Armageddon Versus Extinction

Note from the Editor: Some readers may feel that topics such as politics and religion are inappropriate for a scientific journal. Our “Conservation in Context” column, however, is intended to cover the entire spectrum of the context within which the science of conservation biology must operate. Thus, we freely and openly explore topics in this column that ordinarily are not addressed in scientific journals, to better understand the real-world constraints and opportunities that define how conservation science is applied in a complex world.

Apocalyptic visions are said to be common in every age of rapid change, and ours is no exception. The current president of the United States is reported to believe that we live in the end times as the Bible is said to have predicted. Ronald Reagan is known to have thought this a fine outcome, saying he expected to see it in his lifetime. Such views are increasingly common in the United States and elsewhere as conservative evangelicals grow in numbers and in political influence. Gallup polls show that 83% of Americans believe the Bible to be either the literal or the inspired word of God (G.H. Gallup [1996] cited in Harris [2004: 230]). Of these, many, if not most, seem to believe in the doctrine of a final conflict between good and evil, the end times, the return of Christ, and the rapture that will gather the saved into heaven. There are Web sites purporting to quantify how close we are to the rapture and bumper stickers announcing that the car to which it is attached may suddenly be rendered driverless.

I am puzzled about the actual biblical basis for the doctrine of Armageddon, the rapture, and the end times generally, and why fundamentalists seem to find the book of Revelation more compelling than, say, the Sermon on the Mount. But I confess to a yawning boredom with the subject of prophecy generally. Accordingly, I lay no claim to knowledge of such things based on mastery of scripture. My intentions are rather like those of an anthropologist in a strange land, curious about an interesting convergence of views between conservation biologists and religious fundamentalists. Both agree that things are going to hell in the proverbial hand basket, but thereafter the differences are great and have great implications for the human prospect.

Readers of this journal are exposed daily to scientific research documenting the unraveling of one ecological system or another, habitat destruction, climate change, the ongoing loss of species, the effects of pollution, environmental threats to health, and to the interaction of such factors as a larger cascade of bad news. No broadly informed scientist can be optimistic about the long-term future of humankind without assuming we will soon recalibrate human numbers, wants, needs, and actions with the requisites of ecology within a finite biosphere. Whether by climate change, biotic impoverishment, catastrophic pollution, resource wars, emergent diseases, or a combination of several, the end is in sight, although we can quibble about the details and schedule. Looking at the same data, were they so inclined, evangelicals would most likely regard these data as a sign of the end times and the imminent return of Christ, which is to say the fulfillment of prophecy.

The result, on environmental issues and others, is a kind of standoff between an increasingly militant fundamentalist Christianity on one hand and science on the other. If not exactly a new story, it is particularly important now because right-wing Republicans control all branches of the federal government in the United States along with a sizeable fraction of the public airwaves, television, print media, and state governments. Organized conservative Christians are the heart of Republican political strength and exert considerable influence on domestic policy out of proportion to their numbers. If not yet a theocracy, the lines between church and state are becoming considerably less distinct than they once were and far more permeable than the authors of the U.S. Constitution intended.

More specifically, right-wing evangelicals have been placed in positions of authority throughout the federal government, including departments and agencies that administer federal lands and environmental laws, and they have not been shy in amending scientific reports in ways more agreeable to doctrine. Many professional environmental scientists and highly competent career civil servants have been fired or forced into early retirement, replaced by others with apocalyptic religious views and open hostility to laws and regulations aimed to protect the environment. By all evidence, the Bush administration intends to eliminate inconvenient regulatory barriers to resource extraction, pollution, and the preservation...
of species (Kennedy 2004). This goal represents the convergence within the Republican party of economic forces wishing to be unrestrained by environmental regulations on one side and evangelicals who believe in the imminence of the end times on the other.

These positions are incompatible for several reasons. If the end is near, for example, why bother to add another few percent to the gross national product? But this convenient alliance is more about holding power to the end than it is about consistency.

More important, by becoming an active political force on the extreme right wing of U.S. politics, conservative evangelicals have made an unholy alliance with the vendors of fossil fuels, climate changers, polluters, sellers of weapons, the military, imperialists, exploiters, political dirty tricksters who assume that the ends they've chosen justify whatever means they use, spin artists, those willing to corrupt scientific truth for political gain, and those for whom law and the Constitution are merely scraps of paper. In the language of revelation, these are “the powers.” In political terms these are their confederates, but they are not all of one accord. Evangelicals wish to bring about the Kingdom of God on Earth; their allies wish merely to consoli-

date power in what they call “the American Century.” But against the example of Jesus who refused to be tempted by the prospect of holding political power, conservative evangelicals are now complicit with the political forces sweeping us toward more terrible violence and the avoidable catastrophes of climate change and ecological ruin.

This alliance with the holders of political and economic power opens evangelicals to exploitation. As their part of the bargain, the Powers will say whatever evangelicals wish to hear about abortion, prayer in school, gay marriage, and flag burning, and will even appoint judges of their liking. They will attend prayer breakfasts and give stirring speeches professing their love for Jesus. But they will play conservative evangelicals for fools and use them with utter contempt as they proceed with the grand larceny under way. They will continue to loot the country by shifting taxes onto the middle classes and poor, moving jobs overseas, undercutting the laws that protect environment and human health, waging wars in distant places with sons and daughters of the poor as canon fodder, and eliminating any countervailing power to themselves, talking all the while about family values and morality. They ask only that their supporters be blind, gullible, ill-informed, and unable to relate Christ’s life and teachings with their actions, which makes them a people ripe for the plucking.

