SO LONG NORTHERN WHITE RHINOS

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Category: Observations

Last week brought the sad news that the last male, northern white rhinoceros had died. The species isn't technically extinct because there are still two females alive - but there will be no northern white rhino calves and the end is inevitable.

So what?

What have rhinos ever done for us? Why bother about one species of rhino when there are others which seem to be doing ok? More importantly, why is a mission blog commenting on rhinos, when there are still billions of people unreached with the gospel?

In one sense, the answer to all of these is dead easy; God made the northern white rhinos and he called it good. God likes rhinos - and that should be enough to make them matter to us. Nevertheless, let's dig into this a bit more deeply.

It is quite possible, that rhinos have never done very much for humanity; you can't eat them, ride them or harness them to a plough. Sadly, it is the unproven medical value of their horns that have pushed one species to the edge of extinction and endangers others. Doing something for humanity (proved or unproved) isn't always a good thing. Of course, it could be that the northern white rhino does produce some chemical that would lead to a major medical advance, but we'll never know now. However, looking at nature in terms of "what's in it for us?" is a short-sighted and unbiblical way of regarding things. God the garden into our care, yes it was for our use, but we also had a responsibility as people made in God's image to look after what he had made. Important though we are, creation isn't all about us - Genesis says clearly that it was good before we arrived on the scene.

So what about the argument that we shouldn't worry about rhinos when there are billions unreached by the gospel? Why can't we do both? There is no indication in Scripture that the creation mandate to care for the earth was nullified by the ministry of Jesus. Indeed, if we don't do a better job of looking after this planet some of the people groups who are unreached by the gospel may go the way of the northern white rhino before we do reach them. Creation care might seem like a bit of a luxury to those of us in the comfortable West - it's a matter of life and death to many marginalised communities.

Let me approach this from a different angle. As someone who trained as a biologist and did three years post-graduate research on one particular enzyme system, I've come across more than my share of creation vs. evolution debates. I am not interested in getting into those debates here (frankly, I'm bored with them), but I just want to note the amount of heat that is generated by them. Some evangelicals get very hot under the collar on the subject of how species arrived on the planet. What I find surprising, and - to some extent - hypocritical, is the lack of concern about species becoming extinct. If we are see each species - plant, animal or whatever as a special part of God's work, then we Â should be bothered when one of them is driven to extinction.

If you can't make a rhino (or moss, or insect or tree...) then you should be concerned when they vanish from the world, because we can't replace them.