



GNOSI: An Interdisciplinary Journal of Human Theory and Praxis

Volume 8, Issue 1, January-June, 2025

ISSN (Online): 2714-2485

Integrating Ethical, Legal, and Cultural Paradigms: Advancing Environmental Stewardship

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(**Received:** May-2024; **Accepted:** December-2025; Available **Online:** January-2025)



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ABSTRACT

The escalating environmental challenges of the modern world demand a comprehensive understanding of humanity's moral and legal responsibilities toward nature. Drawing upon Indian philosophical concepts of Dharma and Karma and Christian values, alongside contemporary debates on intrinsic and instrumental values of the environment, this study investigates the ethical frameworks underpinning environmental stewardship. The research critically evaluates India's constitutional provisions and environmental laws, assessing their implementation and alignment with sustainable development goals. It also explores religious and cultural narratives, such as Judeo-Christian and Indian traditions, to highlight their role in shaping environmental ethics. Through a multidisciplinary lens combining philosophy, law, cultural studies, and environmental ethics, this research underscores the urgent need for an ecocentric worldview and ethical governance. This study contributes to the Environmental Humanities by advocating for an integrated ethical and legal approach to address ecological degradation and ensure justice for both human and non-human entities.

Keywords: Environmental Ethics; Dharma and Karma; Intrinsic Value; Sustainable Development.

INTRODUCTION

Forests have been central to human civilization, revered across cultures and disciplines for their ecological, spiritual, and utilitarian significance (Nche & Michael, 2024). The importance of conserving forests has been argued from diverse perspectives, reflecting the interplay between environmental, cultural, and scientific considerations. The first perspective arises from religious and spiritual traditions, where forests are considered sacred spaces that foster enlightenment and human connection with the divine. Thinkers like Henry Bugbee and other early American wilderness scholars exemplify this approach, viewing forests as places of moral and spiritual awakening (Van Yperen, 2019). These traditions emphasize the sanctity of nature, advocating for its preservation as an ethical obligation.

The second perspective stems from environmentalists and ecologists, who underscore the intrinsic ecological value of forests. Forests serve as repositories of

biodiversity, regulate the planet's carbon cycle, and play a pivotal role in combating climate change (Psistaki, et al., 2024). By stabilizing ecosystems and supporting sustainable resource usage, they provide essential services that are irreplaceable for planetary health and human survival. A third perspective is offered by scientists, who quantify the tangible benefits forests provide. Forests act as carbon sinks, aid in oxygen production, and serve as genetic reservoirs for countless species (Dasgupta, 2024). The invaluable ecological services they provide are critical for mitigating climate change, maintaining atmospheric balance, and preserving biodiversity.

Given these multifaceted arguments, it becomes evident that forests should neither be destroyed nor diminished. Developmental activities such as road construction through forested areas must undergo rigorous environmental impact assessments conducted with a holistic and integrative approach. These assessments should prioritize not only ecological considerations but also cultural and ethical imperatives.

This work delves into the complex relationship between forests and humanity, exploring arguments from religion, environmental science, and ethics to emphasize the necessity of their preservation. It argues for a more profound integration of spiritual, ecological, and scientific perspectives in forest conservation, advocating for a balanced and ethically driven approach to development that respects the inherent value of forests.

ANCIENT INDIAN SCRIPTURES & THEOLOGY TOWARDS ENVIRONMENT

Religions across the world offer diverse narratives on the creation of the world, often reflecting the unique cultural and philosophical lenses through which they interpret the relationship between humans and nature. Despite these differences, a shared commitment to protecting and preserving nature emerges from most religious traditions. This respect for the environment stems from the belief that natural elements are divinely created and inherently connected to the Supreme Power. In many religions, particular plants, animals, or even entire landscapes are revered as sacred, embodying the divine or acting as symbols of particular deities. Over time, this reverence has been formalized in spiritual practices and beliefs that advocate for nature worship.

