The ocean displays to us a dismissive, inscrutable exterior, all motion and mood, all mask and disguise, seemingly rolling on as always, the extent of her wrinkles never varying over time. But don’t underestimate her. Because 99 percent of Earth’s living space is in the seas, this planet would likely bear abundant life if no land existed. But without an ocean, this planet would merely spin unnamed three orbits from a star, its browned-out face its own sterile moonscape. How do we begin to acknowledge a debt of such magnitude?

Whether we can see, hear, or feel the ocean, the ocean certainly feels all of us. About a third of humanity now lives within fifty miles of a coast. Gravity takes the byproducts of human enterprise to the water’s edge and beyond. Most of us exert our most direct interaction with the sea through the fish we buy, and fisheries strain the ocean to satisfy the human appetite. Even air quality affects water quality, because what goes up alights elsewhere, as the mercury from power plants that comes to the plate in your salmon. Coral reefs worldwide are struggling, polar ice systems melting, and billions of animals feel it. The collective weight of humanity may rest on land, but we levy heavy pressure on the sea.

Of course, we also inflict disregard upon the land, but we consider the sea even further outside of us, rather than seeing ourselves within the ocean’s life-sustaining envelope of breathable atmosphere and stabilized temperature. Even many of us who maintain a nature ethic don’t give the sea much thought. We don’t consider what we do to “the oceans” the same as what we do to our families, our communities.

We act like the ocean is merely a source of materials and a sink largely because we lack an ethical framework encouraging us to see otherwise. An ethic is not a strategy or a prescription or remedy. An ethic is a concept of relationship—one we wish to acknowledge or one we seek to forge. For example, one ethic, embodied in the U.S. Constitution, is that all people are created equal, endowed by the Creator with inalienable rights. None of this is strictly true — people differ, and rights are won, not endowed. But this ethical conceptualization of what it should mean to be human provides a moral compass pointing the way toward a truly great nation, striving for dignity and the fulfillment of human potential, with indefinite room for improvement toward that equal-rights ideal. It is perhaps no coincidence that the same wilderness continent that gave thinkers enough breathing room to articulate such lofty aspiration for a new society also spawned the generosity of spirit embodied by such nature-inspired souls as Theodore Roosevelt, John Muir, Rachel Carson, and Aldo Leopold.
Aldo Leopold, a visionary forester, ended his classic 1949 book A Sand County Almanac with a famous call to extend our sense of community beyond humanity to encompass the whole living landscape. He called this extension of community “The Land Ethic”—a revolutionary idea at the time that has since become the implicit core of environmental thinking.

Leopold’s “Land Ethic” articulated a much bigger idea than the land that covers less than a third of Earth’s surface. It was really recognition that what he called his “search for a durable scale of values” led to inclusion, compassion, stewardship.

This ethic’s most fundamental corollary is its implication for right and wrong. An action is right, Leopold advised, when it tends to preserve the integrity, stability, and beauty of a living community, and wrong when it tends otherwise. Rightness is reckoned in terms of safeguarding the present and preserving future options—not just for people, but for the living world that forms humanity’s crucible, context, and endowment.

Leopold seemed to land-lock his great idea by its title. From Leopold’s Wisconsin farm, oceans lay distant, out of sight and generally out of mind, as for most people. Even for many nature lovers, oceans seem distant, vague. And for most people living on Long Island, the ocean is just “the beach,” not the realm that spreads in three dimensions for thousands of miles beyond the breaking surf. It now seems desirable that we should extend our sense of community below high tide—complementing the Land Ethic with a “Sea Ethic”—including all life on Earth in our concept of community.

Were it not for the fact that we are such visual creatures, our sense of community with the ocean should be easier and more intuitive to grasp than even our sense of the land, because our connection with the sea is more intimate. Most of the oxygen we breathe is made by ocean plankton. And when animals left the seas in which life arose, they took saltwater with them, in their bodies—an internal environment crucial for cellular survival. We are, in a sense, soft vessels of seawater. Seventy percent of our bodies is water, the same percentage that covers Earth’s surface. You can test this simply enough: taste your tears.

