

THEME SECTION

Environmental decision making in a technological age

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Coordinators' Foreword

Environmental problems are often disconcertingly refractory—not because their technical solutions are not known, but because the moral and political commitment to solve them is weak. Part of the reason for this is

that environmental damage tends to be insidious, its consequence may be far from its cause, and assessments of urgency and treatment commonly involve vested interests. These difficulties are well known, but overcoming them is frequently hindered by inertia or cloaked by ineffective compromises. The most important example of this is the need to regulate greenhouse

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gas emissions; a close second is the growing acrimony about the use of genetical manipulations in agriculture.

To complicate matters further, dealing with the environment is intrinsically complex with consequent uncertainties and with solutions that involve values extending beyond technical fixes by the individual or community to effects on future generations and even 'nature' itself. The answer to all these is often said to be the 'precautionary principle', but this is too often no more than an excuse to retreat from positive action.

In the United Kingdom both the Royal Commission on Environmental Pollution (21st Report, *Setting Environmental Standards*, 1998) and the House of Lords Select Committee in Science and Technology (*Science and Society*, 2000) have addressed the problems of environmental decision-making. The papers of this theme section were planned to supplement these documents; they were given at a Consultation held at St. George's House, Windsor Castle, England from 12 to 14 April 2002. The Consultation continued a series held at St George's House in the late 1980s under the

leadership of the Duke of Edinburgh and the then Dean, Bishop Michael Mann (the conclusions of which were published by St George's House as *Survival or Extinction*, 1989) and more immediately by Consultations organized by the John Ray Initiative in London in 1999 (published as *A Christian Approach to the Environment in Transformation* 16(3) and jointly with St George's House in 2000 (on 'Environmental Stewardship'; available on the John Ray Initiative web-site: www.jri.org.uk).

The Consultation on 'Environmental Decision-Making in a Technological Age' was planned by us on behalf of St George's House and the John Ray Initiative, using 'energy' and 'agriculture' as case-studies. These were presented respectively by Sir Mark Moody-Stuart and Professor David Atkinson with formal responses from Sir John Houghton and Dr Peter Carruthers. The general context was described by one of us (R.J.B.) and a wider dimension added by Derek Osborn. A theological underpinning was given by Professor Celia Deane-Drummond, with comments from Dr Donald Bruce.

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