Ancient Indian thought is no exception, deeply integrating the idea of human-nature interdependence within its religious and philosophical systems. The Vedic texts, for instance, highlight the critical role of trees, forests, and natural resources in sustaining life. The Rig-Veda notes the power of nature to influence climate and fertility, a sentiment that reflects an early understanding of environmental balance and sustainability (Patra, 2016). The Indian philosophy of harmony between human and nature finds its expression in the concept of *Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam*, which means “the world is one family” (Raina & Kumar, 2023). This concept underlines that both the self and the material world are manifestations of the Divine, emphasizing an interconnected universe where all living and non-living entities coexist in mutual dependence.

Furthermore, the Vedic and Upanishadic seers subscribed to the belief in a cosmic order (*ṛta*) governed by an omnipotent divine being, which governed the ethical, social, and natural laws of the universe (James, 1969). This cosmic law emphasized the importance of harmonizing human actions with nature through rituals and sacrifices intended to please the divine. In the Vedic texts, the need for sustainable and wise utilization of natural resources is outlined, with verses such as:

“Wealth must not be despised—that should be the vow, Wealth must not be wasted—that should be the duty, Wealth must be developed manifold—that should be the determination, the earth should be treated as wealth by itself.” (Deshpande, 2007, p. 24)

This teaching, further reflected in the Upanishads, encourages self-restraint, the sustainable use of resources, and an acknowledgment of the natural world as a life-sustaining system. One Upanishadic verse asserts:

“Whatever is there in this ever-changing world of ours, which is always in motion, is pervaded by a single controlling factor. Therefore, you should nurture yourself with only that portion of resources which has been showered upon you. Do not covet anything more, for to whom do all these natural endowments belong?” (Venkataraman, 2004, p. 54)

These teachings highlight the importance of ethical resource management and underscore a deeper understanding of humanity’s place within the broader ecological framework. The relationship between biotic and abiotic communities is further illustrated in the Rig-Veda, where the natural world is described as an interconnected system: “Too wise, pieces of rock turn out to be friends. Trees in the forest become near relations even amid a forest, the wild animals along with their siblings become thy kith and kin” (Howitt, 2023, p. 3). Such verses speak to the code of environmental ethics that emerged in the Vedic and Upanishadic periods, emphasizing an attitude of respect and harmony toward nature rather than domination.

In contrast, the *Chārvākas*, an ancient school of materialism in Indian philosophy, rejected divine influences and proposed that the universe is composed of four elements—water, air, earth, and fire—considering matter as eternal and self-sustaining (Dutta, 2016). For the *Chārvākas*, consciousness and life arose from the combination of these elements, which they saw as independent and self-existing. While they did not acknowledge a divine order, their view of nature as self-sufficient and independent nonetheless emphasizes a material interconnectedness.

The *Nyāya-Vaiśeṣika* schools, on the other hand, offer a more holistic view that incorporates both the physical and metaphysical aspects of nature. These schools identify nine fundamental substances, including not only the material elements (earth, water, fire, air) but also non-material entities like time, space, soul, and mind (Lakra, 2017). They assert that both natural and moral laws govern the universe, with humanity seen as an integral part of the natural order. This view supports the idea that humans, rather than dominating nature, are stewards entrusted with its care. The *Nyāya-Vaiśeṣika* perspective aligns with the biblical principle, “As you sow, so shall you reap,” suggesting that human actions toward nature are morally and cosmologically significant.

JAINISM & ENVIRONMENTAL ETHICS

Jainism, as a philosophical tradition within Indian thought, emphasizes ecological harmony and the interconnectedness of all life forms (Mitra, 2019). Unlike many other traditions, Jainism asserts that the universe has no beginning or end, and it views life not as a collection of individual subjects, but as a combination of interconnected elements. Jain philosophy does not focus on the question of who created the universe, nor does it believe that material substance reflects the divine or Brahma. Instead, it emphasizes reverence for all forms of life, advocating for an ethical relationship between humans and nature.

