

Series: "Ecospirituality and Interbeing"

Episode 5:

Why Care for the Environment?

— usefulness, worth and shared flourishing

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Why, exactly, is anybody to care for the natural environment? And how? If you live in Malta, for example...

Introduction

Many of us, in all countries, want to care, and want our society to care, for the natural environment. But are we clear why? We need to be clear why such care is a priority, since many competing pressures exist. And the question of why takes us also to the question of what type of care. And no, the answers are not obvious.

If you live in Malta, for example, you don't need to look far for a live example of these questions. Take the string of

controversies over land designated ODZ, meaning "outside development zone," which is supposed to remain permanently free of construction.

In Qala, Sannat and Marsalforn, swimming pools and penthouses built on agricultural ODZ land by developer Joseph Portelli and his business partners had their permits

revoked by the Court of Appeal, presided over by Chief Justice Mark Chetcuti, who ruled plainly that such works "could never have been developed on ODZ land under current laws." Yet by the time the courts ruled, the structures were already standing.

The Planning Authority has since moved to sanction several of them regardless of the judgments -- the Sannat penthouses were sanctioned in 2024, and the Planning Commission approved further sanctioning of Portelli-linked structures in September 2025 -- a pattern campaigners say has repeated itself elsewhere on the islands. Moviment Graffiti has called the sequence "a mockery of our justice system," arguing that current law lets developers build through an appeal rather than waiting for it to be resolved.





A second, quieter pressure concerns the sea itself. For two decades, one Maltese government after another has floated plans to reclaim land from the coastline, from Lawrence Gonzi's 2005 vision of an artificial island to Joseph Muscat's 2013 call for expressions of interest, which drew twenty-one proposals for marinas, floating villages and boutique hotels along Malta's shores. None of the large schemes has ever been built, largely because studies kept concluding that reclamation only pays for itself if paired with substantial real estate development -- exactly the outcome that most alarms residents.

The pressure has not gone away. In April 2026, a planning application (PA/03174/26) was filed to reclaim sea-front land in Sliema for a private lido, complete with restaurants and a pool. It drew immediate public objection from Sliema mayor John Pillow, who warned the project would block public views towards Manoel Island and continue eroding a coastline that "residents, families, walkers and swimmers" depend on.

Another objector was Gżira mayor Neville Chetcuti, who separately objected that too much of the shared coastline had already been consumed by similar developments. By late June 2026, more than 1,200 individual objections had been filed

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against the application, most citing concerns over congestion and loss of public access. By August 2026, the Superintendence of Cultural Heritage had escalated its concerns about the project's impact on the Valletta UNESCO buffer zone to the World Heritage Committee.

What connects these two disputes – and many others – is not simply bureaucratic wrangling. It is a small island, some of the most densely built land in Europe, watching its few remaining fields, valleys and open shoreline treated as inventory awaiting the right buyer. Every time a rule bends for one more pool or one more reclaimed plot, something finite disappears permanently -- not because the community decided it should, but because the interests able to press hardest usually prevail.

These are not abstract disputes about "the environment" in general. They are decisions about whether a small, crowded place will still have any wild or open ground left for the next generation, and about whose voice actually counts when that question is asked. *[See Disclaimer on Malta issues, at the end of this blog]*

It is against this backdrop, familiar to any Maltese reader, that the deeper question of this blog arises. In so many other countries, regions, and ecosystems we are familiar with other backdrops. So it becomes worth asking directly: why exactly

should any of this land, sea, or living creature be protected at all? Is it only because it serves us, or does it matter for reasons that go beyond usefulness altogether?

One Motive Is Not Enough

Caring for the environment is rarely a single, tidy motive. It is a family of motives that often travel together. A valley might be preserved because it absorbs floodwater and feeds the water table, because it shelters birds and insects capable of suffering and joy, because it holds beauty found nowhere else on the island, or because a community regards it as part of God's creation, and that alone is reason enough to leave it be.

