

CREATOR

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THE GLORIOUS NATURE OF THE TRINITY

Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit (Matthew 28:19).

Wouldn't it be fun to cavort with humpback whales in their natural habitat, on the open ocean? Or what if we owned a private spaceship and we could visit any planet we wanted, whenever we wished? Oh, I bet we'd see the glory of God in these things! Yes, but our Lord has provided us reflections of His majesty much closer to home. All that's needed is a good pair of hiking shoes and a curious eye. Step softly through *a meadow*, carefully probe the edges of *a pond*, venture into *a desert* or explore a nearby *woods*, and you'll be treated to something that transcends our normal understanding of the natural world. All of the above are examples of *ecosystems*.

Every ecosystem on Earth presents itself as a profound mystery to modern science. Each is a three-dimensional, full-color illustration of a glorious truth found in

Scripture: "Oh, the depth of the riches both of the wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are His judgments and unfathomable His ways!" (Romans 11:33). An ecosystem is a beautiful *reflection of the nature of the Trinity*. The mysterious life of our triune God gives life in special community to plants and animals in ecosystems.

WHAT IS AN ECOSYSTEM?

The term ecosystem was coined by the English botanist A.G. Tansley in 1935. Tansley believed it to be a special relationship between several species of plants and animals—in relative harmony with one another—within a certain geographic area. The *science of ecology* investigates these relationships, and the effects that the



Sequoia stand in Muir Woods, California

physical environment has on plants and animals. These physical (abiotic) influences include temperature, sunshine, precipitation, soil and water conditions, geology and topography, and the pull of the moon. For instance, in any given environment, the ability of a particular species of plant to thrive depends upon climate and length of growing season. Palm trees do well in the tropics where there is abundant sunshine, but will not survive in Canada or Siberia because it is too cold there and the palm trees would not receive enough sunlight.



Some of the concepts that *ecologists* (scientists who study ecosystems) have used over the past 80 years include:

- **community**—two or more species living in the same region, such as a forest community
- **habitat**—the physical environment in which an organism lives
- **biome** (BY - ome)—a region with a particular climate, possessing key plants and animals (e.g., the Mojave Desert with its Joshua trees)
- **biomass**—the total amount (mass) of living things in a particular ecosystem
- **herbivore**—an animal that eats only plants (e.g., a rabbit)
- **carnivore**—an animal that eats other animals (e.g., a lion)
- **omnivore**—an animal that eats either

plants or other animals (e.g., a bear)

- **predation**—the transfer of energy from prey to predator
- **food chain**—the transfer of food energy between different organisms
- **landscape**—an area, large or small, of interacting ecosystems

These terms represent the ways Christ Jesus has pieced together each ecosystem and how He maintains them moment by moment. Some scientists also like to say that plants and animals *coexist* in an ecosystem. In reality, organisms cannot simply coexist—they are critically dependent upon one another. They have been woven together into a dynamic, living tapestry by the hand of our Creator!

Why are ecosystems so special? Even if we disregarded God’s hand in creating plants and animals (each amazingly intricate), we cannot begin to account for how and why creatures interact with each other in incomprehensibly complex ways within ecosystems. Think of an individual species of plant or animal as a single strand of colored thread. Human reason cannot begin to fathom how the countless “threads” of an ecosystem came to be woven together in such a precise way to produce the stunning tapestry of beauty and form that we see in the world around us, a masterpiece only our Lord Jesus could craft.

Contrary to Charles Darwin’s idea that there is inherent “selfishness” built into each species—creating an “every man for himself” struggle in the natural world—God’s creation actually reveals a mutual dependency of organisms. This is especially true of symbiosis—when two creatures help each other.¹ Every organism in an ecosystem is dependent upon the other plants and animals within that ecosystem for its survival. God planned it this way from the start.

¹ Read about symbiosis in **CREATOR** 5-4.

UNITY & DIVERSITY

We simply have no way of explaining the mutual dependency found in nature without looking to our Creator. For Christians, a sincere study of ecology can reveal the wisdom and power of our triune God displayed in His weaving together and preserving each ecosystem. The mutual workings of the Father, Son, and Spirit are evident in each ecosystem.

Scottish theologian T.F. Torrance—speaking of the three Persons of the Trinity—said that Father, Son, and Spirit are “in mutual love and life and activity.”² If we use a sharp eye and a keen mind, we will discover reflections of this “mutual love and life and activity” in each ecosystem that our triune God made through Jesus Christ.

“Obedient” Ecosystems

The foundation of biblical love is *obedience to God* (John 14:21; 1 John 5:2). Our love for one another, and our love for God, is based on our obedience to Christ. Where there is disobedience among us—in society and in the Church—there is little or no love (please read Genesis 3). In light of all this, we might then say that the creatures of an ecosystem “love” their Creator and “love one another” (though not consciously) when they adhere to the design and function Christ has given them. As a general rule, creation obeys its Creator.³ This obedience is revealed in the way ecosystems usually function in very orderly ways.