Jainism argues that the ecological crisis can only be addressed through a spiritual relationship between humans and the environment (Rankin, 2018). Since Jainism rejects the concept of a creator, it develops a cosmology where every life form is responsible for its own destiny and actions. Central to Jain ecological thought is the belief that all beings possess a soul, including birds, trees, plants, animals, and even water—non-human and voiceless entities that provide essential services for human survival. In Jainism, humans and animals are considered the highest forms of life, possessing rationality and intuition

(*mānas*), and therefore bear a greater moral responsibility toward the rest of the universe.

Jainism also emphasizes a strict code of conduct to maintain environmental protection and harmony, based on the principle of *Ahimsa* (Non-Violence). This principle extends not only to human interactions but also to the treatment of all living beings. Jainism advocates for a worldview in which all life is bound together by mutual support and interdependence, expressed through the concept of *Parasparopagraho Jivanam*—all life forms exist through mutual cooperation (Barbato, 2017).

In line with this ethical stance, Jain philosophy is guided by the doctrines of *Anekāntavāda* (many-sidedness) and *Syādvāda* (conditional perspectives), which reject the anthropocentric view of the universe (Rankin & Mardia, 2013). Instead, Jainism encourages practices of self-restraint and compassion (*Jiva Daya*), fostering a deep sense of interconnectedness and responsibility toward nature.

BUDDHISM & ITS CONSCIOUSNESS TOWARDS ECOLOGY

Buddhism, like Jainism, recognizes the profound connection between human beings and nature. The life of the Buddha himself is deeply intertwined with the natural world—his birth, enlightenment, first sermon, and eventual nirvana all occurred in natural settings. Buddha's teachings often emphasized that the root cause of suffering is desire, and it is this very desire, driven by human greed, that has contributed to the ecological crisis (Upreti, 2023). In this ecological context, human greed leads to the exploitation of natural resources, creating environmental imbalances.

Historically, human needs were modest, and resources appeared abundant. However, as populations grew, so did their material demands. Over time, basic needs transformed into insatiable desires. The rise of competition, unchecked desires, economic growth, and demographic expansion further compounded this situation, pushing humanity to exploit nature more aggressively. Nature came to be seen as an object to satisfy human wants, rather than as a provider of sustenance and balance.

Buddhist teachings encourage a mindful approach to consumption and stress the importance of living in harmony with the environment (Harris, 1991). By recognizing the impermanence of all things, Buddhism advocates for reducing desire, promoting moderation, and fostering a sense of interconnectedness with nature. The ecological crisis, from a Buddhist perspective, is not merely a physical or economic issue but a manifestation of the deeper spiritual imbalance caused by human desire and disregard for the natural world (Harris, 1991).

GOD CREATIONS & ECOLOGICAL ISSUES: THE CHRISTIAN PERSPECTIVE

Environmentalists have long argued that solving the ecological crisis requires not only scientific and practical approaches but also moral imperatives that govern human actions. These moral standards are rooted in the basic tenets of human behavior, where one's inner faith and worldview profoundly shape the way we interact with the world around us. Theistic traditions, particularly within Christianity, offer a framework that underscores the moral duty of humans to protect and care for the natural world. This perspective is grounded in the belief that the natural world is a creation of God, as expressed in biblical texts such as Genesis 1 and Psalm 146:6. According to these scriptures, God created the heavens, the earth, and all living things, and humans are entrusted with their care.

The Bible acknowledges that although God grants humanity the ability to utilize and benefit from the resources of nature, the ownership of all creation ultimately belongs to God. Psalm 24:1 emphasizes this by stating, "The earth is the Lord's, and everything in it," while Colossians 1:16 reminds believers that "all things were created by him and for

him.” Thus, from a Christian perspective, human beings are not owners of the earth but caretakers, responsible for managing God’s creation in a way that reflects His will. Since the 1970s, secular environmental ethicists, including proponents of deep ecology, have advanced a similar view of intrinsic value, suggesting that nature and humans hold equal value and that both must be respected and protected. This ethical framework, which extends beyond theistic traditions, posits that the well-being of the environment and humanity are inseparable, and it calls for a profound rethinking of human activities to align with the natural world rather than exploit it (Sessions, 1987).