But the ocean does differ from land, mainly by its fluidity. The same fluidity that generates so much metaphor about life and time also closes the ocean’s skin instantly to hide the tracks of vessels and the scars inflicted by humanity. Yet this very same fluidity that makes the ocean look untrammeled actually smears and spreads the geographic footprint of people—our contaminants, trash, and alien species, the climate consequences of our combustion, and the largest commercial hunting of wildlife on Earth, which has already taken, on global average, 90 percent of the populations of big fishes. The ocean may be uncolonized by people, but it is hardly untrammeled wilderness.

The realms we call aesthetic, spiritual, climatological, nutritional, and ethical interlock to form what we call the quality of life—which we can define as the proximity of the real to the ideal. The wealth of oceans spans these realms. Recognizing the ocean’s importance to life and to human futures would engender a sense of moral engagement. It would mean showing and sharing our sense of connectedness, dependence, gratitude, and commitment to the sea, whose gifts include making this planet capable of supporting Life itself.

What role does the intersection between faith and politics play in how we view and treat our Ocean planet?

In the 1970s, a Republican president, Nixon, signed one major piece of environmental legislation after another, propelling the U.S. to world leadership on the environment. A decade later an-
other republican president, Reagan, said that trees create air pollution, and hired the famously anti-environmental James Watt as Interior secretary. Watt was drummed out of office after it was widely reported that he believed there was no need to worry about running out of resources. He reputedly said, ‘When the last tree is felled, Christ will return.’ The party’s hijacking, by radicals mislabeled neo-conservatives, has tragically made environmentalism a partisan issue — witness the voting regarding drilling in the Arctic Wildlife Refuge. Since Reagan, the Republican party has pursued anti-environmental policies against the very legislation Nixon signed. The party’s current vandals are worst.

Faith figures here. A recent article called “The Godly Must Be Crazy” (Glenn Scherer, Grist, 2004) notes that in 2003, 45 senators and 186 representatives earned approval ratings of 80- to 100-percent from the nation’s three most influential right-wing Christian advocacy groups — the Christian Coalition, Eagle Forum, and Family Resource Council. But many of those same lawmakers got flunking grades from the League of Conservation Voters, averaging only 10 percent approval. Somehow, prominent Christians became anti-environmental. Why?

I and many observers have long believed that the view of humans as created by God in His image, special and above all of nature, and the Biblical exhortation to have dominion over nature, have led us to abuse our environment almost as a matter of prophesy.

But I think that’s too simplistic to fully explain the current rift between political Christianity and environmental values. So let’s look further.

For one thing, environmentalists tend to be socially progressive liberals. They support government regulation. They believe overpopulation is a problem. Some are atheists or have free-form pantheistic leanings. Many Christians are not comfortable with their views and values.

Further, environmental issues are science-based and religious fundamentalists often mistrust science — mainly, it seems, because science brought us astronomy and evolution, which seem to tell us we’re not special in God’s eye. Galileo was life-sentenced to house arrest and forced to sign a statement disclaiming that Earth orbited around the sun rather than sitting at the center of the universe (while signing, he famously uttered, “And yet it moves”). Current struggles over teaching evolution are very similar, even though evolution is the central organizing principle of all of Life and is as proven as the fact that Earth orbits the sun. Flat-Earthers have a stronger claim, because at least the earth really seems flat, and the sun really seems to go around it. I’ve always found evolution much more intuitive. Who can look into the eyes of a dog or an ape and not feel kinship; who can see a cat stretch and yawn and not sense deep relation? But the fundamentalist objection to cosmology and evolution stem from the same fear: If cosmology and evolution are right, we’re not special in the eyes of God; we’re not specially created and the universe doesn’t revolve around us. If that’s what science says, many people want nothing to do with science, including environmental science.
Not all evolutionary thinkers are atheists, by any means. The great evolutionary geneticist Theodosius Dobzhansky wrote “Nothing in biology makes sense except in the light of evolution.” But in the same article he wrote, “I am a creationist and an evolutionist. Evolution is God’s, or Nature’s, method of creation.” But religious fundamentalists and more than half the American public cannot accept evolution.