Our God, as the Trinity, possesses “mutual love and life and activity.” The life and activity shared between the three divine Persons in the Godhead⁴ is what gives life to all plants and animals in community with one another (1 Timothy 6:13). I will go so far as to say that if God were not Three-in-One, there could be no such thing as an ecosystem.

Specifically, ecosystems reflect the “unity in diversity” and the “diversity in unity” of our triune God. They possess a great diversity of organisms, while preserving a unity that transcends science. Our Lord is three distinct Persons, yet one God—“diversity in unity.” He is one God as three distinct Persons—“unity in diversity.”⁵ (God is not three Gods nor is He one Person who shows Himself sometimes as the Father, and at other times as the Son or the Spirit.)⁶ Ecosystems reflect these truths: Each is a collection of many *diverse* plants and animals living and working together for the health and benefit of the *whole* community—“diversity in unity.”



This desert rattlesnake lives in a very special habitat.
It kills and eats only what is allowed by its Creator.
It obeys its Master—Christ Jesus!

If the organisms of an ecosystem love and obey their Creator, what does God expect of us? “*To those who . . . are chosen . . . obey Jesus Christ*” (1 Peter 1:1, 2).

2 T.F. Torrance, “Towards an Ecumenical Consensus on the Trinity” in *Trinitarian Perspectives: Towards Doctrinal Agreement* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1994) 97.

3 Read about ant “obedience” in **CREATOR** 17-1 & 17-2.

4 The term “Godhead” is another way of saying “Trinity.”

5 Islam is “unity without diversity” and postmodernism is “diversity without unity.”

6 These two heresies are called *tritheism* and *modalism*, respectively.

TRIUNE BEAUTY: A HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE

This idea of God's triune nature being expressed in creation is not a new one. Sixteen hundred years ago, St. Augustine taught that the beauty of God was rooted in *the harmony* of the Father, Son, and Spirit within the blessed Trinity. He also saw "the wonders of creation as having their source in *the perfect beauty* of the Creator."⁷ Augustine thus saw vestiges of God's triune nature in the natural world through the harmony that exists there. Gregory of Nyssa—a contemporary of Augustine—also believed that the beauties of the natural realm "reflect the splendor of the triune God."⁸

The early American pastor Jonathan Edwards was convinced that the love within the Trinity (1 John 4:8) is "the foundation and fountain of all being and all beauty . . . of whom, and through whom, and to whom is all being and perfection"⁹ (please read Romans 11:36). The late-nineteenth/ early-twentieth century Dutch theologian Herman Bavinck said that, "the Trinity is wholly unlike anything else, but everything else is like the Trinity."¹⁰ And if what these men have said is true, then it would be utterly impossible for anything in creation—especially something as beautifully complex as an ecosystem—to fail in expressing a part of the perfection and excellence of our triune God! An obvious example of this would be the mesmerizing beauty found in most coral reefs. Many coral reef fish are carnivores, yet they live in relative harmony with one another (diversity in unity).

INTERDEPENDENCE

But do we find this divine beauty in all ecosystems? Certainly there is indescribable delight in the way God's wisdom and power are applied to create the inconceivably complex nature of each ecosystem. As He delights in being God, He also delights in the things He



has made (Genesis 1:31a). An ecosystem is arguably the most complex thing in the visible universe (which, by the way, means "unity in diversity" or *uni- . . . verse*).

Ecologists have tried to understand and explain how plants and animals interact with one another and their physical environment in the harmonious way they do. In the end, honest ecologists admit that they have failed to provide an adequate explanation for this harmony.¹¹

Richard of St. Victor, a twelfth century monk, pictured the interaction within the Godhead as a *giving and receiving* between the three divine Persons. Taking it a step further, he also said that each Person of the Trinity *feasts* upon the love and beauty and joy of the other two Persons.¹² If so, might the *feasting* of one organism upon another organism in an ecosystem be said to be a reflection of this sweet dependence each Person of the Trinity has for the other two Persons?

7 Douglas F. Kelly, *Systematic Theology*, Volume Two, p. 16.

8 *Ibid.*, p. 21.

9 Jonathan Edwards, *The Nature of True Virtue*, p. 15.

10 James Eglinton, *Trinity and Organism: Towards a New Reading of Herman Bavinck's Organic Motif*

11 Pomeroy, Hargrove, Alberts "The Ecosystem Perspective" in *Concepts of Ecosystem Ecology* (Springer-Verlag: New York, 1988) 1-18.