A key biblical verse that captures this divine order is Genesis 1:28, where God blesses humanity and gives them dominion over the earth: “So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them. God blessed them and said to them, ‘Be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth and subdue it. Rule over the fish of the sea and the birds of the air and over every living thing that moves on the ground.’” This passage is often cited by Christian environmentalists to highlight the responsibility humanity holds in managing the earth. While the word “dominion” can imply power and authority, it is essential to understand it through the lens of stewardship—an understanding that acknowledges a duty to care for, protect, and preserve God’s creation rather than exploit or degrade it.

The concept of “stewardship,” as frequently mentioned in both the Old and New Testaments, reflects this idea of humans as appointed managers or caretakers of the earth (Butkus, 2002). In Genesis 2:15, it is written, “The Lord God took the man and put him in the Garden of Eden to work it and take care of it.” The notion of stewardship conveys a profound ethical obligation to protect the environment, ensuring its sustainability for future generations. This responsibility aligns with a broader theological understanding that whenever humanity fails to uphold these duties—by overexploiting natural resources or disregarding God’s commandments regarding nature—God is grieved, as it disrupts the harmony He intended for creation.

Thus, from a Christian perspective, the care for the environment is not merely a practical concern but a spiritual duty, rooted in the belief that humans are answerable to God for their treatment of the natural world. This moral responsibility, shared by many religious traditions, calls for a deeper recognition of the interconnectedness of all life, urging humanity to act as responsible stewards of the earth’s resources in a way that honors both divine creation and the integrity of the environment itself.

RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN PEOPLE AND NATURE ON EARTH

This work emphasizes that the relationship between humans and nature is intricately linked to ecological systems, particularly through the food chain. The physical environments in which humans live are not merely constructed spaces but are designed to sustain life through interconnected systems such as air circulation, regulating the balance of oxygen and carbon dioxide, heating and cooling systems, and access to clean drinking water. These systems depend on the natural cycles, including the water cycle, nutrient cycling, and mineral resource cycles, which ultimately support both renewable and non-renewable resources.

Humans, as caretakers of the earth, are given the responsibility to manage and maintain these ecosystems (Alfiyah, et al., 2024). People engage with nature in various ways, such as cultivating the land to provide food, planting trees for forestry, and establishing protected areas to safeguard endangered species. Additionally, humans have learned to harness natural resources through managing ecosystems like lakes and rivers, not only to produce electricity and drinking water but also to support a variety of recreational activities. In this sense, the relationship between people and nature is characterized by stewardship—where humans are entrusted by God to care for the

natural world. God's purpose for humanity includes the role of manager and caretaker of the earth. This divine mandate calls for respect and responsibility towards nature, recognizing its vital role in sustaining life and providing the resources necessary for human survival. Nature, in its essence, is interdependent—each component, from the smallest organism to the largest ecosystem, contributes to the balance of the planet and human livelihoods. In Islam, the Qur'an teaches that the earth and everything in it is created by Allah and is considered a trust (Amanah) entrusted to humanity (Qur'an 6:165). Human beings are viewed as caretakers (Khalifah) of the earth, tasked with maintaining its balance and using its resources responsibly. While the earth was created in a state of natural harmony, humans' misuse or negligence can lead to corruption and environmental imbalance (Qur'an 30:41). Islam calls for an ethical relationship with nature, emphasizing stewardship and respect for all of creation as a reflection of Allah's will. The Qur'an asserts that humans should not exceed the limits set by Allah and should avoid wastefulness (Qur'an 7:31). Hence, while humans have dominion over nature, they must act as responsible custodians, ensuring the preservation of the earth for future generations. Buddhism teaches that all beings are interconnected through the principle of interdependence (Pratītyasamutpāda).

