

## **The Great Divide: Disbanding the Borders between Ethical Issues of Environmentalism, World Hunger and Food Safety**

Jennifer Acuff

Department of Biology; College of Arts and Sciences  
Abilene Christian University

**Various groups work toward correcting social injustices including alleviating world hunger. The command to care for Creation as God's image bearers indicates that humans have a responsibility to restore Earth and its resources at all times. And yet, we must balance this environmental care with compassion for the hungry. Unfortunately, many popular 'green' or 'organic' methods of doing so may prevent efficiency in feeding the world. In this paper, I will examine world hunger, environmentalism, and the surrounding ethics through a lens of scientific data, practicality, social justice, and Christianity.**

The media, activist groups, conferences, world leaders, and school classes are putting a great deal of effort and resources into shining a light on the social injustices throughout the world. From child slavery and human trafficking to water scarcity and racism, there always seems to be a serious issue needing to be addressed. One such issue is world hunger. Organizations such as Food for the Hungry, Stop Hunger Now, and the World Food Programme have sought to fight hunger and prevent hunger-related deaths. Ethical issues such as world hunger would seem clear. The goal is to feed the hungry. Unfortunately, the "right" answer for one ethical issue may come in conflict with the "right" answer of another.

Currently, the general consensus is that humans have a responsibility to care and restore Earth and its resources. However, certain popular methods of doing so may prevent efficiency in feeding the world. In this paper, I will examine world hunger, environmentalism, and the surrounding ethics through a lens of scientific data, practicality, social justice, and Christianity.

One easy answer to the issue of world hunger is to produce more food. However, with the ever-growing world population and continued expansion, this approach ignores respect of the environment and the land on which humans live. Instead, we must learn how to produce more food in sustainable ways. Lately, there has been a popular shift of producing food organically and shopping locally under the pretenses that it is physically better for the consumer, as well as for the environment. Consequently, there *seems* to be more of an effort to eat and produce food more responsibly.

Nevertheless, in 2009, Americans sent about 40% of their food to the trash; and since 1974, the average person's food wastage has increased by 50%.<sup>1</sup> This clearly indicates a disconnect between opinions on ethical matters and problem solving practices.

### **Hungry Numbers**

According to the latest statistics from the World Food Programme, 842 million people find themselves without enough food to eat. This number has indeed fallen by 156

---

<sup>1</sup> Schwartz, 2012.

million since 1990, but this number is still far too high. The majority of these 842 million hungry people live in developing countries, which show a daunting 14.3% of their populations to be undernourished. In discussing the causes of world hunger, the WFP also notes that the world produces enough food to feed over 7 billion people. However, it is well known that a substantial portion of agricultural products is used for other purposes. Biofuel production that relies on agricultural products increased more than threefold from 2000-2008; and from 2007-2008, grains used for the production of ethanol reached about 10% of global production.<sup>2</sup>

These statistics clearly support the position that world hunger is not a result of the inability to produce enough food. Rather, it seems that poor allocation of food products has had the greater impact on hunger, poverty and inequality as well as leading to higher prices of food. According the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations, despite having sufficient supplies to develop steady agriculture, hunger endures because companies lack income prospects for feeding the poor. The prices for food continue to spike as more agriculture products are used for biofuels and anything else more profitable than feeding the hungry. So despite the rich growing richer, the poor continue struggling to feed themselves and their families.

### Environmental Concerns

Although many of the ethical concerns regarding the environment seem less important for the current time period, the future of societies and nations who ignore environmental concerns should be considered and examined closely. Studies indicate that the impact of climate change

between years 2080-2100 on African agriculture could be a 15-30% reduction in agricultural production.<sup>3</sup> Surely this threat is persuasive enough to induce more sustainable farming. Furthermore, unsustainable agricultural practices can lead to soil erosion, detrimental carbon emissions, and runoff pollution into water sources. These matters may not seem eminent, but when focusing on the long-range picture, they are extremely threatening.