12 Richard of St. Victor, *De Trinitate*

An eagle capturing and consuming a rabbit could be understood as a type of this *giving and receiving*. Admittedly, the rabbit does not willingly “give” itself to the eagle, after all, it doesn’t want to be eaten! (Nor does the Heavenly Father “consume” His Son.) But God’s love for the eagle (Psalm 104:10-23) allows the eagle to *receive* food from our Heavenly Father, *given* to it by way of the rabbit. In like manner, God *gives* nutrients back to the ecosystem when the eagle dies and decomposes. The environment then *receives* much needed minerals and nutrients into its soils to be used again by plants, plants which also feed rabbits.

Fragile Ecosystems?

Contrary to popular belief, ecosystems are far more stable than was once believed. If a catastrophe, such as a large volcanic eruption, destroys a local ecosystem, it will return in time and eventually possess *the same* plants and animals it had prior to the natural disaster. This is exactly what has happened on the island of Krakatoa (now called Rakata) in the Indian Ocean. All living things on the island were obliterated in 1883, when the volcano on Krakatoa exploded. One hundred years later, life has returned (see *kids’ kreation* #78).

Within the Trinity, each Person abides or lives in the other. (Theologians call this *perichoresis*—PAIR - ih - KO - ree - sus.) And each Person delights in the other Two with an infinitely intense affection. There is sweet, unbreakable love and union between the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit.

This helps to explain the eternal “stability” of the Godhead (Malachi 3:6). God’s love (1 John 4:8, 16) can never be broken. It would be impossible for God to exist without all three Persons present at all times in this loving relationship. If the Son left the Trinity, even for a moment, God would cease to be God.

We see this truth reflected through a study of ecology. If it were possible for us to remove all the pond cypress trees from the



Pond cypress trees

Okefenokee Swamp in southern Georgia (this was attempted between the years 1891 and 1927), it would cease to be the Okefenokee Swamp. The pond cypress (*Taxodium ascendens*) is considered a *keystone species* of this ecosystem. And the health of this unique ecosystem depends upon this tree. Similarly, if all the plankton in the ocean suddenly disappeared, the ocean would die.

Our Creator is a God who does not change and the stability of His triune nature is mysteriously imprinted upon the fabric of each ecosystem, making ecosystems quite resilient and resistant to change. The chief way God builds resilience into an ecosystem is through *biodiversity*. The greater the number of species, the more stable it is.

THREADS & BEAMS

The key species placed within each ecosystem serve as the “backing” for these living tapestries. Our Creator also “weaves” numerous other creatures into its design, like the multicolored threads of an oriental rug. And when we examine the relationships that all these organisms have with one another, the mind boggling complexity of even “simple” ecosystems begins to be revealed.

Using a different metaphor, we could say that the food chain, mentioned earlier, is the “support beam” that our Lord Jesus uses to construct the “home” we call an ecosystem. There are many different food chains that can be found within any given environment—many beams needed to build this living house. Incidentally, the prefix “eco-” found in ecosystem comes from the Greek word *oikos*, which means “house.”

Within each ecosystem, food chains provide a steady transfer of energy and materials from one level of an ecosystem to another, just as a beam helps support the weight of a house, safely transferring loads from one part of the house to another. Plants receive light from the Sun (93 million miles or 145 million km away) and use it in combination with water and carbon dioxide found in the air to make sugar (glucose) through a chemical process known as photosynthesis.¹² In turn, the cells of green plants convert these sugar molecules into other complex organic chemicals necessary to sustain the life of a plant. Along comes a rabbit, which eats some of the green plants. When it does, a small amount of the solar energy stored in the vegetation is transferred to the rabbit. The rabbit is then captured and eaten by an eagle, again passing on a small amount of the energy and materials that the rabbit obtained

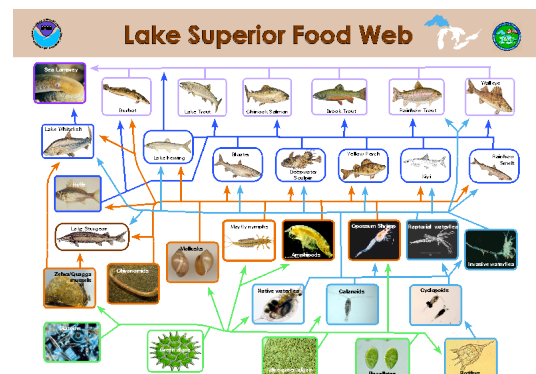
from the plants. The eagle represents the final link in this food chain.

A Food Chain

Sun → green plants → rabbit → eagle

In nature, a given food chain is rarely more than four or five links long. Ecologists refer to each of these links as “trophic levels,” coming from the Greek word, *trophikos*, meaning “food.”