Underneath these practical reasons sits one real dispute worth naming plainly: does nature matter only because it serves us, or does it also matter in itself? Philosophers call this second kind "intrinsic value." That phrase can sound abstract, so it helps to put it more simply. It means a creature or a place can give us a reason to care for it because of what it is and how it lives its own life, quite apart from anything we might gain from it.



The Case for Protecting Nature Because It Serves Us

The most common argument for conservation is also the most persuasive to policy-makers: we depend on nature for our own survival and flourishing. Clean water and air, fertile soil, pollinated crops, medicines drawn from plants, a stable climate, and simple recreation and beauty for the soul all flow from healthy ecosystems. There is also a wiser, more cautious version of this argument: we ought to protect what we do not yet understand, because an unstudied plant or an intact ecosystem may hold value we cannot yet foresee, medically, agriculturally, or otherwise.

This way of thinking has real strengths. It connects environmental protection to health, safety and the wellbeing of future generations. It gives ecological damage a place at the table in economic and political decisions that would otherwise overlook it entirely. And importantly, it reminds us that when nature is degraded, it is usually the poorest and most vulnerable communities who suffer first and worst.

Yet this reasoning has a real weakness too. If protection depends entirely on usefulness, then whatever seems useless becomes expendable. A species with no obvious economic role, an unglamorous insect, a remote



and inconvenient wilderness, or a predator that threatens livestock can all start to look dispensable the moment we measure their worth only by what they give us. There is also a subtler danger: treating nature as replaceable, as though money or clever engineering could ever truly substitute for an ancient forest or a lineage of life lost to extinction. And a purely human-centred view will always overlook the suffering of animals themselves, even while human welfare, measured in the aggregate, continues to rise.

The Case for Valuing Life on Its Own Terms

A different way of seeing things begins with a simple observation: every living being is organised toward its own growth, its own maintenance, its own continuation. For animals capable of feeling, this takes on a further dimension. Life can go well or badly for them, from their own point of view, not just from ours. Their flourishing includes bodily health and freedom from suffering, certainly, but also agency, companionship, play, the raising of young, and the full engagement of their senses with the world they were made to inhabit.

