

Scientists call for religious help to save our wildlife

3 September 2013

Leaders of the world's major 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.

The scientists, including The University of Queensland's Professor Hugh Possingham, have published a paper pointing to a strong overlap between regions with high conservation needs and the world's major religions.

Lead author Grzegorz Mikusinski from the Swedish University of Agricultural Sciences said 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.

"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," Grzegorz Mikusinski said.

"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 Possingham, a UQ academic from Australia's ARC Centre of Excellence for Environmental Decisions (CEED) explained the research.

"Stewardship and conservation are closely related ideas, and this offers hope for mutual progress," he said.

"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," Professor Possingham said.

"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.

'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](#).

CEED is the Australian Research Council Centre of Excellence for Environmental Decisions. CEED's research tackles key gaps in environmental decision making, monitoring and adaptive management.

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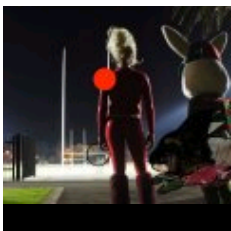
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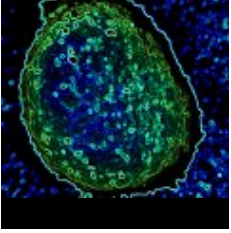
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