Things wouldn’t be quite so complicated if only rabbits ate green plants and only eagles ate rabbits. This is not reality. Some organisms are the favorite meal for many other organisms. A mouse is a choice meal for foxes, hawks, owls, weasels, coyotes and, yes, house cats. Within a particular ecosystem, each of the above animals *competes* with one another for the limited number of mice available. Some ecologists



An example of an ecosystem—greatly simplified

prefer to use the phrase “food web” rather than food chain to describe these complex feeding behaviors (see *kids’ kreation* #78, bottom of page 2). I would like to humbly suggest, however, the notion of a “food tapestry,” because what God has created and continuously maintains within an ecosystem is far more than a tangled web of life!

¹² Read about photosynthesis in **CREATOR** Volume 2 Number 3.

TYPES OF ECOSYSTEMS

Our Lord Jesus did not create just a handful of different ecosystems, but a vast number of special environments all over the globe, both on land and at sea, giving us a glimpse into His magnificence. Here is a short list of the living tapestries God has made—some grand, some modest:

- Mojave Desert, U.S.A.
- coral reefs
- ponds
- Taiga forest of Siberia
- savannahs
- cypress swamps
- arctic tundra
- the Serengeti, Kenya
- tropical rainforests
- Sahara Desert
- rivers
- Lake Tanganyika, Africa
- bamboo forests
- Brière Marsh, France
- boreal forest
- Lake Baikal, Russia
- alpine tundra
- Rannoch Moor, Scotland
- mangrove swamps
- Carlisle Bog, U.S.A.

• And the list goes on . . .

Ecosystems can be challenging places to explore, but they are—like the “landscape” of God’s character—delightful, despite the difficulties.

One such unique ecosystem is the Vasyugan swamp (below) in western Russia



(southwestern Siberia) along the left bank of the Ob River. A freshwater ecosystem, the Vasyugan is the largest swamp in the northern hemisphere.

ECOSYSTEM TESTIMONY

Every molecule, every rock, and every star in the universe proclaims something uniquely marvelous about the character and glory of our Creator. Yet it would seem that as we study more and more complicated things in creation, the richer and more profound is its testimony of God. The Holy Spirit reveals this truth through the Psalmist, who points to the highest of God’s physical creatures—human beings—as



"George Whitefield Preaching" by John Collet

being “fearfully and wonderfully made” (Psalm 139:14). Certainly dragonflies and doves also display the fear and winsomeness of our Lord, but the Spirit seems to be saying here that man, of all creatures on Earth, displays these attributes most supremely.

So, how much more might something as incredibly complex as an ecosystem—which is magnitudes more complicated than any one creature, even a human being—be a means by which the Trinity reveals His own glory?

It has been said that nothing in the universe properly or fully represents the triune nature of God. This is certainly true because the creation is physical and finite, and God is Spirit (John 4:24) and infinite. Yet, I truly believe that ecosystems *reflect*, in an unmistakable way, the relationship between the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit

within the Trinity. Just as a human being better mirrors certain attributes of our Creator than other creatures, so an ecosystem—which is a higher level of organization than individual organisms, including human beings—better reflects the Trinity.

When we consider just how utterly complex even “simple” organisms are (a honey bee, for instance, has almost one million neurons in her brain and nervous system!), we ought to be stopped in our tracks at how much more complex an ecosystem is.

Many of the world’s most brilliant minds—Galileo, Copernicus, Newton, and Einstein, to name a few—applied themselves to the study of the cosmos. And most had some belief in God. I am convinced that the study of ecosystems is an even stronger



Rannoch Moor, Scottish Highlands

witness for the existence of our triune Creator. But this study takes humility. Researchers have no way of truly explaining the complexities of the ecosystem using purely scientific means. In this, I rejoice! Science can never bring us to absolute truth on its own—only the Bible can do that—but science, if wisely applied, can “get us in the ballpark,” and can be a vehicle of praise and worship to our Trinity.

• • •

Do you want to know our triune God and experience His love? Two thousand years ago, the Second Person of the Trinity took on human flesh to provide us with this

opportunity. While on Earth, the God-man, Jesus Christ, preached that people needed to repent of their sins and have faith in Him. And He died on a cross so that our sins might be forgiven. To know God—to know the Trinity—you must know Jesus Christ, who is the only way to be united to God in love.

Please recognize that you have lived your life in rebellion to God (we all have), that you have sinned grievously against Him, and that you need to surrender yourself completely to Christ’s will. If you desire to be at peace with God in this way, then receive His gift of life in Jesus Christ, who is alive forevermore. Believe in Christ and repent of your sins. Your union with Christ means that you are also united to our triune God, for Jesus is the Bridge between God and man, and the only Gate into Heaven itself!

The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit, be with you all (2 Corinthians 13:14).

Recommended reading:

R.C. Sproul’s *What Is the Trinity?*

James White’s *The Forgotten Trinity*

Bruce Ware’s *Father, Son, and Holy Spirit*

Michael Reeves’ *Delighting in the Trinity*



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