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Peter Raven Calls for End to Destruction of Earth's Unique Biological Diversity

"If everyone in the world lived like Americans then you'd need three planet Earths floating around to sustain that level of consumption," said botanist and biodiversity advocate Peter Raven, speaking at a AAAS seminar entitled, "Avoiding the Sixth Major Extinction, Why It Matters."

Raven, who is Director of the Missouri Botanical Garden and Chairman of the AAAS Board, spoke on 11 April at an event sponsored by AAAS's Dialogue on Science, Ethics, and Religion (DoSER). Raven's talk was part of an ongoing series of lectures on various topics at the intersection between science, ethics and religion, among them the study of the human genome, evolution, and inheritable genetic modifications.



The world cannot afford another century like the 20th century, said Raven, citing a number of examples to support his statement. Over the last 50 years, he said, Earth has lost one fifth of its topsoil; one third of its forests, and 20 percent of its agricultural land. He blames humans for making the world less sustainable, less beautiful and less resilient.

"Biodiversity is a precious gift to humanity," said Raven. "The loss of biodiversity is tragic to humanity and this irresponsible treatment of the planet is completely unacceptable."

As species rapidly disappear with loss of habitat, Raven believes, so do possibilities of discovering new medicines or useful products. He said that humanity has forgotten that all bio systems are interconnected. Humans rely on plants directly and indirectly for food and as a source for day-to-day materials and oxygen.

Raven noted that the impact of the deterioration of biodiversity and wild climatic changes; extraordinary population growth (from 2.5 billion people to over 6 billion over the last 50 years); a disparity in quality of life; and disruption of social order is making our planet vulnerable to natural disasters, and causing parts of the world to become uninhabitable. This situation, in turn, triggers economic depression and incites conflict in 'hot' regions.

There are 4.5 billion people in the world surviving on less than \$2 per day, while the United States consumes 25 percent of the world's economic output. Raven is concerned with this disparity and believes that terrorist activities are flourishing because of this instability.

Larry Rasmussen, a Lutheran Theologian and Reinhold Niebuhr Professor of Social Ethics at the Union Theological Seminary in New York City, responded to Raven's remarks with a reflection on the human tendency to delight in causing injury to nature. He suggested that people of all faiths should be judged by their contributions to Earth's well-being.

"Humans moved more rock and soil than tectonics, volcanoes and natural disasters combined," Rasmussen said.

For more information on the DoSER program or lecture series, visit the website at www.aaas.org/spp/dser.

--Monica Amarelo