

A study on our place in the environment

If I write a letter to my senator in support of legislation to fight climate change, or if I say a prayer at church in behalf of the environment, or if I read a book about solar and wind energy, but do not change my own actions, have I accomplished anything?

The global environmental situation may seem too big and too unwieldy for an individual to make any difference. So, let's break this down to bite-sized manageable ideas so we all can make a difference. Just as all politics are local, so, too, are the sources of all environmental problems. Therefore, as we educate ourselves about our place, Wendell Berry would suggest that we ask ourselves these questions:

- Where am I?
- What's here?
- What has happened here?
- What's wrong here?
- What could happen here?

As you answer each of these questions, you will begin to understand the environmental situation not only around your place but also around the world.

About this study guide

This guide is comprised of two studies, one on place and one on food. Each opens with a Bible verse, keywords for understanding the issues, and study activities.

Study 1: Place

Bible verse: *"The land shall not be sold in perpetuity, for the land is mine; with me you are but aliens and tenants. Throughout the land that you hold, you shall provide for the redemption of the land."* — *Leviticus 25:23-24*

Keywords for review: biome; bioregion or ecoregion; commons; ecosystem; extinction or extirpation; endangered, threatened, invasive or introduced species; species; topography; watershed.

Refer to <http://en.wikipedia.org/> for definitions.

Select a place to begin a study of your bioregion. Your place could be the setting of your church and/or your town. Document the following (you might consider such resources as your local library, county extension office, local parks department, state department of natural resources, and/or the Internet to find the answers for this study):

- Specifics of your bioregion: topography, geological history and major landforms;
- Biome, soil types, ecosystem and climate;
- Watershed: bodies of water, source of drinking water; pathway to wastewater disposal;
- Native (and non-native) plant, insect, and animal communities;
- Human communities;
- Primary use of land in and around your place (agriculture, industry, other?);

- How have the natural systems within your place changed over time (from presettlement to the present)? Was it once a forest or desert? Was a river dammed to accommodate a city or a lake drained to supply irrigation for agriculture or municipal use?
- What species have become locally extinct, extirpated, rare, endangered or threatened?
- Based on what you have learned about your place, what do you think are the most critical environmental issues facing your place? How does a degraded environment (such as poor air or water quality) affect the quality of life for the people in your place? How do your actions contribute to those environmental issues? What actions can you take to make change?

Once you have completed the study, select one of the following exercises to do:

- Read [The Age of Missing Information](#) by Bill McKibben. Conduct a similar experiment and document your experiences.
- Examine your relationship with the land and its inhabitants around you. When was the last time you were outside? When you go outside, how much time do you spend there? Select a place to be outside for about 30 minutes a week for six to 12 months. Document your experiences and observations in a journal (in words and/or images). How does it change from week to week, month to month? What is your relationship to the plant, insect, and animal communities? Do you understand their social structures? Did you know they had social structures within their own communities? What if you want to but are afraid to spend your time in an urban park, is that a problem? What does that say about the value of the commons versus privately owned land?
- Become engaged in an action that will improve the environmental quality of your place. Is an organization in your area already working in behalf of that issue? If so, what skills do you have to volunteer in behalf of that issue? If nothing is being done, what actions can your congregation take to foster change in your community?

Study 2 Food

Bible verse: *Do not, for the sake of food, destroy the work of God.* — Romans 14:20

Keywords for review: confined animal feeding operation (CAFO), climate change; food security; foodshed; high fructose corn syrup (HFCS), local (or regional) food, locavore, organic.

Refer to <http://en.wikipedia.org/> for definitions.

What is the source of the food you eat? How far does it travel to your plate? How do your food decisions affect the environment in your place, or in the state or country where your food is produced? Is it possible your food decisions can affect the global environment? Meanwhile, how do your food decisions affect the livelihoods of the workers who make a living in the food industry?

Begin your study by documenting the following:

Keep a journal for one week of the food you eat. Document the following:

- Where was the food produced or packaged?
- How far did it travel to your plate?

- How far did you travel to buy the food?
- How was the food produced and packaged? Organically? Conventionally?
- At the end of the week, document how many miles the food traveled from its source to your plate. Also, document how much of your trash was food packaging. How much of the trash could be recycled in your area?
(Each family member can be assigned a particular task, such as mapping the food miles, weighing the trash. Or you can do this at your church during a pitch in.)

For further study:

As you engage in your food consumption study, consider the following questions and resources:

- Books by Michael Pollan, The Omnivore's Dilemma: A Natural History of Four Meals and In Defense of Food: An Eater's Manifesto
- Kingsolver, Barbara. Animal, Vegetable, Miracle: A Year of Food Life.
- Schlosser, Eric. Fast Food Nation.
- “Lessons from the Green Revolution” by Peter Rosset, Joseph Collins, and Frances Moore Lappe.
[<http://www.foodfirst.org/media/opeds/2000/4-greenrev.html>]
- “The Oil We Eat” by Richard Manning.
[<http://www.harpers.org/TheOilWeEat.html>]
- Any of the essays appearing in Food and Faith, edited by Michael Schut.
- Any of the essays appearing in For Hunger-Proof Cities, edited by Mustafa Koc
[available online: http://www.idrc.ca/en/ev-9394-201-1-DO_TOPIC.html]

Questions:

- After engaging in your food consumption study, what did you discover? How will you change your food habits?
- Are locally-produced foods available in your area (within 100 miles)? If not, why not? If so, where do you buy locally-produced food?
- Based on your understanding of the interconnectedness of life, what happens when chemicals are applied to the land on which your food is grown? How does that affect you?
- In a time of increasing oil prices, does it make sense for food to travel so many miles? Furthermore, does it make sense, in the Midwest, for instance, to eat tomatoes in January or strawberries in November? What does it mean to eat seasonally?
- What is food security? Would you consider your community to be food secure?
- What are the working conditions of farm workers? How much do they earn?
- If you eat meat and dairy, how were the animals treated?
- Is the issue of food a social or environmental issue ... or both?

Food-related Web sites:

- 100-mile diet: Local Eating for Global Change [<http://www.100milediet.org/>]
- Community Food Security Coalition [<http://www.foodsecurity.org/>]
- Eat Well Guide [<http://www.eatwellguide.org/>]
- The Meatrix: A Web feature on factory farming [<http://www.themeatrix.com/>]

Observations

As we begin to understand our place in and our interaction with the natural world at the local level, we become intimately aware of how our actions ripple around the entire world. My journey down this path became clearer in 2003, when I attended National Council of Churches conference and met Michael Schut, learning from him the connection between my food choices and the environment.

Living in a world that we can pass on to our children and grandchildren means being in community with each other, and embracing the broader community of plants, animals and insects. If enough of us think that safe parks are important, then our legislators will respond. If enough of us prefer to buy locally-produced food, farmers will respond by growing fresh produce.

While we cannot make people share our beliefs, I firmly believe we can become a witness to what is possible. Mohandas Gandhi challenges us to be the change we want to see in the world. When I serve locally produced milk and eggs at my house, I like to tell my guests that I met the cows and chickens that produced those items. Indeed, I have, along with their keepers. And the total combined travel to buy the milk and eggs? 12 miles, a distance I can travel by bicycle (or by foot if I'm feeling especially motivated!). A small testimony to what is possible.

Engaging in a study on place combined with personal action around food can help us understand more deeply our connection with the natural world ... a connection that is as physical as it is spiritual. And isn't that what this is about, taking little actions in community, that in the end, make our world a better place, for you and me, our children, and their children?

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