This is an alliance that ought to be undone. To help in that process we have to understand more fully the major differences between conservation biologists and right-wing evangelicals, which appear to be those listed in Table 1.

Are the positions of conservation biologists and evangelicals hard and fixed? Could one be a right-wing evangelical, for example, and a good conservation biologist? Having known a few, the answer is yes. But reconciling religious doctrine at the extreme with the goals of conservation requires heroic intellectual acrobatics. On one side, belief in the imminence of the end times tends to make evangelicals careless stewards of our forests, soils, wildlife, air, water, seas, and climate. It is a great deal easier to be concerned about conserving the Creation if one assumes that (1) Earth is God’s handiwork; (2) we are called to be good stewards of it and pass it on undiminished; and (3) humankind will be around for awhile to enjoy nature and perhaps even be uplifted by it.

Evangelicals’ belief in the end times, in other words, has the paradoxical effect of seeming to justify behavior that brings on the end times,

### Table 1. Differences between conservation biologists and right-wing evangelical Christians.

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Dynamics/drivers</th>
<th>Conservation biologists</th>
<th>Evangelicals</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Source of problem</td>
<td>lack of knowledge</td>
<td>sin/evil/Satan</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Model</td>
<td>ecosystems biosphere</td>
<td>human evil</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Remedy</td>
<td>better science</td>
<td>battleground: good versus evil, Earth as fallen, heaven as true reality</td>
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<td>Tools</td>
<td>economic policy</td>
<td>individual salvation</td>
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<td>Goals</td>
<td>sustainability</td>
<td>redemption</td>
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<td>Ironies</td>
<td>little connection between deeper levels of human motivation and ecological problems</td>
<td>Armageddon, Second Coming</td>
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<td></td>
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<td>a redeemed world that fulfills the promise of creation</td>
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<td></td>
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<td>end times become a self-fulfilling prophecy</td>
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of a sort without scriptural basis. In biblical terms, the destruction of the Creation because of hardheartedness and a profound indifference to life is a sin against God and a crime against humanity. Further, careless talk about the imminence of Armageddon suggests a darker fascination with death, militarization, and violence undeserving of Christians and altogether alien to Christ’s teaching. We have it on high authority that between life and death, we are called to choose life, that we and our children might live abundantly.

Conservation biologists, too, are in a quandary. For several decades now we have documented in great detail the decline of one life form or another and the corruption of ecological processes. But we seem tongue-tied when we consider the deeper questions about the causes and forces driving biotic impoverishment and climate change. Instead, we talk about changing economic policy, laws, and regulations, adopting better technology, and more science education. Economist Herman Daly said that humankind has an infinite itch but doesn’t know where to scratch. Until we do, the deeper motivations and the deeper causes of our ecological problems will elude us and so, too, will the public support necessary to resolve them.

Without a clearer understanding of why people seek the consolations of religion, we lack both a deep explanation of what makes us tick and the deeper motivations and the deeper causes of our ecological problems will elude us and so, too, will the public support necessary to resolve them. Without a clearer understanding of why people seek the consolations of religion, we can make no compelling case for sustainability beyond the fact that we wish to survive. In other words, we lack both a deep explanation for what ails us and a larger cosmology that resonates with the public. Persons of scientific inclination are hesitant to trace problems back to a source labeled “sin” but have not attempted to join the relevant sciences together to develop a coherent and plausible alternative story of our ecological maladjustments, thereby leaving much to evangelicals.

What to do? One response is to keep on keeping on, assuming this too shall pass. It is, of course, impossible to run a country for long on red ink, war, mendacity, and ecological denial. So in the meantime, we continue to do what we have been doing and bide our time. But time is what we do not have.

A second strategy is to be nice, tolerant, and attempt to start a reasonable dialogue, assuming the other side(s) wishes to engage similarly. This approach reminds me of a Gary Larson Farside cartoon showing a large alligator across the rear of a rowboat about to devour a man who is being advised by his wife sitting precariously in the uplifted bow: “Rub his belly, Ernie! Rub his belly.” I suspect that strategies aimed to start a reasoned dialogue in a spirit of tolerance and good will (i.e., rubbing alligator tummies) are counterproductive at this time. I am all for tolerance, reason, and good will, but the rubbing should be done from the outside, not the inside of the alligator’s belly.

Sam Harris, author of The End of Faith (2004), proposes a tougher approach. “The problem that religious moderation poses for all of us,” he writes, “is that it does not permit anything very critical to be said about religious literalism . . . and closes the door to more sophisticated approaches to spirituality, ethics, and the building of strong communities” (pp. 20–21). He intends to help “close the door to a certain style of irrationality . . . still sheltered from criticism in every corner of our culture” (p. 223). In his view religious faith—unmoored from fact, data, logic, and the procedures of verifiability—poses a mortal danger to civilization. His book is rather like a stern reprimand for foolish and dangerous religious thinking that has permeated human cultures and now, with dispersion of weapons of mass destruction, threatens to undo civilization entirely. This is not the time, Harris writes, to preach tolerance of views that are patently disgusting, violent, and dangerous on a global scale, but rather a time to call fundamentalists—Muslim and Christian alike—to account.

Doing so goes well beyond the frequent calls to establish a dialogue and find some middle ground between modern science and Iron Age philosophy. How this might proceed I do not know. Neuroscientists and biologists are learning a great deal about what makes us tick. But I do not know whether the sciences broadly can come together to tell a compelling, authentic, and life-oriented story of our human sojourn to replace those now circulating about the saved and unsaved and the end times and Armageddon. What I do know is that time for reason and reasonableness is running short.

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Literature Cited