### Determining Rights and Responsibilities

To address the issues that are threatening current and future generations, it is necessary to determine the responsibilities the human race holds towards the environment, as well as to non-human inhabitants of this planet. However, this is difficult to accomplish. Even among Christian populations, the debates are heated. Varying interpretations of scriptures add to the vitriol. Typically, there are two conflicting views with which most align. One view states that stewardship of the environment should be considered a problem of virtue and obedience in terms of the Christian faith.<sup>4</sup> This position comes from the doctrine that God gave humankind the capabilities to reside over the Earth, but that His creation is holy and worthy of care. The second viewpoint states that God granted humankind dominion over the Earth, which gives man the freedom to do to the environment whatever he may choose.

While God does indeed present humans with freedom, the dominion view is often used as an excuse to ignore and abuse God's created Nature, which in turn hurts God's creatures: both animals and people. Consequently, Christians should care for the environment

---

<sup>2</sup> How to Feed the World in 2050, 2009.

<sup>3</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>4</sup> Bullmore, 1998.

as a means of caring for their neighbor as well.

Caring for the environment, for Christians and non-Christians alike, is a vague and ill-defined concept. For most, some type of moral status is subconsciously assigned to plants, animals, and other facets of nature. This typically compromises an individual's commitment to concern for the environment. On one end of the spectrum, it is believed that objects of nature and animals do not require the moral status that humans hold. For example, both Descartes and Aristotle believed animals and plants had life, but were nothing more than "machines" made with the purpose of serving humankind. On the other side of the continuum, Jeremy Bentham demands rights for anything that can suffer, regardless of whether or not it can reason or communicate.<sup>5</sup> A more moderate line of thought, one that author Joel Feinberg proclaims, defends the rights of animals and plants under the assumption that they have interests, and that their purpose and provision deserve protection of rights.<sup>6</sup> This viewpoint would not consider rocks or inanimate monuments to have interests, and thus no rights. This perspective has a focus on providing social justice, but not without careful reason. This view finds that although humans are not the only subjects that hold rights, those rights are granted as a result of a display of purpose.<sup>7</sup>

Once the moral status or "rights" of the environment and its living inhabitants are determined, the role of humankind in upholding these rights should be addressed. To address this in the simplest way, it

should be asked, "What does each individual deserve?" In regards to humans, food has become a right expected to be addressed at a national and international level, something now referred to as food security.<sup>8</sup>

Most would agree that everyone (and every creature) is entitled to the opportunity to acquire good, affordable food. The question then is to ask what defines good and affordable food that everyone deserves. The recent push to persuade consumers to buy organically and shop locally presents the case that it is healthier, and is determined "good" food. However, this type of food is by no means more affordable or proven better than commercially produced food. Solely purchasing local and organic foods and supporting these higher food prices allows companies to take advantage of consumers and avoid finding ways to produce more affordable food.

In addition to claiming rights for the prospect of attaining food, it is natural to expect that all creatures deserve a healthy place to flourish. To provide this, there are certain obligations humans must meet. These can be interpreted as goals for which society ought to strive. The first is to make a sincere effort to develop alternative energy sources.<sup>9</sup> The second goal is to conserve current energy sources. These goals lead to innovative thinking in ways that can provide energy at potentially more affordable costs, as well as to those who may not currently have the benefit of expendable energy. The last obligation, one that is rather vague and open for interpretation, is that current generations ought to provide future ones with a reasonable chance for happiness in

---

<sup>5</sup> Des Jardins, 1993.

<sup>6</sup> Feinberg, 1974.

<sup>7</sup> A potential problem here is that "purpose" is often and only defined in human terms. If we re-define our "purpose" as being caretakers of *all* of God's

Creation, even when it does not benefit us, then we may develop a more robust protection of the environment which belongs to God, not us.

<sup>8</sup> Margulis, 2013.

<sup>9</sup> *op. cit.* footnote 5

relation to the environment and living situation. This could be defined as having clean air and water, aesthetically pleasing scenery, and the land with which to provide a livelihood. These goals not only serve to protect the rights of the environment, but also the current and future residents. However, it is only within the power of the current residents to ensure these goals are met.

