Joseph Smith, the founding prophet and president of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (the Mormons) taught that all of God’s creations, humans, animals, plants, and the earth have eternal spirits. Rejecting the doctrine of ex nihilo creation, Smith taught that God took these eternal spirits, combined them with indestructible matter, and organized them into living beings.

We do not know how God created each, except that He used the power of the priesthood. In the cases of human beings, however, a revelation to Joseph Smith said that our Father in Heaven is a being with a body and a spirit. A statement of the Church’s First Presidency in 1909 said that humans have “heavenly parents,” and Mormon tradition calls one of them our Mother in Heaven. The difference between humans and other creations is that human spirits are the literal children of God, the Father, and our Mother in Heaven. We are created in His image.

The relationship of these creations to the Creator has implications for their treatment by human beings. Since the essence of the earth, animals, and plants has existed eternally and independent of God, he could not in justice grant humans permission to abuse any of them. Nevertheless, since he organized each of them, he gave humans, the only entities created in His image, the responsibility of caring for His creations.

Revelations to Joseph Smith and commentary by Mormon theologians clarify the Biblical account in Genesis. Instead of “subdue” these revelations use the word “till” to
refer to treatment of the earth. Mormon theologian Hugh W. Nibley has written that the word “dominion” means that humans have the responsibility of caring for God’s animal creations for Him. Abuse of the earth, Nibley says, is part of Satan’s effort to thwart God’s plan for salvation by drawing men and women away from God and making nature their enemy.

Moreover, revelations received by Joseph Smith in 1832 and clarified by Brigham Young in 1862 clarify that Christ’s atonement, the resurrection, and salvation reach all of God’s creations, human, animal, vegetable, and mineral. In contrast with humans who sin regularly, however, non-human creations obey God’s commandments. A revelation that Joseph Smith received in November and December 1830 linked moral and environmental pollution. The revelation says that the earth “the mother of men” is “pained” and “weary because of the wickedness of my children. When shall I rest, and be cleansed from the filthiness which is gone forth out of me? When will my Creator sanctify me, that I may rest, and righteousness for a season abide upon my face.”

Smith’s successor, Brigham Young, elaborated on the teaching. “The soil, the air, the water are all pure and healthy. Do not suffer them to become polluted with wickedness. Strive to preserve the elements from being contaminated by the filthy, wicked conduct and sayings of those who pervert the intelligence God has bestowed upon the human family.”

Although the teachings of prophets like Smith and Young admonish the Mormons to care for God’s creations as they would for their own morals, like most people they have not always done so. In 1834 while Joseph Smith led a volunteer militia group from Kirtland, Ohio to Independence, Missouri members of the party found three prairie
rattlesnakes. They intended to kill the snakes, but Joseph urged them to leave them alone. “Men must,” he said, “become harmless, before brute creation; and when men lose their vicious dispositions and cease to destroy the animal race, the lion and the lamb can dwell together,” and in an allusion to Isaiah 11: 6-8, he said “the sucking child can play with the serpent in safety.”

Clearly, however, these leaders did not oppose killing animals or plants for sustenance. They did, however, counsel as Young put it that Mormons should not take “any more” than needed for subsistence. Nevertheless, in some cases, Young, himself, and others in the pioneer companies that came to Utah beginning in 1847 killed predators apparently in an attempt to protect their food and crops.

Consistent with the ideal of caring for God’s creations, Joseph Smith and his counselors proposed a plan for an ideal city designed to exert a minimal impact on the land and its resources and to promote environmental democracy. These cities were to provide a pleasant environment in which people could live in relative equality, raise gardens, and keep a few domestic animals. As they laid out the cities on a grid pattern with central blocks reserved for public buildings, planners placed the larger farms outside the town boundaries. After the cities reached 15,000 to 20,000 those who wanted to live in a city were to move beyond the farmlands surrounding the city and build a new one. When the Mormons settled in Utah, they used the city plan that Smith had proposed to lay out many of the cities, but they did not limit the city growth to 20,000 people.

After the Latter-day Saints settled in Utah, they linked the concept of multiplying and replenishing the earth found in Genesis 1:28 to the importation and nourishing of a wide variety of plants and animals. In 1862, Heber C. Kimball, Brigham Young’s first
counselor, taught church members that they should help the earth “multiply and increase her productions, vegetation, fowls, animals and all manner of creeping things.”

