

# Coming Home to our Father's World: Creation Stewardship

**A White Paper by Don DeGraaf  
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## **INTRODUCTION:**

In his book *Reflections of the North Country*, the late Sigurd Olson remarks that "the greatest achievement of our flight to the moon (in 1969) is the picture of the earth, a living blue-green planet whirling in the dark endless void of space, and the realization that this is home." The environmental movement expanded greatly with this realization – the first earth day was in 1970. This effect of the American space program was never intended or anticipated – indeed, nearly all environmentalists in the 1960s actively fought against the space program, saying that we had to solve Earth's problems before exploring space. But the timing was right, and a real reframing took place to examine the environmental issues of the day.

Fast-forward almost 50 years and we can see that some progress has been made related to worldwide environmental issues, but so many issues remain. Crazy weather patterns, loss of the social capital needed to sustain communities, global conflicts, overuse of resources, the list is endless. All around us we can see the brokenness that is a result of sin and includes broken relationships with our God, with each other and with our natural world.

In viewing the state of our planet today, it is easy to lose hope and wonder what we can do as individuals and as professionals to address the multi-faceted issues facing our world. Yet, we also know that we are called as Christians to be faithful and to work toward shalom. In this context, shalom can be thought of as "the battle for universal wholeness and delight," a feeling of contentment, completeness, well-being, and harmony. Shalom denotes a right relationship with God, with others, and with God's creation; it is the way God intended things to be when he created the universe. As a result, Christians have begun to embrace their role to work with God's created order and to work toward sustainability as stewards of God's world (see appendix A for the Biblical foundation for our calling as stewards).

This calling to serve as stewards of our natural world demands that we examine all aspects of our lives to live as God intended. In terms of our relationship to the natural world, the recreation activities we pursue provide a rich framework for pursuing shalom in our lives. Within this context, recreational

professionals can work to integrate their faith into their work when they strive to create programs that promote deeper relationships with our God, our neighbors (across the street and around the world), as well as with the natural world that God created. In particular, this paper will focus on how recreation professionals (and the colleges and universities that prepare them) can encourage wonder and love for the things God loves as well as stewardship and accountability for the renewal and care of God's natural world.

To explore the connection between our recreational choices and fulfilling our calling as stewards of God's world, we shall turn to discussing three words – Dream – Explore – Discover – which challenge us to live out our faith in tangible and creative ways as we continue to strive for shalom, the universal flourishing of all things.

## **DREAM**

In his classic work *The Sand County Almanac*, Leopold (1949) challenges Americans to develop a land ethic that enlarges the boundary of the community to include soils, water, plants, and animals or collectively the land. It demands that each question of man's relationship to his environment be studied in terms of what is ethically and essentially right as well as what is economically expedient. "A thing is right when it tends to preserve the integrity, stability and beauty of the biotic community. It is wrong when it tends to do otherwise" (p.204).

This challenge was reiterated in the President's Commission on Americans Outdoors (1987) that concludes for the past 25 years we have emphasized the role of government in conservation and environmental problems and have given little attention regarding the role of the individual. A land ethic has not been created in the minds of individuals. Today, no attempt to protect the environment will be successful unless ordinary people are willing to adjust their lifestyles and develop a personalized ethic of care for the environment and each other. Education is a key component of developing an ethic of care that emphasizes the ability to make conscious moral decisions and to understand how and why those decisions are being made and how these behaviors are affecting the earth and other people.

Almost 30 years after the President's Commission on American Outdoors, Americans still struggle with developing a mindset that encourages a deep connection to the natural world. As Christians, we must strive to create a narrative that captivates our imaginations and our senses to foster a land ethic that ties into our Biblical mandate as stewards. This demands that we *dream*, to envision what might be. I think that God wants us to dream! He wants us to use our imaginations to see and experience the world

differently, not as it is but as it could be. God wants us to engage our world with an eye on transforming the isolation and brokenness we find into connectedness and caring for the whole.

As Bouma-Prediger and Walsh (2008) note, “we need to have our imaginations set free to see and experience the world differently. We need a richer, deeper, and thicker habitus, a worldview rooted in a narrative that engenders a culture of hospitality and justice. We need a renewed imagination and renewed cultural practices that can counter a geography of exclusion with an ethos of inclusion...we need to be set free by a radical narrative of hospitality and homecoming” (p. 112). Such a narrative, leads us to a metaphor of homemaking, connecting individuals deeply to a specific place; such commitment is impossible without imagining how to love, care, learn about and connect with a specific place. The process of learning to love our natural world is often rooted and nurtured in how we spend our time in the outdoors.

