

Conservation and Stewardship

(Genesis 1:22, 24; Leviticus 25:4)

Is the idea of the conservation of natural resources and wildlife in the Bible? Genesis communicates that the earth was created for mankind, including the birds, fish, livestock, and wildlife (Gen 1), but is there an implied mandate of stewardship? Merriam-Webster defines conservation as the "careful preservation and protection of something, especially: planned management of a natural resource." Stewardship is "the careful and responsible management of something entrusted to one's care." The purpose of this article is to show how mankind is charged with a responsibility to appropriately conserve and steward what God has created for humanity's consumption, use, and enjoyment.

In Genesis 1:22, God blessed the birds and fish He created and directed that they "be fruitful and multiply and **fill** the waters in the seas, and let birds **multiply** on the earth." That which God created is supposed to be fruitful, multiply and **fill** the water and multiply on the earth. God's desire and directive is more, NOT less. All the waters are to be filled with fish. In verse 24, the earth is to produce living creatures according to their kinds. "The earth" represents all the natural ways God has ordained for the quantity of living creatures to increase. Animals need each other and ecosystems to survive and, more importantly, thrive. So, while man has been given dominion over all living creatures and the authority to subdue the earth's natural resources, this must be kept in check with God's fill and multiply directives in v. 22 and 24.

Simple examples can illustrate and teach the balance between dominion and conservation and subduing and stewardship. From the beginning, man has enjoyed fish as a part of his diet. As mankind developed better ways of catching fish, the probability of catching too many fish became more and more of a reality. Is it possible to harvest fish to the point of extinction? Absolutely. Thus, there is a need for conservation and stewardship. Man must see himself as God's steward. Humans have been given the responsibility to properly manage the global fish population such that no kind of fish ceases to exist and fish **fill** the waters of the earth. The same can be said for domestic and wild animals.

Aquaculture is the industry that combines the cultural mandate to cultivate with exercising dominion over fish. Fish farming combines dominion and stewardship. Fish are bred, reared, and harvested much like chickens, pigs, or cattle. Farmers create controlled environments where the best conditions improve the harvest. This is pleasing to God. God created fish to be eaten by all generations. However, conservation is necessary in environments where mankind is not controlling the conditions, like oceans, lakes, and other bodies of water. Conservation agencies and officers are charged with the responsibility to ensure the catching of fish does not eliminate a species. God ordained that fish **fill** the waters. Conservation laws are required because of the sinful nature of mankind. Laws that limit the number and size of the catch are important to ensure fish can naturally sustain their population. Dates for prohibited fishing are established to protect the fish during breeding periods. Fishermen must possess a license to fish legally; money from the cost of the license is reinvested into sustaining the fish population, education programs, and the preservation of the environment.

Consider the paper industry. Society has benefited beyond imagination from the invention of paper. The global distribution of the Bible was made possible by the invention of economic paper. This very article was printed on paper for your knowledge and edification. Yet the paper industry needs millions of tons of virgin pulp (from trees) to satisfy the global demand for paper, as in toilet paper, paper towels, wrapping paper, paper packaging, paper bags, paper for printing, paper for writing, etc. The production of paper is a matter of stewardship and conservation. For every tree harvested, multiple seedlings must be planted and grown to the point of being ready for harvesting. The world does not have enough trees grown naturally to meet the demand. Wise stewardship is vital to meet the growing demand.

In Leviticus 25:4, Yahweh required that the land be given a complete rest every seventh year from planting and harvesting. This is both stewardship and conservation. The land was God's, not Israel's. Since it was God's, He could and did give man directives concerning the land. Humans were stewards; God was the owner. The principle of conservation is also present in ensuring the value of the land is preserved. In the same way, man should not empty a lake of fish; the land must not be emptied of its nutrients. If Israel were to continually plant the same crops year after year, the dirt could completely lose its ability to produce a crop—like animals ceasing to exist—the soil would cease to be able to produce crops. Today, crop rotation and the ability to rejuvenate the soil negate the need for land to lay fallow. Still, the biblical principles of the ongoing conservation and stewardship of the earth and its resources must be followed for mankind to thrive in a way that glorifies God. What must you steward better?