### **Methods of Sustaining the Environment**

While there are many options for fulfilling these responsibilities toward the environment and its residents, there are some, such as the suggestion of farming and supporting locally and organically-produced food, that are not only less effective, but also deceptive. Farming organically is not sustainable in terms of feeding billions of people. Organic yields are typically between 5-35% lower than conventional yields, depending on various conditions.<sup>10</sup> With more study into organic farming methods over long term studies, it has been seen that many farms are still contributing to major pollution by means of runoff and mineral depletion; and the substitutions for pesticides have been observed to have negative effects on animals residing in the areas. Although buying organic food is currently marketed as the “ethical” consumer’s choice, it is now seen to damage the environment in many ways not originally observed.

Rather than supporting the bandwagon of organic farming and buying locally, there should be a focus to live thoughtfully and communally. The now cliché suggestion to reduce, reuse, and recycle still stands as a powerful option to preserve the environment. Composting and salvaging reusable items can lower amounts of trash sent to landfills that are growing out of

hand. This can improve relations between global communities by saving money, resources, and focusing on the common good for those who benefit from the same air.<sup>11</sup> Furthermore, there should be a new approach toward appropriate technology. This concept focuses on using the amount and kind of technology that is appropriate for the task. Although this may not always be most convenient for individuals, cutting back on even a few luxuries can promote efficiency and conservation. These habits, and the benefits that result, can trickle down to future generations as well as the current subjects also entitled to a healthy and beautiful place to live.

### **Methods of Enhancing Food Production**

Similar to addressing the issues related toward sustaining the environment, addressing the responsibilities humans have toward ending world hunger and bettering the quality and price of food require innovate ideas and questioning the propositions set in place. To improve the quality of food for the vast majority, the local and organic marketing schemes should be demolished. When consumers pay extra money for a label that certifies it as organic, they believe they are purchasing a food product that is special and carefully produced. However, most of the organic companies, such as Kashi, Naked Juice, and Odwalla are owned by larger parent companies, like Kellogg, Pepsi, and Coca Cola. If consumers knew their juices, granola bars, and peanut butter were produced in a factory alongside products marketed as inorganic, so-called organic foods would no longer reside on the pedestal of grocery stores—on the top shelf with high honors. It is clearly a form of misrepresentation. If consumers could save money to purchase the same quality of food, perhaps the money could be put toward

---

<sup>10</sup> Seufert, Ramankutty and Foley, 2012.

<sup>11</sup> *op. cit.* footnote 5

directly solving world hunger, or at least toward research that aims to find sustainable farming methods for underdeveloped and struggling communities.

Furthermore, food safety issues should be pursued more aggressively. Local and organic foods are subject to the same forms and sources of contamination as any other product grown in a field or processed by employees. In comparing the microflora of organic and inorganic product, the majority of studies show negligible differences between the two.<sup>12</sup> However, more and more outbreaks of foodborne illness are originating at organic producers, showing that bacteria such as *Escherichia coli*, *Salmonella*, and *Listeria monocytogenes* are nondiscriminatory in what they contaminate. Also, since local markets are less strictly governed than large grocers, there are more vectors for contamination by the consumers and sellers. The misrepresentation of local and organic foods being safer to feed your family is a marketing scheme that convinces conscientious consumers to pay more for food. This is simply unethical marketing. Moving away from this trend will be a vital step in improving the quality and affordability of food by eliminating it.

There should also be a focus on integrated farm management, which combines traditional farming methods with efficient and conscientious use of modern means of production through technology.<sup>13</sup> This version of responsible farming is site specific and helps conserve the environment. Integrated farm management would also put appropriate technology into use, by not always using the most convenient farming method if another can be more helpful in terms of preservation of the environment.

Lastly, in order to truly fight against world hunger and promote better and more inexpensive food, wasting less food should be a priority. While many across the world struggle to feed their families, Americans waste 40% of their food, approximate \$1300-\$2200 worth of food. Much of this is due to misunderstanding or misrepresentation of expiration dates.<sup>14</sup> It should be no secret that the food dating system is extremely flawed. Phrases such as “use by” and “best by” do not give the date for expected spoilage, but rather an arbitrary date claiming when the product is at its “best” quality. While twenty states prohibit stores from selling products after the nondescript and inaccurately represented dates, waste amounts increase steadily. The current food dating system also does not consider food safety in terms of expiration. Temperature abuse can change the already uninformative dates, and some dates could be extended if stored and cooked correctly. When determining the dates of expiration of food, there ought to be a heavier focus on the safety of food rather than when a food tasting “expert” hired by companies determines the food to taste best.

