



A Second Chance for some Endangered Species

One of the great strengths of the Encyclical *Laudato Si: On Care of Our Common Home* – is its extensive treatment of the importance of biodiversity. Before the publication of the encyclical, there was very little writing on biodiversity in Catholic Social Teaching. *The Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church* (2004), published eleven years before the encyclical recognised the ‘environmental value of biodiversity ... because it constitutes an extraordinary richness for all of humanity.’¹

In *Laudato Si*, biodiversity has a very prominent role. The encyclical states that ‘the earth’s resources are being plundered because of short-sighted approaches to the economy, commerce and production. The loss of forests and woodlands entail the loss of species which may constitute extremely important resources in the future, not only for food but also for curing disease and other uses. Different species contain genes, which could be key resources in

the years ahead for meeting human needs and regulating environmental problems’ (No. 32). It goes on to make the point that ‘other species have value in themselves. It is not enough, however, to think of different species merely as potential ‘resources’ to be exploited, while overlooking the fact that they have value in themselves. Each year sees the disappearance of thousands of plants and animal species which we will never know, which our children will never see, because they have been lost forever. The great majority become extinct for reasons related to human activity. Because of us, thousands of species will no longer give glory to God by their existence, nor convey their message to us. We have no such right.’

The destruction of biodiversity is a disaster for planet earth. Scientists now estimate that 100,000 species become extinct each year through deforestation, poaching and pollution. The current rate of extinction is estimated to be 1000

times what it would be in the absence of human intervention.

Amid all the gloom, there is a flicker of hope through targeted breeding programmes. In 1998, the last wild oryx in the Quadi-Rime-Quadi wildlife reserve in Chad was shot by a hunter. Captive oryx are found in both the Middle East and in North America. Now the Sahara Conservation Fund and the governments of Chad and Abu Dhabi are involved in a programme to reintroduce oryx into the wild. Biologist John Newby, who is leading the Sahara oryx programme says that Chad is now well able to deal with poachers.²

Mike Hoffmann from the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN), says that a growing number of species have been successfully reintroduced into the wild. In his words ‘these species are not out of the woods by any means, but their status is no longer critical.’³

Another group of species has been called ‘Lazarus species.’ As the name



implies, these are species which appear to have risen from the dead. One such species is the black-footed ferret of the North American Great Plains. By the 1950s it was thought that this species had become extinct as a result of farmers poisoning prairie dogs, which is the main source of food for the ferrets. To everyone's surprise in 1981, near Meeteetse, Wyoming, a dog killed a black-footed ferret. During the following years, the US Fish and Wildlife Services captured 18 ferrets and reared them in captivity. By 2016, they have reintroduced 300 ferrets at six locations. The plan is to have 3,000 breeding adults at 30 locations in the Great Plains.

There has been astonishing success with the blue-eyed black lemur in Madagascar. For years it was thought to be a taxonomic error, until in 1985 one was discovered in the Sahamalaza peninsula in Madagascar. Its population

was dropping precipitously, but it made a remarkable recovery. Early this year, it was taken off the list of 25 primate species thought to be in peril. There are now about 3,000 black-footed ferrets in the population so, for now, the animal is safe. Those who are working at preserving species realise that success takes many years of conservation work on the ground. But then as *Laudato Si'* says 'each creature ... reflects in its own being a ray of God's infinite wisdom and goodness' (No 69).

Prayer for our Earth

*All-powerful God,
Pour out upon us the power of your love,
That we may protect life and beauty.
Fill us with peace, that we may live
As brothers and sisters, harming no one.
O God of the poor,
Help us rescue the abandoned
And forgotten of this earth*

*So precious in your eyes.
Bring healing to our lives,
That we may protect the world
And not prey upon it.
That we may sow beauty
Not pollution and destruction.
Touch the hearts of those who look only for
gain
At the expense of the poor and the earth.
Encourage us, we pray, in our struggle
For justice, love and peace. Amen.*

*Adapted from Encyclical Letter
Laudato Si' of Pope Francis*

NOTES

¹ *Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church*, 2004, Veritas, Dublin, No 466, page 220.

² Olive Heffernan, 'Back from the brink,' *NewScientist*, 23 January 2016, page 8.

³ *Ibid.*

*Fr Sean McDonagh SSC
seanmcdonagh10@gmail.com*