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Panel 4



KATHOLISCHE
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Chair for Moral Theology
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"That he may serve it and guard it"
(Gen 2:15)

*Ethical and spiritual approaches
to the relationship between man and soil*





Farmers often pick up a handful of soil, look at it, smell it, touch it and finally crumble it → a ritual: soil is precious!

0. Towards cornerstones of a "soil ethic" and a "soil spirituality"

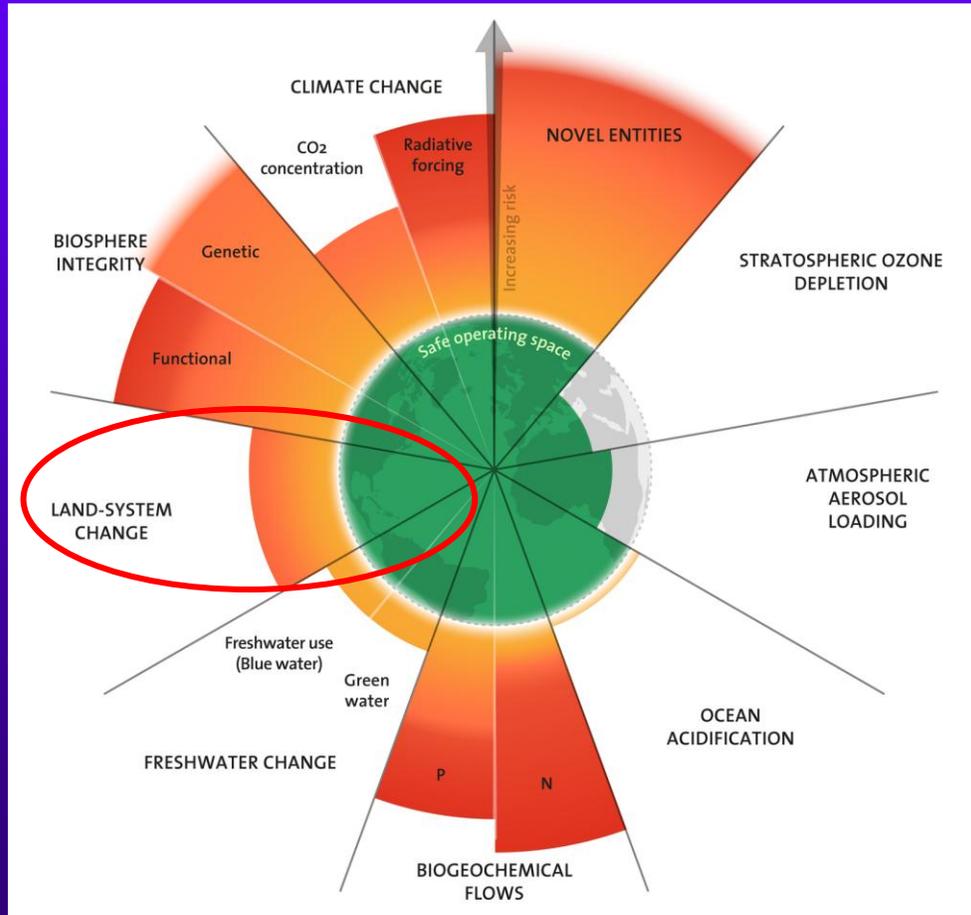
Four steps:

- 1) Classic anthropocentric perspective: plead for a strong sustainability approach to soil
- 2) Biocentric expansion of this view for a more ambitious protection of biodiversity
- 3) Spiritually deepened reflection on the connection of man + soil
- 4) Holistic extensions of land law for ethical reasons

1. Soil as a scarce resource (anthropocentrism)

- soil is a very thin layer that has formed over many millennia and envelops the Earth. From a few centimetres to several meters
- irreplaceable as the basis of life → one of the planetary boundaries: "land system change" (cf. Stockholm Resilience Center)

