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Bonn Profiles – Press Reports

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WEA Sustainability Center calls for a rethink in our relationship with nature in view of the Covid-19 pandemic

(Bonn, 08.05.2020) In view of the Covid-19 pandemic, the World Evangelical Alliance Sustainability Center (WEASC), based in Bonn (Germany), is calling for a fundamental rethink of our relationship with nature. As part of the global Christian “Renew Our World” campaign, WEASC published a statement calling for, among other things, stronger regulation of the global trade in wildlife products.

“The Covid-19 pandemic can be a real eye and heart opener,” said Matthias K. Boehning, Director of WEASC, “if we read the signs of the times and let actions follow”.

The statement addresses, among other things, the problem of destruction and fragmentation of natural habitats and the unsustainable, often unregulated and often illegal use of wildlife and wildlife products, which contributes to the disruption of ecosystems. “The fact that this also increases the likelihood of transmitting pathogens from wildlife to humans is an important message that must be heard and understood in times of the global Covid-19 pandemic,” said Boehning.

Together with numerous other Christian organizations from all over the world working in the fields of development, justice and creation care, the World Evangelical Alliance Sustainability Center affirms in the text of the statement: “We believe that God has created an interdependent world within which humans have a responsibility to use the gifts and resources contained in the natural world wisely, cautiously and sustainably.”



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What do wildlife markets have to do with the gospel?

Interview by Matthias Böhning, Director of the World Evangelical Alliance Sustainability Center and WEA Permanent Representative to the United Nations in Bonn, with Dave Bookless, Director of Theology at A Rocha International, on the Renew our World Initiative.

Matthias Boehning: Great, thank you so much, Dave Bookless, for making time for this short interview accompanying the new statement 'Renew Our World calls for a rethink in our relationship with nature' which will be published today. So, Dave, give us a little bit of background to your person and your work.

Dave Bookless: Sure, I am British, although I was born and grew up in India, and I am an ordained clergyman in the Church of England, the Anglican church, and my main work is for A Rocha International as Director of Theology. A Rocha is a global network of Christian organisations working in more than twenty countries around the world helping Christian communities engaged in nature conservation and working with the wider communities as well.

Matthias Boehning: Great, very exciting. Thank you so much, Dave. So the statement is titled 'Renew Our World calls for a rethink in our relationship with nature'. My first question to you: Isn't it actually unethical to deal with the environment during a time of global human tragedy and loss, like we have at the moment?

Dave Bookless: Well, firstly, we cannot underestimate the human tragedy that has been caused by COVID-19. Both, in the directive act in terms of sickness and in terms of so many deaths – but also in the social, the psychological, the economic suffering that has been caused by so much of the world coming to a standstill. So we need to acknowledge that. But if we are to tackle the novel coronavirus effectively, we need to recognise its causes. And its causes are fundamentally environmental. It emerged in the transmission of a virus from wildlife to human beings and it could spread so rapidly because of the hyper-mobility that is part of our globalized economic system. Scientists are very clear that the destruction of natural habitats and our overuse of wildlife and nature's resources mean that we could see more and more of these zoonotic viruses transferring to human beings and causing chaos to human flourishing. That is, we will see more unless we fundamentally re-examine our relationship with nature. Human health, at a global level, is impossible without ecosystems that are healthy and flourishing.

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Dave Bookless and Matthias Böhning during the interview © WEASC

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Matthias Boehning: Well, Dave, I am pretty sure there are some Christians out there who ask themselves what does the issue of wildlife markets actually have to do with our gospel, with the Christian biblical gospel? Shouldn't we actually focus on spiritual issues much more or at least the welfare of people?



Dave Bookless: We need to look at what “the Gospel” means. The term gospel means ‘good news’ and Jesus described it in the gospels as the ‘good news’, the ‘gospel of the Kingdom of God’. In other words, it is about the rule of God. It is not just ‘good news’ about sins forgiven and of a restored spiritual relationship with God – although that is central. It is the news of God’s Kingdom – the rule of Jesus Christ over every area of life. That includes human society, it includes economics and it includes the natural world. Wildlife is part of the creation that God declared ‘very good’ and entrusted to humanity to steward and care for in a wise and careful way. And so if we are misusing and abusing God’s creation it is a Gospel issue. We are failing to demonstrate and articulate the good news of the Kingdom of God if we fail to allow wildlife to flourish.