The Buddha emphasized the importance of recognizing the impermanent nature of life and the need for mindfulness and compassion towards all living things. In Buddhist thought, suffering arises from desire, and it is humanity's greed and attachment that have led to the ecological crisis. By cultivating mindfulness, compassion (Karuna), and wisdom (Prajna), individuals can reduce their desires and live in harmony with nature. Buddhism does not see nature as something to be dominated or exploited but as an interconnected whole that should be respected and nurtured. Environmental degradation is seen as a result of ignorance and attachment, and the Buddhist path encourages individuals to live simply and in balance with the earth, promoting a sense of shared responsibility for all sentient beings. Jainism holds that the universe has no beginning or end and is governed by its own natural laws. It teaches that all life forms, including plants, animals, and even non-living entities like water and air, possess a soul (Jiva) and are interconnected. Jainism emphasizes non-violence (Ahimsa) as a fundamental principle, encouraging compassion and respect for all life. The ecological crisis is seen as a consequence of human actions driven by greed, exploitation, and ignorance. Jainism advocates for an ethical relationship with nature based on self-restraint and compassion (Jiva Daya). According to Jain thought, humans have a moral responsibility to protect all living beings and the environment, refraining from harming any life form and living in harmony with the natural world. Jains believe that every action, whether positive or negative, contributes to the moral and spiritual evolution of the soul, and thus the preservation of nature is a path to spiritual advancement.

From a Christian perspective, the Bible teaches that all of creation was initially made good by God, but it has been marred by sin (Romans 8:20–22). The consequences of this sin are evident in how humanity has often exploited and harmed the environment, despite its abundance of beneficial services. The Bible teaches that all of creation was initially made good by God, but it has been marred by sin (Romans 8:20–22). This sin, resulting from human disobedience, has led to environmental degradation and the imbalance we see in nature today. Humans, as stewards of the earth, have a moral duty to care for creation, as God has entrusted the earth and all living creatures to humanity's care. However, the separation caused by sin means humans now face the consequences of their actions, experiencing toil and hardship as a result of their exploitation of nature. Christians believe that through reconciliation with God, humans can return to their intended role as responsible caretakers, guided by moral reflection and a commitment to sustainable living.

Thus, the ecological degradation is not only a moral failure but also a reminder of the inherent separation between humans and nature. As a result, humans face the consequences of their actions, reaping what they sow, in a sense of toil and hardship. However, this separation also calls for reconciliation. Christians believe that through forgiveness from God and a moral reckoning, individuals can mend their attitudes towards the environment, recognizing it as a divine gift entrusted to them for care, not exploitation. Hence, the relationship between people and nature is not one of domination but of mutual respect and responsibility. By acknowledging the interdependence of all life forms and recognizing the moral and spiritual obligations to safeguard the environment, humanity can fulfill its role as responsible stewards of the earth. This stewardship is an ongoing journey that requires constant reflection on our actions, as we seek to align our behaviors with the divine intention for creation and its preservation.

ENVIRONMENTAL ETHICS AND JURISPRUDENTIAL IMPLICATION

Environmental ethics has long been a topic of discussion among researchers, who argue that conventional ethical frameworks tend to be anthropocentric, focusing primarily on human pleasure, needs, and interests. This outlook often serves the interests of a select few, and its prevalence continues to influence human behavior, especially in relation to the natural world. The non-human world, many argue, is often viewed merely as a tool to satisfy human desires, driven by unchecked greed. This anthropocentric viewpoint raises critical questions about humanity's moral and ethical values regarding the environment, particularly as it relates to the broader implications for future generations. While laws and regulations have been established to safeguard the environment, these measures are often criticized for being poorly enforced and insufficiently ethical, especially when it comes to the well-being of non-human life and marginalized human communities.