1. Soil as a scarce resource (anthropocentrism)

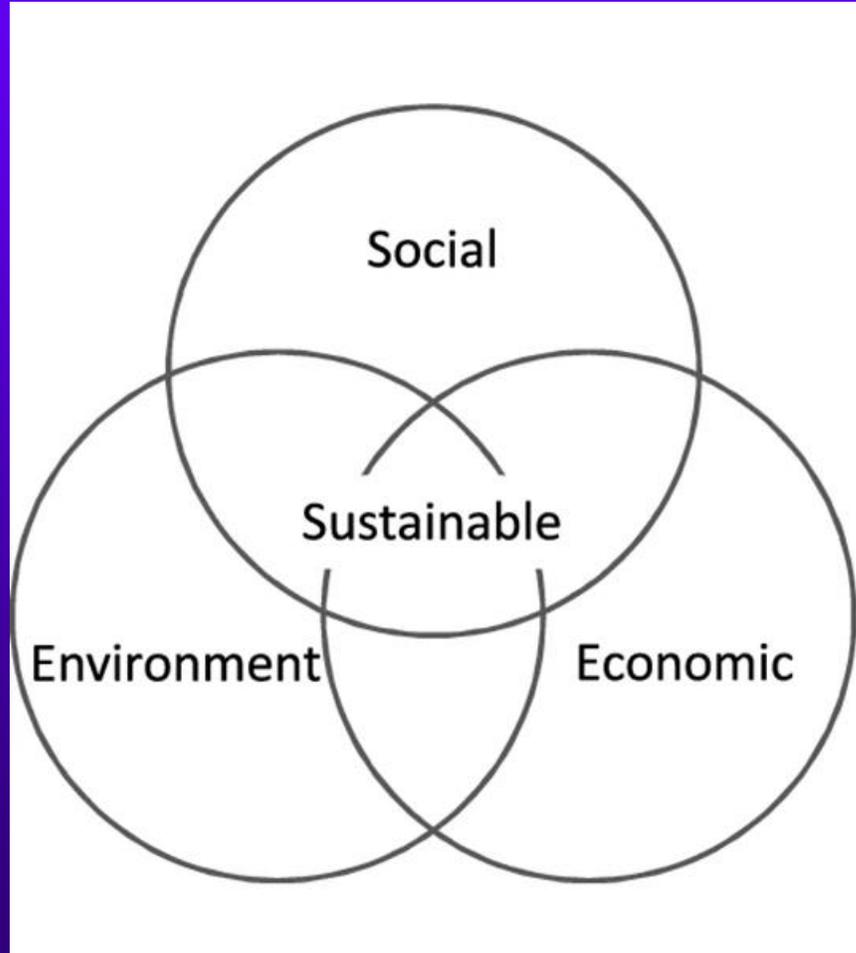


Stockholm Resilience Centre,
Sakschewski/ Caesar et al. 2025

1. Soil as a scarce resource (anthropocentrism)

- Soil degradation: 1% of all farmland worldwide a year
- Social problem: 85% of farms in the world are smaller than 2 hectares and cultivate only 9% of agricultural land, while 0.1% of farms control almost 50% of agricultural land (FAO 2025)
- → plead for strong sustainability (no compensability of one sector by the other)

1. Soil as a scarce resource (anthropocentrism)



Strong sustainability as an
intersection of all three criteria
(according to Robert Goodland/
Herman Daly 1996)

2. Soil as a habitat for many species (biocentrism)

- a single handful of dark topsoil is home to more microorganisms than people on the entire earth: earthworms, springtails, woodlice, mice, moles, fungi, algae and countless bacteria
- to claim that these creatures are all only there for humans would be an extremely steep thesis – no longer convincing
- Biocentrism: humans are first and originally integrated into nature and in this (!) respect equal to all living beings (“biocentric equality”, Paul W. Taylor 1981)
- Pope Francis: "all of us are linked by unseen bonds and together form a kind of universal family." (LS 89)

2. Soil as a habitat for many species (biocentrism)

Two complementary strategies of nature conservation:

- *Protection through renunciation of use* (especially in the case of peatlands, wetlands and primeval forests): EU Biodiversity Strategy + Global Biodiversity Framework: 30% by 2030, with 10% under strict protection
- *Protection through mindful use* (especially near-natural forestry, extensive grazing of alpine pastures and poor meadows and organic farming)

Both strategies require a demanding ethic from landowners, which excludes aspiring maximum short-term profit as well as the feeling of being allowed to do what one likes with one's own land → contrary to modern feeling

3. Soil as the "primordial substance" of all creatures (spirituality)

- man as an "earthling" and "soil being" – 'ādām, belonging to the 'ādāmāh, the fertile soil
- biblical command: "cultivate and guard" the soil – literally "serve it and guard it" (Gen 2:15) → humans as servants of soil
- Three basic attitudes are indispensable for this:
 - *Humility*: < humus: attitude of being close to the soil and staying on the ground → awareness of having earned nothing, but received enough as a gift → awareness of one's own finiteness + freedom from compulsion to perform/ be successful.
 - *Reverence/Respect*: "Take off your shoes; for the place where you stand is holy ground." (Ex 3:5)
 - *Familiarity/connectedness*: Gary Snyder: being at home in and familiar with a concrete regional habitat → know *by heart* the interplay of soil and landscape profile, water and climate

4. Land as the property of God (holism/ law)

- "The effort to preserve nature achieves nothing because it is not compatible with our [...] concept of the earth. We abuse land because we regard it as a commodity belonging to us." (Aldo Leopold 1992, 18)
- "To the Lord belongs the earth and all that fills it, the world and its inhabitants." (Ps 24:1) → juridical consequences:
 - Social regulation of land-trade (Lev 25:23)
 - Eco-social orientation of land-use toward common good (Ex 23:10-11)
- Effectivity today only by recognizing particularly sensitive *ecosystems as legal entities*: holistic legal construct particularly promoted by indigenous communities, already established e.g. in Ecuador, New Zealand, Uganda and Spain
- Spirituality needs legal support!

"That he may serve it and guard it" (Gen 2:15)



Thank you for your attention!