

Interfaith Council for Environmental Stewardship

Intended as a challenge to the National Religious Partnership for the Environment's claim to represent Judeo-Christian thought on environmental issues, the Interfaith Council for Environmental Stewardship (ICES) was founded in April 2000 by Jewish, Catholic, and Protestant leaders promoting a theologically and politically conservative public religious agenda. These leaders argued that religiously-informed moral action, rather than governmental controls, should guide behavior, and that the environment can best be sustained in a context of free market economics, strong property rights, and technological innovation. The ICES was conceived and established by the Acton Institute for the Study of Religion and Liberty, an advocacy and educational organization created in 1990 by Fr. Robert A. Sirico "to promote a society that embraces civil liberties and free-market economics."

The defining document of the ICES is the Cornwall Declaration on Environmental Stewardship, created in October 1999 at a conference center in West Cornwall, Connecticut. Largely a distillation of arguments made by E. Calvin Beisner in his 1997 book *Where the Garden Meets Wilderness*, the Cornwall Declaration minimized the threat of global environmental problems, such as "destructive manmade global warming, overpopulation, and rampant species loss," arguing instead that the greatest environmental threats were local in nature and typically confined to the developing world. Rather than depicting humans as "consumers and polluters," the Cornwall Declaration envisioned them as "producers and stewards" with the ability to "add to the earth's abundance" and to "enrich creation" by "developing other resources" and by unlocking "the potential in creation." Humans were "given a privileged place among creatures" in the divine order and thus "the human person is the most

valuable resource on earth." Nature is not best when "untouched by human hands" but instead must be developed and brought to fruitfulness by humans. Humans are to exercise wise stewardship, "which must attend both to the demands of human well being and to a divine call for human beings to exercise caring dominion over the earth." A series of aspirations at the end of the Declaration envisioned a world in which "objective moral principles" and "right reason" unite with limited government, a free market economy, assured property rights, and technological advancement to produce a better environment for all creatures.

Though it was at odds with mainstream secular and religious environmental thought (even questioning some of its fundamental assumptions), the Cornwall Declaration represented the first acknowledgment of the need for environmental care by religious leaders combining theological with political conservatism. Among the prominent evangelical conservatives supporting it were Bill Bright (Campus Crusade for Christ), Charles Colson (Prison Fellowship Ministries), James Dobson (Focus on the Family), D. James Kennedy (Coral Ridge Ministries), Beverly LaHaye (Concerned Women for America), and Donald Wildmon (American Family Association). The Catholic and Jewish supporters included Fr. Richard John Neuhaus (editor of *First Things*) and Rabbi Daniel Lapin (Toward Tradition).

The ICES created a stir among Christian environmentalists in April 2000 when it sent the Cornwall Declaration to 37,000 religious leaders along with an introductory letter accusing the National Religious Partnership for the Environment of seeking to "redefine traditional Judeo-Christian teachings on stewardship" and claiming that "its agenda will have devastating, unintended consequences for humanity and our world." The Evangelical Environmental Network was forced to defend its evangelical credentials and policies in an open letter to its constituents and in a series of semi-public letters with ICES leaders.

The ICES provided an extended explication of its views in its book *Environmental Stewardship in the Judeo-Christian Tradition*, published in 2000.

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Further reading

Barkey, Michael B., ed. *Environmental Stewardship in the Judeo-Christian Tradition: Jewish, Catholic, and Protestant Wisdom on the Environment*. Washington, DC: Interfaith Council for Environmental Stewardship, 2000.

Beisner, E. Calvin. *Where Garden Meets Wilderness: Evangelical Entry into the Environmental Debate*. Grand Rapids, MI: Acton Institute for the Study of Religion and Liberty and William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1997.

Larsen, David Kenneth. "God's Gardeners: American Protestant Evangelicals Confront Environmentalism, 1967-2000." Ph.D., University of Chicago, 2001.