

*Overture to PCUSA General Assembly:
Saving 30 percent of Nature by 2030 (30 x 30)
for Humanity, Creation s Flourishing and a Healthy Climate*

The Presbytery of XXXX overtures the 225th General Assembly (2022) of the Presbyterian Church (USA) to commit as a church, and as people of faith to support and advocate for the implementation of science-based goals that simultaneously protect the diversity of Creation and mitigate climate change while honoring and engaging Indigenous wisdom and leadership for stewardship of lands and waters.

The goal to protect 30 percent of global lands and waters by 2030 emerged from scientists who proposed a “Global Deal for Nature” (citation <https://www.science.org/doi/10.1126/sciadv.aaw2869#>) to complement the Paris Climate Accord. This goal recognizes that increasing the level of protection for certain lands and waters or managing them in ecologically sound ways will prevent mass extinction, increase their ability to mitigate climate change while allowing wildlife and ecosystems to adapt to a changing climate. The goal also helps decision makers translate the to need to protect nature into policy.

Globally, 15 percent of land and 8 percent of waters are under some type of protective designation such as national parks, wilderness, or marine sanctuaries. Scientists anticipate that one million species of plants and animals could go extinct if we don’t protect more lands and waters. From 1970 to 2014, 60 percent of all terrestrial wildlife was lost (citation: <https://www.worldwildlife.org/pages/living-planet-report-2018>). The conservation of nature can provide up to 30 percent of the climate mitigation needed to keep the earth’s global temperature from rising above 1.5 degrees C.

Overture the 225th GA to endorse the international and US goal to protect 30 percent of lands and waters by 2030 for climate and biodiversity and for the PC(USA) and its members to:

1. Encourage all PC(USA) members and congregations to learn where lands and waters in their region are under threat, what actions are needed to protect or restore them, the vital roles that Indigenous People play in their protection and restoration and the damage done by colonization.
2. Advocate for Tribal Sovereignty to be upheld in protection of lands and water and for the cultural, spiritual, historical and subsistence and other needs of Tribes.

3. Encourage all PC(USA) members and congregations to assess how the lands in their stewardship can be managed to enhance biodiversity, sequester carbon and help wildlife, ecosystems and human communities to adapt to a changing climate.
4. Direct the Presbyterian World Mission Agency to assess how mission activities can better integrate the simultaneous goals of biodiversity protection, climate mitigation and adaptation, Indigenous sovereignty and cultural perseverance, as they relate to lands and waters
5. Advocate through the Office of Public Witness to support policies for robust protections for US public lands-especially at the landscape level, and waters, to meet the 30 x 30 goal and center Indigenous leadership in meeting this goal.

Rationale:

As told in the opening story of creation, when God saw everything that had been created, “indeed, it was very good. (Gen.1:31)”. The day and night, the revealed land and gathered waters, the vegetation and living creatures of every kind, everything crawling on the ground and humanity created in God’s image—it is this totality of creation that God celebrates on the hallowed Sabbath day that follows. Sabbath shalom is the peace that encompasses all life. When the land suffers, when birds go extinct, when fish are poisoned, that peace is broken as surely as when the human desecrates the image of God in themselves.

As Presbyterians have proclaimed, “In the biblical story the land belongs integrally to the work and the promise of the Redeemer God. The land represents freedom, abundance, and fulfillment for the Hebrew people in contrast to the affliction, toil, and oppression of their enslavement. God gives it for their use, their livelihood, their enjoyment-not as their exclusive property to be exploited selfishly but as a trust to be cultivated with care and made instrumental to justice and community.”ⁱ

The practice of sabbath, and the sabbatical year, and the 50th or jubilee year in the Bible reflect God’s concern for and protection of the well-being of the land. Again, as Presbyterians have recognized, “Clearly the God-intended purpose of the land is the long-term sustenance of all the people, together with the other creatures. The land gives life. This divine intention for the land makes it instrumental to God’s justice -that all be nurtured, filled, and made glad by it.”ⁱⁱ

When humankind breaks covenantal relationship with God, the whole creation suffers.ⁱⁱⁱ What does our ailing creation tell us about our relationship with God, and our effect upon the shalom God celebrated on that first sabbath day?

The ground-breaking 1990 environmental report approved by the 202nd General Assembly observes that “the divinely given natural world is vanishing, while the built environment of human culture has been increasing dramatically.” Wildlife and wildlands and “atmospheric instability” are two of the five policy areas addressed. Regarding the human driven loss of species, it says, “anyone who would destroy a species in the name of development takes, in monstrous arrogance, the prerogative of God” The report concludes that “it is past time for the church to call humans to respect the plenitude once so vast and now quickly vanishing.”

Presbyterians have become more and more aware of the historical injustices done to Indigenous Peoples. These injustices, with the blessing of the Christian church and the twisting of Christian scripture, are a root cause environmental injustice. “For more than five centuries, the Doctrine of Discovery and the laws based upon it have legalized the theft of land, labor and resources from Indigenous Peoples, and systematically denied their human rights...As Christians, now is the time to understand our role in the injustice, and seek to rectify it.”^{iv} To restore both justice and the health of the land, and to protect well-being of both, Indigenous Peoples must be given a leading voice in the movement toward reconciliation and healing of creation.