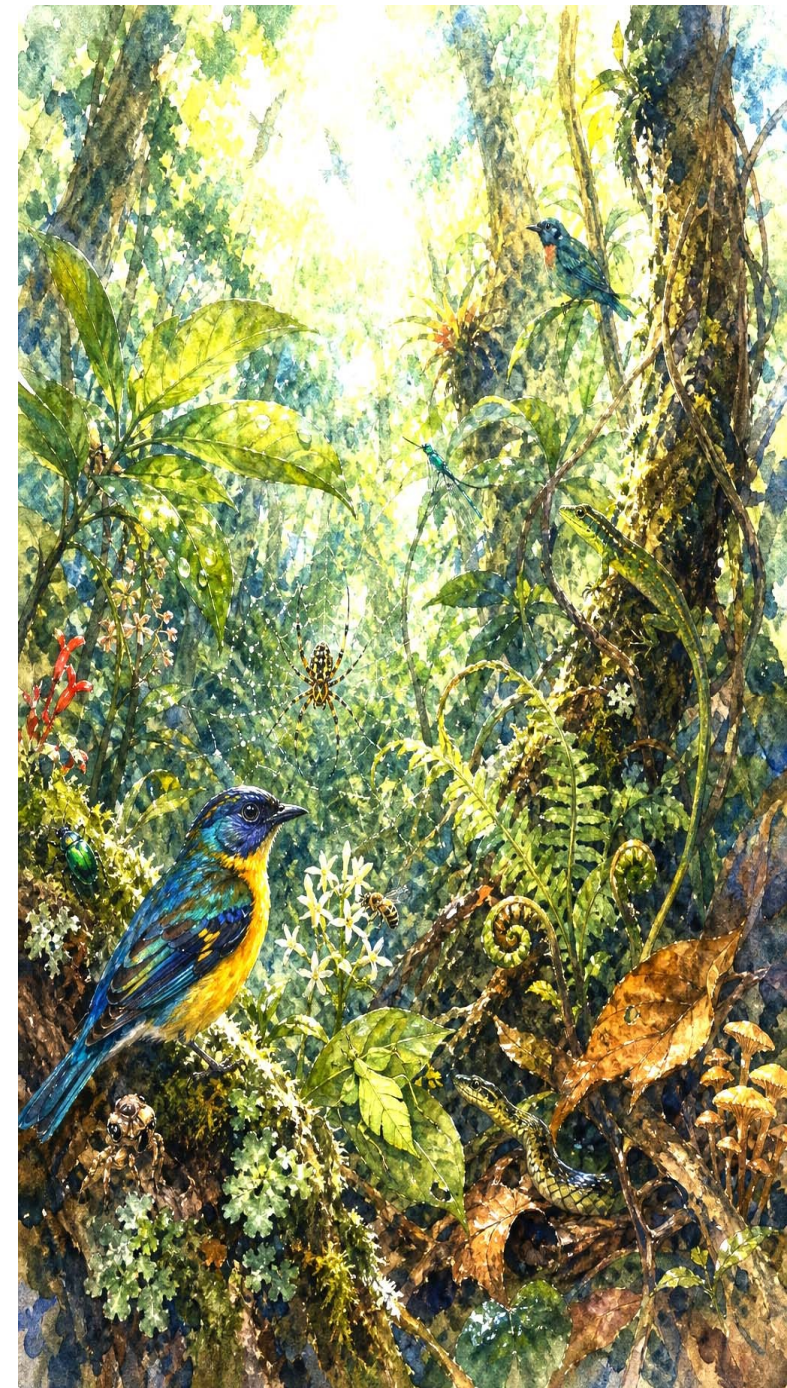
Seen this way, a tree, a bee, or a wolf

is never merely a piece of "ecosystem service." Yes, it may benefit us, but its life and its relationships carry weight beyond whatever benefit we happen to draw from it. This conviction applies most clearly and directly to creatures capable of experience, but some thinkers extend a form of moral consideration even further, to every living organism, on the grounds that each one has a good of its own, whether or not it is consciously aware of pursuing it.

The Case for Valuing Species and Ecosystems Themselves

Species and ecosystems present a harder puzzle, because they do not obviously possess a single, unified experience the way an individual creature does. A forest does not feel pain the way a deer does. Yet species carry within them millions of years of evolutionary history and untold future possibility, while ecosystems hold living relationships, resilience and the capacity to recover from disturbance. To say that these things "flourish" is to speak by analogy: it means their characteristic processes continue rather than being frozen into some artificial, museum-like state.

It is worth clarifying what ecological flourishing does not mean. It does not mean keeping nature untouched, as if under glass. Eco-



systems have always changed, shaped by climate, migration and disturbance long before humans arrived. Genuine care, then, means protecting resilience, connection between habitats, and the potential for life to keep adapting, rather than insisting on recreating one favoured moment from the past. Human involvement in this process is not automatically harmful. What matters is whether our presence is restrained, informed, and willing to leave room for other forms of life to continue alongside us.

Seven Ways of Seeing the Question

The table below sets out seven broad perspectives on why nature deserves our care. Each has genuine insight to offer, and each carries its own characteristic risk if taken in isolation. Reading across the table rather than settling on a single row is, I think, the wiser path.

If you are approaching this from a Christian perspective, the final row of the Table deserves particular attention. Scripture presents the natural world neither as mere raw material for human use nor as something to be worshipped