Wilford Woodruff, then a member of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles and later Church president, experimented with imported plants during the 1850s. In September 1855 he joined with others to organize the Deseret Horticultural Society. Members of the society planted and grafted a wide variety of fruits to determine which would flourish in Utah’s climate and soil.

In 1856 the territorial legislature chartered the Deseret Agricultural and Manufacturing Society. DAMS imported animals and plants and seeds for fruits, grains, and vegetables from other parts of the United States and from Europe and Australia.

As Mormon immigrants continued to pour into Utah, they transformed the land. Along the Wasatch Front they founded communities with families, homes, churches, and schools. They also changed the lush grassland they found there into verdant fields and orchards. With considerable difficulty and a number of failed efforts, between 1847 and 1890 they established more than 500 settlements the majority of which have persisted to the present.

Although the settlements generally flourished, the Mormons also caused the eradication of some wildlife and environmental damage to their pasturelands. Populations of various species of wildlife such as bears, wolves, mountain sheep, elk, rattlesnakes, fish, and crickets declined or disappeared under predator eradication, harvesting, and competition from domestic crops and animals. By 1865, recognizing the destruction of pastures caused by overgrazing, leaders like Orson Hyde, then serving as president of the Quorum of Twelve Apostles, the second highest governing body in the
church, chided members for destruction of land and vegetation.

In spite of such admonitions, the expansion of Mormon participation in the market economy during the 1880s led to the introduction of increasingly large herds of cattle and sheep. Overgrazing by these animals caused extensive watershed damage in the uplands in northern and central Utah. Such destruction denuded the land and led to summertime rock-mud floods that further eroded the land as they caused millions of dollars worth of property damage.

As watershed destruction mounted, after the turn of the 20th century church leaders began to reemphasize the principles of stewardship and care of God’s creations that 19th century leaders had taught. Declaring, “love of nature is akin to love of God,” President Joseph F. Smith denounced the “wicked” destruction of wildlife.

Consistent with this view, he favored watershed protection. As the federal government encompassed timber stands and watersheds into national forests, under Smith’s direction, church priesthood leaders voted on April 7, 1902 to urge the federal government to withdraw from the market for protection all public lands in the watersheds above Utah cities.

Continued overgrazing and flooding, however, led to the appointment by Utah Governor George H. Dern of a committee headed by MIT engineering graduate and church Presiding Bishop Sylvester Q. Cannon to determine the reasons for the damage. The committee attributed the damage to extensive overgrazing and urged measures to reduce the number of livestock on the mountain watersheds. This report led directly to Forest Service grazing reductions and range rehabilitation projects.

Other early 20th century church leaders set examples of caring for God’s
creations. Reed Smoot, a member of the church’s Quorum of the Twelve Apostles, served as a Senator from Utah from 1903 to 1933. He actively supported the conservation programs of Theodore Roosevelt and Gifford Pinchot. Among other things, he favored the designation of National Forests and opposed the Hetch Hetchy dam slated for construction in California’s Sierra Nevada Mountains. After Smoot had introduced legislation for the organization of the National Park Service in previous congressional sessions, in 1916 he served as Senate sponsor for the act introduced in the House by California Congressman William Kent to create and fund the NPS. In 1920, as chair of the Senate Public Lands and Surveys Committee, he co-authored the Mineral Leasing Act, which serves as the basis for federal leases of minerals such as petroleum and phosphates.

In the meantime, Latter-day Saints worked to deal with other environmental damages. In 1904, farmers in central Salt Lake valley secured an injunction against nearby smelters for polluting the air and destroying crops. A number of the offending smelters closed and other remained open only by installing pollution control equipment. John A. Widtsoe, University of Goettingen educated member of the Quorum of Twelve Apostles, conducted experiments to make irrigated and dry farming more productive and environmentally sensitive.

In Salt Lake City, Latter-day Saint leaders worked to improve the physical environment. Sylvester Cannon, then serving as a stake president, worked to protect and maintain the city’s watersheds and parks. As city engineer, Cannon, and George W. Snow, the director of the city’s Mechanical Department, fought against air pollution. Prominent Mormon women like Leah Eudora Dunford Widtsoe, Susa Young Gates, and
Emily L. Traub Merrill worked on civic improvements in Salt Lake City during the first decades of the twentieth century, especially to control air pollution.