The environments we explore, the activities we love to participate in, as well as the people who share our passions all help to create a strong connection with place and lead us to include our natural world into a homemaking narrative, where all things can flourish. Homemaking is deeply rooted in learning to love the natural world as God loves it.

Many recreational professionals are already embracing some aspects of this call to homemaking through their commitment to place making. The Project for Public Spaces defines place making as “a process that capitalized on a local community’s assets, inspiration and potential, ultimately creating good public spaces that promote people’s health, happiness, and well-being. It is both a process and a philosophy, an overarching idea and a hands-on tool for improving a neighborhood, a city, or region” (MRPA, 2013). A commitment to place making is a commitment to helping individuals connect to the communities and places where they dwell, challenging them to dwell well by seeking the flourishing of all things.

Challenge questions (for both individuals and recreational professionals):

1. Through the outdoor activities we pursue or promote for others, how can we foster a worldview that includes our responsibility for the environment, a worldview that includes a land ethic similar to the one Leopold advocates for in his book, *The Sand County Almanac*?
2. What does the metaphor of homemaking or place-making mean to you? How do the outdoor activities you participate in compliment or contradict these metaphors?

3. Sanders (1994) in his book, *Staying put: Making a home in a restless world*, states “to become intimate with your home region, to know the territory as well as you can, to understand your life as woven into local life does not prevent you from recognizing and honoring the diversity of other places. If you are not yourself placed, then you wander the world like a sightseer, a collector of sensations, with no gauge for measuring what you see. Local knowledge is the grounding for global knowledge.” How can we avoid being a collector of sensations in our recreational pursuits and instead work to use our outdoor recreation activities to promote shalom, right relationships with God, each other and the natural world around us? How can we manage the tension between rootedness and exploration?

## **EXPLORE**

John Muir in his book *Our National Parks* (1901) reminds us of the physical, mental, and spiritual benefits of being outdoors when he writes, “wander here a whole summer, if you can. Thousands of God’s wild blessings will search you and soak you as if you were a sponge.” As Muir notes, one of the keys to experiencing God in our lives is that we must immerse ourselves in the natural world. While dreaming is an important first step in the process of seeking shalom, it is through exploring, doing and being in the outdoors that strong connections are developed and nurtured.

The experiential nature of outdoor recreation activities provides a important foundation for connecting to our natural world and in so doing connecting to God by living a good story. While we can learn a lot about God from the pages of scripture, He is still a mystery, unless we look for ways to be in relationship with Him. This is one of God’s desires, he wants to connect and while he will not force himself on us, he does respond to those who want to know him.

Don Miller, the author of the book *A million miles in a thousand years*, encourages us to see our lives as stories and gifts from God and in so doing challenges us to live a good story, to fully use the gifts God gives. People often have great dreams of changing the world and living fully but quickly fall into settling for what comes their way. But this does not have to be the case.

In a recent college trip to kayak and canoe in the backcountry of Everglades National Park with students, I remember laying on the beach looking into the heavens and seeing millions of stars. As students gazed upward they began to marvel at the vastness of the heavens, they talked about the beauty and power of creation. In a similar situation Miller asked a friend “why do you think God did all of this?” Miller’s friend answered: “it’s obvious, he made the stars to dazzle us.” Ultimately, what does

God want from us? “He wants to interact with each one of us, enjoy time with us, have a relationship with us and enjoy the fact that we, in turn, enjoy him” (Miller, 2012, p. 11).

Throughout his writings, Millers argues that God wants us to live a good story and “remember the point of a story is never about the ending. It’s about your character getting molded in the hard work of the middle” (Miller 2009, p. 154). I believe that being active in the outdoors can help build a great story. Outdoor activities can draw us closer to God, help us to slow our lives down and enjoy simple pleasures. Outdoor activities can also help us build relationships and shared stories with others as well as deepen our connections to the natural world, enjoying the wonders of God’s creation.

Outdoor activities can do all this and more but only if we are intentional in how we are creating and living out our stories and seeing how our story connects with God’s bigger story of seeking shalom in this world. Being intentional, creating a good story, and exploring God’s bigger story through the outdoor activities we pursue demands that we ask the following types of questions of ourselves and the programs we develop:

1. How can we make exploring in the outdoors fun and worthwhile? How can we be intentional about the outdoor activities we pursue so that our involvement in these activities help us build better stories and see how our stories ultimately connect to God’s story in this world?
2. How can we find ways to elevate people’s recreation habits rather than simply serving popular tastes for recreation?
3. How can we avoid the drive to consumerism in outdoor recreation, the notion that we need the latest and best to truly enjoy the outdoors?
4. How can we develop micro adventures to encourage connecting to the natural world within a local context? (See the resources section for micro adventure program ideas).
5. How do we manage the tension between rootedness and exploration? How do we actively engage our world and connect the local and the global.