The Basic Policies in Support of Wildlife and Wildlands recommended are to be consistent with the spirit of the following aphorisms

- -Keep wildlife wild and free; Avoid irreversible change; protect and expand remaining public wildlands; Optimize natural diversity; optimize natural stability; Increase options for experiencing natural history; Do not “discount” the future value of the environment; Respect life, the species more than the individual; Respect life, the more sentient, the more respect; Think of nature as a community, more than a commodity.

Particularly relevant in the implementation section of the report are the following:

- Preserve wildlands in all the diverse kinds of American ecosystems including wildlands near urban areas; and restore degraded wildlands reintroducing all the original native fauna and flora where possible.
- Protect wetlands, show special concern for critical environments that support migratory wildlife.
- Support Native American efforts to retain and restore wildlands and to maintain a sustainable relationship with wildlife.
- Prohibit trade in endangered wild animals and endangered plants, or products derived from them

In 1996, the General Assembly of the PC, USA approved the report “Hope for a Global Future: Toward Just and Sustainable Human Development.” The report included a section on Biotic Justice (p 81) which concludes:

“Any morally acceptable concept of human development must be grounded on distributive justice, providing a fair share of scarce to all parties with stakes in an outcome—and that includes the whole biotic community, human and nonhuman, present, and as we shall now argue, future.”

Citations

A Global Deal For Nature: Guiding principles, milestones, and targets

E. DINERSTEIN [HTTPS://ORCID.ORG/0000-0001-6230-](https://ORCID.ORG/0000-0001-6230-3937)

[3937](https://ORCID.ORG/0000-0002-3656-2887) C. VYNNE [HTTPS://ORCID.ORG/0000-0002-3656-](https://ORCID.ORG/0000-0002-3656-2887)

[2887](https://ORCID.ORG/0000-0003-4730-3570A)E. SALA [HTTPS://ORCID.ORG/0000-0003-4730-3570A.](https://ORCID.ORG/0000-0003-4730-3570A)

R. JOSHI [HTTPS://ORCID.ORG/0000-0003-2565-](https://ORCID.ORG/0000-0003-2565-5495)

[5495](https://ORCID.ORG/0000-0003-2617-6568T)S. FERNANDO [HTTPS://ORCID.ORG/0000-0003-2617-6568T.](https://ORCID.ORG/0000-0003-2617-6568T)

E. LOVEJOY [HTTPS://ORCID.ORG/0000-0002-5771-8588J.](https://ORCID.ORG/0000-0002-5771-8588J) MAYORGAD. OLSONG.

P. ASNER [HTTPS://ORCID.ORG/0000-0001-7893-6421](https://ORCID.ORG/0000-0001-7893-6421)[...]E. WIKRAMANAYAKE +10

AUTHORS [AUTHORS INFO & AFFILIATIONS](#)

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Wildlife and Wildlands section of “Restoring Creation for Ecology and Justice” (1990) pages 49-50.

“Hope for a Global Future: Toward Just and Sustainable Human Development.” (1996) pages 81-84/

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Resources:

The Campaign for Nature <https://www.campaignfornature.org/>

American Nature Campaign <https://www.natureamerica.org/>

Conserving and Restoring: America the Beautiful Report, 2021

<https://www.doi.gov/sites/doi.gov/files/report-conserving-and-restoring-america-the-beautiful-2021.pdf>

<https://www.iucn.org/crossroads-blog/202108/we-need-protect-and-conserve-30-planet-it-has-be-right-30>

<https://www.iucn.org/theme/climate-change/our-work>

<https://www.iucn.org/crossroads-blog/202108/we-need-protect-and-conserve-30-planet-it-has-be-right-30>

ⁱ Keeping and Healing the Creation, a resource paper prepared by the Presbyterian Eco-Justice Task Force (1989) p.47.

ⁱⁱ Keeping and Healing the Creation, a resource paper prepared by the Presbyterian Eco-Justice Task Force (1989) p.47.

ⁱⁱⁱ In a passage observing the upending of many of the Ten Commandments, the prophet Hosea saw the entire nonhuman world languishing over human faithlessness:

“There is no faithfulness or loyalty,
 and no knowledge of God in the land.
 Swearing, lying, and murder,
 and stealing and adultery break out;
 bloodshed follows bloodshed.
 Therefore the land mourns,
 and all who live in it languish;
 together with the wild animals
 and the birds of the air,
 even the fish of the sea are perishing. (Hos. 4:1b–3)

The same Hebrew word that means “mourns” also means “dries out” or “withers.” Whereas humans mourn with tears, the ground here mourns in drought. Both become weakened. Using terminology very similar to both the Hosea passage above and the story of Cain, Isaiah 24:4–6 claims:

The earth dries up and withers,
 the world languishes and withers;
 the heavens languish together with the earth.
 The earth lies polluted
 under its inhabitants;
 for they have transgressed laws,
 violated the statutes,
 broken the everlasting covenant.
 Therefore a curse devours the earth,
 and its inhabitants suffer for their guilt;
 therefore the inhabitants of the earth dwindled,
 and few people are left.

Here it is not simply the ground that suffers but the entire earth, the world, and the heavens—the whole cosmos—when humans overstep our bounds, when we violate one another and misuse our gifts of intelligence and choice.”

Tull, Patricia K.. *Inhabiting Eden: Christians, the Bible, and the Ecological Crisis* (pp. 46-47). Westminster John Knox Press. Kindle Edition.

^{iv} “Environmental Justice with Indigenous Peoples” Creation Justice Ministries, <https://www.presbyterianmission.org/resource/earth-day-sunday-indigenous-peoples/>