During the 1930s and 1940s, Latter-day Saints in various localities worked to stabilize and beautify the environment. In 1936, a number including Robert H. Stewart of Brigham City, William Lathum of Wellsville, and Bishop John O. Hughes of Mendon organized the Wellsville Mountain Watershed Protective Association. Collecting money from depression-strapped farmers, they purchased land in the foothills of the Wellsville Mountains on the boundary between Cache and Box Elder Counties. Then they lobbied Congress to extend the boundaries of the Cache National Forest to encompass the land, which they donated to the Forest Service for watershed protection.

As Secretary of Agriculture during the Eisenhower Administration, Ezra Taft Benson, a member of the Quorum of Twelve Apostles and later church president, advocated watershed rehabilitation. Although J. Reuben Clark, then a member of the church’s First Presidency and a rancher, criticized Benson, the agriculture secretary nevertheless supported the efforts of the Forest Service to reduce numbers of livestock in grazing allotments and restore the land and its vegetation. In addition, he spoke out in favor of reverence for life and “for the resources God has given man.” “The outward expressions of irreverence for life and for fellowmen,” he said, “often take the form of heedless pollution of both air and water.”

Recent church presidents have also spoken out on the need for environmentally friendly attitudes. “We recommend,” Spencer W. Kimball said in November 1974, “to all people that there be no undue pollution, that the land be taken care of and kept clean, productive, and beautiful.” “This earth is [Gods] . . . creation,” Gordon B. Hinckley said
in April 1983, “When we make it ugly, we offend him.”

In recent years, environmental ethicists have concerned themselves with population growth. Unfortunately, it is much easier to find official statements on population control than to provide accurate statistics on the Mormon population. This is in part because the church does not compile such statistics, only about 14 percent of all Mormons live in Utah, and fewer than 50 percent of all Mormons live in the United States. Nevertheless, the *Church Handbook of Instructions* an official directive for local leaders offers the following: “The decision as to how many children to have and when to have them is extremely intimate and private and should be left between the couple and the Lord. Church members should not judge one another in this matter.”

In spite of the small representation of Latter-day Saints and the fact that the sample includes fewer than half of all Mormons, using data from surveys in the United States, Brigham Young University sociology professor Tim Heaton has estimated that Mormon couples both expect to and do have more children than average. Statistics from the General Social Survey indicate that an average LDS family in the United States has 2.63 children compared with a national average of 1.99 children. Moreover, Mormons say that an ideal family should consist of 3.89 children compared with a national average of 2.89 children. Both the larger family size and the larger reported ideal probably derive from Mormon belief in the eternity of the family and in the importance of providing bodies for God’s spirit children. Moreover, the statistics show that Mormons use contraceptives at the same rate as other Americans.

On the matter of the attitudes of the church leadership toward caring for God’s creations, the church’s Public Affairs department has published a general packet
including a statement of policy. Among other things, the statement says, “The Church does not, institutionally, endorse specific environmental crusades, but instead encourages its members, as citizens, to join with their fellow citizens in supporting worthy programs that will make their communities better places to live and raise their families.”

Although vestiges of the teachings of Joseph Smith and Brigham Young have appeared in the thought and actions of church leaders like Joseph F. Smith, Spencer W. Kimball, Ezra Taft Benson, Gordon B. Hinckley, Reed Smoot, and Sylvester Q. Cannon, many members have forgotten the teachings on the relationship between humans, animals, plants, and the earth. Some scholars and others have begun to remind the current membership of these teachings, but many are unaware of them today.

Thomas G. Alexander, Brigham Young University

Further Reading


Alexander, Thomas G. "Senator Reed Smoot and Western Land Policy, 1905-1920." Arizona and the West, 13 (Fall 1971), 245-64.

Alexander, Thomas G. “Sylvester Q. Cannon and the Revival of
Environmental Consciousness in the Mormon Community.”

*Environmental History* 3 (October 1998), 488-507.


Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. *Church Handbook of Instructions: Book 1, Stake Presidencies and Bishoprics*. Salt Lake City: Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1998.


Handley, George B., “The Environmental Ethics of Mormon Belief.” *BYU*
Studies 40 (2001), 185-211.


Nibley, Hugh W. “Brigham Young on the Environment.” Brother
Brigham Challenges the Saints. Don E. Norton and Shirley S. Ricks, eds.