PERSPECTIVE	WHAT IT CLAIMS	WHAT IT OFFERS	WHERE IT CAN GO WRONG
INSTRUMENTAL HUMAN-CENTREDNESS	Nature matters because it serves human wellbeing.	It gains real traction in policy, and keeps health and livelihoods firmly in view.	Protection quietly fades wherever the human benefit is unclear or a cheaper alternative appears.
ENLIGHTENED HUMAN-CENTREDNESS	Lasting human flourishing depends on intact ecological systems and self-restraint.	It thinks in terms of future generations, caution and whole systems rather than short-term gain.	It still treats humanity as the final measuring stick for everything else's worth.
SENTIENTISM	The capacity for conscious experience is what grants a creature moral standing.	It draws a clear, honest line to suffering and to positive wellbeing wherever they occur.	Plants, species and the health of whole ecosystems matter only indirectly, unless further values are brought in alongside it.
BIOCENTRISM (LIFE-CENTRED ETHICS)	Every living organism has a good of its own, worth respecting.	It is generous in its inclusiveness and challenges any instinct to dominate or destroy needlessly.	It becomes genuinely difficult to weigh countless, sometimes conflicting, interests of living things against one another.
ECOCENTRISM (WHOLE-SYSTEMS ETHICS)	Species, ecosystems and natural processes have worth beyond their usefulness to anyone.	It captures the value of wholeness, resilience and deep evolutionary history.	If pressed too far without limits, it can excuse sacrificing an individual creature's welfare for the sake of "the whole."

in place of God, but as creation-gift, mystery and something entrusted to our care. The Apostle Paul writes that “the whole creation has been groaning” and longs to be set free from its “bondage to decay” (*Romans 8:19–23*).

Human beings, too, share in that groaning and hope. Care for creation, then, is more than efficient management of resources. At its best, it is a response of reverence, gratitude and love: a willingness to receive the world without possessing it, to restrain our power over it, and to take responsibility for the life entrusted to us. Care for creation may mean celebrating an ultimately sacred wholeness.

Christian tradition also needs to examine honestly the ways in which religious language has sometimes been used to justify domination rather than care. Authentic stewardship therefore includes humility, repentance and a renewed attentiveness to creation as something that belongs first to God and participates, with us, in the hope of renewal.

As examples from some of the other faiths, consider these:

Islam: the concept of khalifa – humans as stewards or trustees of the earth on God's behalf, not owners –

[Table continues from previous page]

PERSPECTIVE	WHAT IT CLAIMS	WHAT IT OFFERS	WHERE IT CAN GO WRONG
RELATIONAL AND VIRTUE-BASED APPROACHES	Value grows out of kinship, responsibility, a sense of place, and character formed through practice.	It roots care in lived relationships, culture and genuine motivation, not abstract principle alone.	Such relations can become partial or exclusionary unless they are joined to safeguards that apply to everyone, everywhere.
SPIRITUAL AND THEOLOGICAL CARE	Nature is understood as creation, as sacred presence, as spiritual kin, as gift, or as a field for compassion.	It can ground reverence, humility, restraint and genuine hope in ways that argument alone cannot. It may motivate those moved by spiritual tendencies but remain outside institutional religion. It can generate spiritual synergy among persons from diverse religious and spiritual traditions.	It needs honest self-examination, since religious tradition has, at times, been used to justify domination rather than care.
	paired with mizan, the Qur'anic idea of a built-in balance that corruption on land and sea disrupts (Qur'an 30:41). This mirrors a Christian understanding of moving from "creation-gift" to "entrusted care".	<i>paticca-samuppada</i> is the concept Buddhist teachers and scholars actually cite when connecting doctrine to ecological ethics, including the Dalai Lama's own writing on interdependence between environment and inhabitants.	Māori <i>kaitiakitanga</i> a specific one among many indigenous traditions: guardianship of land as <i>taonga</i> (treasure) carrying <i>mauri</i> (life force), held in trust for both
	Buddhism: <i>paticca-samuppada</i> , dependent origination – the teaching that nothing exists in isolation from the web of conditions sustaining it. There is always the notion of compassion, of course, but		

ancestors and descendants. *Taonga* carries explicit intergenerational framing – protecting land "for the benefit of our future generations".

Untangling a False Choice

It can feel as though we must choose between people and nature, but this is very often a false choice. Our bodies, our economies and our cultures are themselves ecological through and through. Clean air, a stable climate, healthy soil and thriving animal life are not simply external resources delivered to humanity from outside. They are part of what it actually means for a human life to flourish. And the relationship runs the other way too: human knowledge and effort can genuinely aid the rest of creation, through habitat restoration, the rescue of endangered species, and the reduction of pollution.

This is not to pretend that all conflict simply dissolves once we see things clearly. Real tensions remain around food, disease, safety and livelihood, and they deserve honest attention rather than being wished away. It is also worth asking, quite plainly, which humans actually benefit from a given project. Schemes described as serving "humanity in general" can, in practice, displace local and often less powerful communities while the profit flows elsewhere entirely. A just approach to environmental care has to reckon



with fairness in who bears the cost and who reaps the benefit, alongside the wellbeing of the animals and ecosystems involved.

A Practical Way to Weigh These Questions

When faced with a real decision, whether about a local valley, a coastline, or a personal choice, it helps to work through a few honest questions in order.

Name everyone and everything affected: the people, the animals capable of feeling, the wider populations and species, and the ecological processes involved.

Separate out the different kinds of value at stake, such as wellbeing, livelihood, ecological function, rarity, cultural meaning, beauty and sacred significance.

Weigh how severe, how lasting and how reversible the impact would be, giving particular weight to anything that risks extinction, irreversible harm or serious suffering.

Ask honestly who caused the situation and who stands to gain or lose from each possible response.

Favour choices that support both human and more-than-human flourishing together, rather than assuming a payment or a substi-

tute can ever fully replace what would be lost.

Where a genuine conflict remains, lean on principles of necessity, proportion, least harm, and honest, ongoing review.

Keep the affected parties involved in the decision itself, listening to the communities concerned and, where animals are involved, paying attention to what is actually known empirically and anecdotally about their needs and preferences.

Where This Leaves Us

The most defensible way to care for the environment protects it, in part, because we genuinely depend on it, while refusing to let human usefulness be the only measure of its worth. It recognises that we owe direct care to sentient creatures, a measure of restraint and regard towards all living things, strong reasons to preserve species and their evolutionary future, and a responsibility towards the health and resilience of whole ecosystems.

The goal is not to preserve every last thing exactly as it currently stands, as though the world were a museum piece. It is to seek a coexistence that is just, well-informed and humble, one in which our own human projects leave enough room for oth-

er beings, and other communities of life, to flourish alongside us. For those of us who hold this within a life of faith, that humility is not a limitation on love. It is love's proper shape.

Further Reading

For you if you'd like to go deeper into these ideas:

On animal consciousness and welfare: J. Birch, A. K. Schnell and N. S. Clayton, "Dimensions of Animal Consciousness," *Trends in Cognitive Sciences* 24(10), 2020, offers an accessible entry point into how scientists currently assess which creatures are likely to have subjective experience.

On animal spirituality and religiosity, a fascinating and still-debated area: P. Cunningham, "The Case for Animal Spirituality," *Journal for the Study of Religion, Nature and Culture* 16(2), 2022, and P. Waldau, "Religion as Animal and Alive," *Religions* 10, 2019, both explore whether non-human creatures might participate in something like religious or spiritual experience.

On the philosophical framework of ecocentrism and biocentrism referenced in the table above, Holmes Rolston III's writing (see his chapter "Spiritual (In)formation: From Biological to Religious Evolution") remains one of



Disclaimer on Malta issues.

Note on sources: The events, rulings, and figures described above are drawn from public court judgments, Planning Authority decisions, and reporting by Times of Malta, MaltaToday, The Malta Independent, The Shift News, and Sliema.News between 2024 and August 2026, together with public statements issued by Moviment Graffiti, the Sliema and Gżira local councils, and the Superintendence of Cultural Heritage. Quoted material is attributed to its original speaker or organisation.

The present text offers commentary and interpretation on matters of public record and ongoing planning and legal proceedings; it does not allege any fact beyond what has been publicly reported or judicially established, and readers are encouraged to consult the cited proceedings directly as they continue to develop. Opinions here are not necessarily shared by the publisher or host website.

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the clearest bridges between environmental ethics and theology.

On the Maltese context specifically, Malta Today's long-running coverage of the land reclamation debate and Moviment Graf-

fitti's reporting on ODZ planning cases are useful for following how these questions play out in real permits, courtrooms and communities, week by week.

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