Matthias Boehning: But with regards to this statement – ‘Renew Our World calls for a rethink in our relationship with nature’ – why this specific focus on wildlife trade and the wildlife markets amongst all the potential environmental topics out there?

Dave Bookless: Yes indeed, there are a huge number of environmental topics, but there are two main reasons why we are particularly focusing on the wildlife trade and wildlife markets. One is theological and the other practical. Biblically, the very first command that God gives to human beings is to reflect God’s image in having ‘dominion’ over the animals, and the birds, and the reptiles, and the fish. And dominion means servant leadership, not domination. It’s our first command in the Scripture and that first command – if you think about it – is about wildlife conservation and preservation. It is basic to being human and created in God’s image to care for our fellow creatures. But secondly, and more practically, the links between COVID-19 and what are often called wet wildlife markets appear to be very convincing. Certain species, such as pangolins, are being driven rapidly towards extinction within our lifetimes by a massive increase in the – often illegal – trade in wildlife and wildlife parts. If we believe that wildlife matters and that avoidable extinction is a tragedy and maybe even a sin or a blasphemy against God, then we have a moral imperative to make sure that these wildlife markets are very carefully regulated to prevent damage both to wildlife and to human beings.

Matthias Boehning: You are talking of a regulation of these wildlife markets. Some people out there are pressing actually for a total ban on wildlife markets. Why does the statement take a more nuanced approach here?

Dave Bookless: A good question. There are some who are opposed to all human use of wildlife on ideological grounds. So, some animal rights-based worldviews, some vegan

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worldviews are opposed to any human use of wildlife. But if we look throughout history, and if we are looking many parts of the world today, we see that human communities have hunted and fished in relatively sustainable ways. And today millions of people – particularly some of the poorest communities – depend on wildlife as part of a subsistence diet. What has changed today is the growth of a global, criminal and highly lucrative trade where certain species and their organs are valued almost more as status symbols for food and for medicine rather than as something that is needed for a subsistence diet. And that is where the focus needs to be, not on banning livelihoods for subsistence communities.

Matthias Boehning: Thank you very much. Last question – and I recognise here is a Brit talking to a German, two white guys – so one very provocative question maybe: Isn't a proposed regulation, that you were talking of, of the wildlife markets the usual Northern or Western patronizing perspective on life in other parts of the world?

Dave Bookless: It is an obvious question and it is a good one. We are part of 'The Renew Our World coalition' and that is global, it includes organizations and voices from every part of the world. That is why we have taken a careful and nuanced view on this, after consulting with our members. So, we have heard from our members in Africa, in Asia, in Latin America. If we only criticized, for instance, Chinese wildlife markets, without recognizing that there are other expressions of the wildlife trade, for instance, in European fish markets, in African bush meat, in American wild meat or 'game' – those are also forms of the wildlife trade. So, we would be being patronizing and perhaps hypocritical if we did not acknowledge that this is a global issue. However, as Christians we believe that all people, wherever they are from in the world, are both infinitely precious to God and also responsible to God for how we use the earth and all that it contains. And so our call is for people everywhere to exercise compassion, and caution, and care in how we relate to wildlife, and in caring for what is God's creation.

Matthias Boehning: Dave Bookless, thank you so much for your time. Thank you for your insights and your explanations accompanying this statement. We hope the best for this campaign and for this statement and this is to explain a little bit the background of the newest statement of 'The Renew Our World coalition'. Thank you, Dave! Bye bye!

Dave Bookless: Thank you, Matthias!

Downloads and Links:

- **Photo:** Dave Bookless and Matthias Böhning during the interview © WEASC
- **Renew Our World Statement and accompanying interview (video and transcript):** <https://wea-sc.org/en/renew-our-world-campaign-calls-for-a-rethink-in-our-relationship-with-nature>
- **Website of the Renew Our World Campaign:** <https://renewourworld.net>
- **Website of the WEA Sustainability Center:** <https://wea-sc.org/en/>

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