Yet for many environmentalists, evolution helps ground their sense of connectedness and relationship to living nature. Aldo Leopold, in his essay on the Land Ethic I’ve discussed, wrote so eloquently, “We know now what was unknown to all the preceding caravan of generations: that men are only fellow-voyagers with other creatures in the odyssey of evolution.” He continued, “This new knowledge should have given us, by this time, a sense of kinship with fellow-creatures; a wish to live and let live; a sense of wonder over the magnitude and duration of the living enterprise.”

The sense of kinship strikes me as compatible with the view that we are all God’s creatures, but I think that very scientific and very religious persons are often uncomfortable with each other, and that gets in the way of working together.

But we can’t afford that rift. Too much is at stake for the future of life on Earth. The evolutionary geneticist John Avise, in a 2003 article in BioScience, wrote, “I want to suggest that during this most urgent challenge of all — shepherding Earth’s biodiversity through this critical bottleneck century — science and religion can and must put aside their philosophical differences, at least for now, and join forces in a crusade to save the planet.”

Organized churches and religious leaders have a profound opportunity to play a key moral role. Every religion encourages respect for nature. Many Biblical passages encourage or direct Jews and Christians to act as Creation’s stewards. The Koran encourages Muslims to examine the beauty of nature with curiosity and attentiveness. Buddhism emphasizes restraint.

Organized religions can offer moral authority and distribute this message. But where are they today on this issue?

In earlier times naturalists were theologians, and the idea of natural history was to bring us closer to the creator. When William Bartram roamed the southeastern United States 200 years ago, he sought through his observations the glory of God: “This world, as a glorious apartment of the boundless palace of the sovereign Creator, is furnished with an infinite variety of animated scenes, inexpressibly beautiful and pleasing, equally free to the inspection and enjoyment of all his creatures.” A century later another natural theologian and seminal environmentalist, John Muir, wrote, “every flower a window opening into heaven, a mirror reflecting the Creator.” Darwin himself planned to become a minister, and in the famous closing paragraph of The Origin of Species, wrote, “It is interesting to contemplate a tangled bank, clothed with plants of many kinds, with birds singing on the bushes, with various insects flitting about, and with worms crawling through the damp earth, and to reflect that these elaborately constructed forms, so different from each other... have all been produced by laws acting around us.... having been originally breathed by the Creator into a few forms or into one.” On the lighter side, when the 20th century naturalist J. B. S. Haldane was asked by a cleric what his studies of nature’s diversity of species had taught him about the Creator, he reputedly replied, “He has an inordinate fondness for beetles.”
Whatever one's view of evolution, it is apparent that all naturalists and environmentalists descended not long ago from a common ancestry of people who were moved in deep and spiritual ways toward their love of nature. How tragic that rather than recognizing this common background and working together for the future of life, ideologies have thrown up firewalls and fiercely drawn lines.

I believe that regardless of religious belief, we share a moral and practical responsibility to maintain Earth's life-support systems and its varied beings. Like early naturalists, we must reintegrate the emotional power of religion and the rational insights of science.

By far the most encouraging sign is an awakening among Christian evangelicals of the need to care for Creation. In a New York Times article (March 2005) titled, "Evangelical Leaders Swing Influence Behind Effort to Combat Global Warming," Reverend Rich Cizik, vice president of the National Association of Evangelicals, said, "I don't think God is going to ask us how he created the earth, but he will ask us what we did with what he created." In its document "For the Health of the Nation: An Evangelical Call to Civic Responsibility," the Association states that Genesis 2:15 "implies the principle of sustainability: our uses of the Earth must be designed to conserve and renew the Earth rather than to deplete or destroy it ... We urge government to encourage fuel efficiency, reduce pollution, encourage sustainable use of natural resources, and provide for the proper care of wildlife and their natural habitats."

This awakening is superb news, because if we sink the ark everyone on it goes down, regardless of what they believed. So let us all join together, in an ethic that embraces a full sense of community with the only home we will ever get, and what remains—despite astronomy—the universe's only known island of life, the blue curve of Earth.

Carl Safina is co-founder and president of Blue Ocean Institute. Blue Ocean works to inspire a closer relationship with the sea through science, art, and literature. They develop conservation solutions that are compassionate to people as well as to ocean wildlife, and they share reliable information that enlightens personal choices, instills hope, and helps restore living abundance in the ocean.

Visit Blue Ocean Institute at www.blueocean.org, or email info@blueocean.org to join our email news list.

References: