There is an old gospel hymn that we frequently sang when I was a child, which goes something like this:

This world is not my home, I'm just a 'passing through,
If heaven's not my home then, Lord, what will I do?
The angels beckon me through heaven's open door
And I don't feel at home in this world anymore.

There is little doubt that Christian theology has traditionally regarded this world as something less than a place to be desired or affirmed. Indeed, to leave this world meant for the "true believer" an escape from a place that is corrupting and full of sin. And, though this view is perhaps expressed a bit more eloquently in present-day theology, it is still fundamental to basic Christian doctrine.

In 1982, I had the opportunity to spend a few hours at the same dinner table with then Secretary of the Interior James Watt. Already aware that his was a highly consumptive rather than a preservationist philosophy, I was more than a little curious to learn why this man who was the appointed guardian of the environment was so disposed to "spend it all" in such a relatively short span of time. I understood, of course, that he and the administration he represented were, by philosophy and tradition, closely allied with various business enterprises that were eager to exploit heretofore untapped resources. Even those resources that historically had been declared of limits because of a commitment to protect and preserve the magnificent forests, parks, and wilderness that shielded them would now suffer irreparable harm if such resources were permitted to be extracted from the Earth.

But, clearly, there was a much more decisive and determinative reason for Secretary Watt's penchant for this kind of exploitiveness. With great sincerity, he expressed the conviction that we were living in a world and on a planet called Earth that would no longer be our home within a few short years. He professed then, and perhaps still does, that the "second coming of Christ" was imminent and that, once that event had occurred, the Earth would cease forever to be of importance to anyone, or at least to those who would be taken to a "home" beyond this place.

There are relatively few persons, I am sure, whose theological views would be so thoroughly Earth-rejecting. Yet, an affirmation of the Earth and a true stewardship of its beneficence will, as some have suggested, "require that mankind yield its claim to the central place in creation and temper the quest for personal salvation with reverence for nature."

There can be no question that the religious orientation of most persons has had a major influence on how we view ourselves in relation to other creatures and to nature in general. We have historically accepted the notion that we are superior to everything else and that the world was made expressly for the benefit of us human beings. As a consequence, we have exploited other creatures for every imaginable purpose and have plundered the Earth to no end to satisfy our own needs and wants.

But, we are finally beginning to realize that the Earth's resources are not without limits and that the creatures we so wantonly exploit can, in fact, become extinct. We are also recognizing, however slowly, that the Earth's biosphere is capable of being harmed, and that we may very well be on the verge of making it so terribly ill that full recovery will be virtually impossible. And, we are finally beginning to acknowledge, however reluctantly, that other creatures are, like ourselves, capable of experiencing pain and misery and are, therefore, deserving of a consideration that does not subject them to abuse and suffering.

In the several articles that make up this special environmental edition of the HSUS News, you will read of the enormity of the devastation being caused by our various actions and inactions. We are presenting this edition as a part of our commitment to the growing awareness and concern sweeping our nation and the world that the time has, indeed, come when we must reassess, and, in many cases, change, not only our personal life-styles but also the corporate (continued inside back cover)
Large-scale agricultural systems... are wasteful of natural resources.

Garbage-strewn water in Hong Kong water pollution contributes to Earth's malaise.

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mental harmlessly pesticides, nitrate and other chemical fertilizers, and animal drugs alike.) We believe that every nation should conduct an environmental impact assessment of its animal and other agricultural practices. As an example, consider the world population of 1.2 billion cattle and 1.6 billion sheep and goats, a significant contributing factor to the global greenhouse effect in many countries and regions since it is linked with deforestation, overgrazing, and desertification in several parts of the world. Large-scale agricultural systems...