extinct during in the 20th century.....At the beginning of the third millennium it is estimated there are about 6784 different languages spoken around the globe half of these will become extinct in the next 100 years.”</p>	56
<p>In Ireland “we have lost the crane, the bittern, the red kite, and a number of species of eagles, the marsh harrier, the osprey & the goshawk.”</p>	45
<p>“More than half the peat sold in garden centres in Britain comes from Irish bogs. It is ironic that a hobby like gardening which one would associate with something positive can be doing so much damage.”</p>	49
<p>“Whilst it is wonderful to be able to point to a number of Catholic theologians and mystics whose deep appreciation of creation touched and shaped their Christian lives, unfortunately they constitute a small minority in a tradition which either disregarded creation or denigrated it.”</p>	69
<p>“The first papal document devoted exclusively to environment and development issues, entitled <i>Peace with God the Creator, Peace with all creation</i> was published on 1 January 1990. In it Pope John Paul II declares that “Christians in particular realise that their duty towards nature and Creator are an essential part of their faith (No 15, emphasis mine). This teaching is arguably the best kept secret in the Catholic Church.”</p> <p>“It is a pity that the two most recent encyclicals <i>Evangelium Vitae</i> and <i>Faith and Reason</i> are so engrossed in human problems and moral challenges that they barely mention the current ecological crisis.”</p> <p>(Note added in 2022: “Laudato Si’” was published in 2015, 11 years after McDonagh’s book. Sean McDonagh was one of the advisors when Laudato Si’ was written)</p>	80
<p>“The natural world is God’s creation. Protecting life ought surely to be the vocation of every Christian today.”</p> <p>“The challenge facing this generation is quite different. This is the mass extinction of other creatures in just a few short decades.”</p>	151
<p>Churches should spearhead an awareness programme.</p>	

Part 1: Biodiversity Statistics; Part 2: attitudes of Christians and the Church in History

The first part of the book is packed with useful statistics, for the Philippines, for Ireland and Britain, and for the world. In the second half, he considers the attitude towards nature of individual Christians and the church throughout history. He is quite critical of the churches' response. It gives bible quotations and Christian teaching. I learned (amongst many other things) that examples of past positive influences include: Pelagius, Benedict and Francis, and negative: Luther and Augustine and very negative: Jansen.

Are Extinction rates really so great? - Lomborg challenges

Those who have read Bjorn Lomborg's book, the Skeptical Environmentalist, will be aware that Lomborg ridicules some environmentalists for giving, quoting or **requoting** extreme statistics that illustrate their point, but which do not have a sound basis. They do not always give all the assumptions. McDonagh for the most part has taken care to quote standard, reputable and conservative statistics, and has done a good job of simplifying things. (Scientific papers can be complicated by being full of caveats).

However, the difficulty is - we just DO NOT KNOW how many species there are in the world, so we can only make estimates. There are 1.7 million species that have been named – but perhaps between 5 million or even 150 million not yet discovered and named. (These include bacteria and insects and deep sea creatures as well as larger plants and mammals). Here are some examples of quotes:

- Clive Hambler (Conservation- Studies in biology series Camb Univ Press 2004, page 19) gives a very rough estimate of 1-20 species becoming extinct each day.
- McDonagh quotes 74 per day – taking the lower value from Harvard biologist E.O.Wilson's oft quoted estimate of 74-280 per day.
- Bjorn Lomborg quotes several sources as suggesting a rate of 0.7% (actually 0.1 to 1%) of all species becoming extinct in 50 years.
- The BBC Green page in March: "Up to 150 species are becoming extinct every day... Germany has chosen both biodiversity and climate change as top priorities for this year's environment ministers' G8+5 meeting <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/science/nature/6432217.stm>
- "Unless we change and protect life and particular habitats one third to one half of species of the world will be lost in a mere 45 years". Sometimes it is necessary to quote the larger estimates to get people's attention.

Environment Sunday

World Environment Day is always 5 June and Environment Sunday is 1st or 8 June in 2014. Perhaps we could use extracts from his book in our services that day. Perhaps we can lobby our MPs and MEPs and ask what they are doing - on our behalf – to save endangered species and endangered habitats. The churches are becoming more aware of the environment – but it is books like this that are leading the way – and we can all play our part.

For more ideas on what to do, Join a conservation organisation, visit [Green Christian's website](#) (see below) & raise money for [GC's Rainforest Fund](#).

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