## **DISCOVER**

When we dream with our minds what can be, and explore with our hands and feet and see what is, we are free to discover what brings God joy and how He wants us to dwell well in the places we inhabit, seeking the flourishing of all things. When we approach our relationship with the natural world with a humble heart and seek the justice that God demands, we open ourselves to the possibilities of this world, we open ourselves to discover God’s wonderful plan for our lives. As recreational professionals

we begin to see our calling and how we can be a part of God's work in His world. We begin to see what it means to not only live deeply but to dwell well as inhabitants, whenever we find ourselves. In the words of David Orr, "*A resident is a temporary occupant, putting down few roots and investing little, knowing little, and perhaps caring little for the immediate locale beyond its ability to gratify . . . The inhabitant, by contrast, 'dwells' . . . Good inhabitation is an art requiring detailed knowledge of a place, the capacity for observation, and a sense of care and rootedness*" (as quoted by Bouma-Predinger & Walsh, 2008).

And why is it important that we dwell well in the places we inhabit? Because it brings God joy! As the first question and answer of the Westminster Catechism states: ***What is the chief end of man? To glorify God and enjoy him forever.*** In addition to this ultimate purpose, spending time outdoors helps us rediscover:

- The importance of spending time outdoors in promoting mental health and reducing stress, depression and anxiety, and hyperactivity (DeVries, Groenewegen, & Spreeuwenberg, 2003), and to reduce aggressiveness and violence (Kaplan, 1995). Children in particular benefit socially, academically, and psychologically by spending time outdoors (Louv, 2005).
- The interconnectedness of our world including the importance of all aspects of our lives in making our world more sustainable. For example, the more we make choices that allow us to bike and walk to work rather than rely on the automobile, the more sustainable our lives become.
- The connection between what we believe and what we do. As Leopold (1949) has noted: "no important change in ethics was ever accomplished without an internal change in our intellectual emphasis, loyalties, affections, and convictions. The proof that conservation has not yet touched these foundations of conduct lies in the fact that philosophy and religion have not yet heard of it. In our attempt to make conservation easy we have made it trivial" (p. 220).

Fostering this discovery process brings us to ask the following types of questions of ourselves as well as for the programs we develop:

1. How can the outdoor activities we participate in help us to dwell well and better inhabit the places we are called?

2. What behaviors or virtues do we need to incorporate into our daily lives to make our world more sustainable?
3. What price are we willing to pay to follow God's calling to be stewards and dwell well where we are planted?
4. What do we need to do to slow down our lives so that we can be surprised by wonder and feel the presence of God?
5. What is the connection between our thoughts and our deeds when it comes to living simply and embracing the concepts of sustainability and conservation?

## CONCLUSION

This paper has asked you, as a person of faith and someone who influences others in the recreation choices they make, to step back and reflect on our relationship and responsibility to the natural world. In addition, the paper has asked you to answer a number of challenging questions by being willing to dream, explore, and discover a new way of thinking based in the metaphor of coming home to God's world. Through the process of struggling with these difficult questions, it is my hope that we have returned to the bigger question of why should we care about the natural world around us. Answering this "why" question gives us the foundation to answer many "how" questions presented in this paper. In this case, answering the question *why should we care about our natural world* leads to understanding what brings God joy and how we can strive to promote shalom, the flourishing of ALL things.

As Wendell Berry reminds us "the world can not be discovered by a journey of miles, no matter how long, but only by a spiritual journey, a journey of one inch, very arduous and humbling and joyful, by which we arrive at the ground of our feet and learn to be at home," at home, in our Father's world by building deeper relationships with our creator, each other, and the natural world. When we see the outdoor activities we participate in contribute to this goal, we have gone a long way to answering many of the "how" questions presented here.

*This is my Father's world, the birds their carols raise,  
The morning light, the lily white, declares their maker's praise.*

<i>This is my father's world Of rocks and trees, of skies and seas</i>	<i>, I rest me in the thought His hand the wonders wrought</i>
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*This is my Father's world: he shines in all that's fair;  
In the rustling grass I hear him pass; he speaks to me everywhere.*

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