### **Dissolving Boundaries between the Moral Issues**

Determining one’s moral standpoint on issues surrounding environmentalism versus food quality and quantity can potentially create a paralyzing false dichotomy; one assumes there is too much to be done and he or she does not have the ability to make a difference. However, this creates a separation between humankind and nature. This divide has led to waste of food, degradation of the environment, and millions of people left hungry. In response, consumers grasp for products that give them false satisfaction that they are helping the

---

<sup>12</sup> Phillips and Harrison, 2005.

<sup>13</sup> Trewavas, 2001.

<sup>14</sup> *National Resources Defense Council*, 2013.



environment and buying sustainable products, while also living healthier. Consumers and humankind have a duty to the environment, those who are currently struggling, and to future generations in order to find the truth behind these marketing schemes and begin to truly live more sustainably. Christians, who are supposed to

embrace loving their neighbor as the second greatest command, should be leading this effort. While this is a daunting task, it can be accomplished over time with a long-term commitment and dedication to defend the rights of living in a healthy world, and eating nutritious, affordable food.

### Literature Cited

- Bullmore, Michael A. (1998). The Four Most Important Biblical Passages for a Christian Environmentalism. *Trinity Journal*. 19NS, 139-162.
- Des Jardins, Joseph R. (1993). *Environmental Ethics*. Belmont: Wadsworth Publishing Company.
- Feinberg, Joel. (1974). [The Rights of Animals and Future Generations](http://www.animal-rights-library.com/texts-m/feinberg01.htm). In William Blackstone (ed.), *Philosophy and Environmental Crisis*. Athens, Georgia: University of Georgia Press. Found at <http://www.animal-rights-library.com/texts-m/feinberg01.htm>
- How to Feed the World in 2050. (2009). *Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations*.  
[http://www.google.com/url?sa=t&rct=j&q=&esrc=s&source=web&cd=1&ved=0CCAQFjAA&url=http%3A%2F%2Fwww.fao.org%2Ffileadmin%2Ftemplates%2Fwsfs%2Fdocs%2Fexpert\\_paper%2FHow\\_to\\_Feed\\_the\\_World\\_in\\_2050.pdf&ei=jgNpVMbxDc-xyAS\\_zYG4BA&usg=AFQjCNEvZBB2Wrep78tku\\_vCige3UqTm3Q&sig2=2zJT21L0kJ-LdxBYYKV\\_zQ&bvm=bv.79142246,d.aWw](http://www.google.com/url?sa=t&rct=j&q=&esrc=s&source=web&cd=1&ved=0CCAQFjAA&url=http%3A%2F%2Fwww.fao.org%2Ffileadmin%2Ftemplates%2Fwsfs%2Fdocs%2Fexpert_paper%2FHow_to_Feed_the_World_in_2050.pdf&ei=jgNpVMbxDc-xyAS_zYG4BA&usg=AFQjCNEvZBB2Wrep78tku_vCige3UqTm3Q&sig2=2zJT21L0kJ-LdxBYYKV_zQ&bvm=bv.79142246,d.aWw)
- National Resources Defense Council. (2013). The Dating Game: How Confusing Labels Land Billions of Pounds of Food in the Trash, *IB*: 13-09-A.
- Margulis, Matias E. (2013). The Regime Complex for Food Security: Implications for the Global Hunger Challenge. *Global Governance* 19: 53-67.
- Phillips, Christie A. and Mark A. Harrison. (2005). Comparison of the Microflora on Organically and Conventionally Grown Spring Mix from a California Processor. *Journal of Food Protection* 68: 1143-1146.
- Schwartz, S. A. (2012). The Coming Food Crisis the social tsunami headed our way. *Lilipoh* 17: 12-21.
- Seufert, Verena, Navin Ramankutty and Jonathan A. Foley (2012). Comparing the yields of organic and conventional agriculture. *Nature* 485: 229-232.
- Trewavas, Anthony (2001). Urban Myths of Organic Farming. *Nature* 410: 409-410.