To effectively address the ecological crisis, it is essential to apply environmental ethics, which are moral standards developed not only for humans but also for other species, especially those that cannot advocate for themselves. An example of how legal systems have begun to recognize the need for ethical environmental protections can be seen in landmark rulings such as the *Rural Litigation and Entitlement Kendra v. State of Uttar Pradesh*, where India's Supreme Court expanded the scope of Article 21 of the Indian Constitution, which guarantees the fundamental right to life (Das, 2022). The Court ruled that environmental rights were inherent in this right, acknowledging that a meaningful life includes the enjoyment of a healthy environment. This judgment exemplifies the integration of environmental ethics into the jurisprudence of India.

While India has made significant strides in environmental jurisprudence, other countries have also taken steps to implement ethical environmental principles within their legal systems. For example, in the United Kingdom, environmental law is heavily influenced by the European Union's directives and the UK's own Climate Change Act, which sets binding targets to reduce greenhouse gas emissions and promote sustainability (Carlarne, 2010). The UK's focus on reducing carbon emissions reflects a growing recognition of the ethical obligation to mitigate human impact on the planet. In Nigeria, environmental law faces challenges in enforcement, particularly in relation to the oil industry, which has been linked to widespread environmental degradation. Nigeria's National Environmental Standards and Regulations Enforcement Agency (NESREA) was established to ensure compliance with environmental regulations, but the efficacy of these regulations has been undermined by systemic corruption and inadequate enforcement mechanisms (Bakare, et al., 2024). Despite these challenges, Nigeria has made some progress in recognizing the need for stronger environmental

ethics, particularly through public campaigns and local initiatives aimed at reducing pollution and conserving natural resources.

In the United States, environmental laws such as the Clean Air Act and the Clean Water Act reflect the ethical imperative to protect public health and ecosystems from pollution and exploitation (Schmalensee & Stavins, 2019).. The U.S. has also made international commitments, such as the Paris Agreement, to address global environmental challenges. However, debates over climate change and environmental policies often reflect a tension between economic interests and environmental sustainability, revealing the need for more robust ethical considerations in policymaking.

In India, the Wildlife (Protection) Act of 1972 plays a significant role in safeguarding biodiversity by establishing protected areas and regulating the exploitation of wildlife. The Act has several provisions aimed at protecting both ecosystems and species from destruction. Section 29 and 35(6) of the Act outline that any destruction or removal of wildlife from protected areas requires a permit issued by the Chief Wildlife Warden (CWW), emphasizing the role of the state in preserving wildlife habitats. However, this provision has been criticized for granting the CWW excessive discretionary powers, which can be exploited for personal gain or to bypass environmental protections. This loophole in the law highlights the ethical concerns of arbitrary decision-making by authorities and the lack of transparency in the management of protected areas. Similar issues exist under Section 33 of the Act, which authorizes the CWW to construct infrastructure and carry out activities in wildlife sanctuaries, such as roads and buildings, which may conflict with the purpose of protecting these areas. The discretionary power granted to the CWW has often led to conflicts of interest, especially when commercial or development activities threaten the integrity of these protected areas. Without effective checks and balances, these discretionary powers may undermine the ethical foundations of environmental stewardship.

Furthermore, the Forest Conservation Act of 1980 has provisions that prohibit the diversion of forest land for non-forest purposes without prior approval from the central government. This law, aimed at curbing deforestation, highlights the ethical responsibility to protect forests as vital ecosystems (Ramesh, 1999). However, like wildlife protection laws, enforcement remains inconsistent, and the balance between development and conservation continues to be a contentious issue in many regions. The ethical and legal challenges surrounding environmental governance are not limited to India, but are global in scope. As climate change, biodiversity loss, and pollution continue to threaten the planet's ecosystems, the need for comprehensive environmental ethics becomes more urgent. These ethics must be embedded not only in the laws of individual nations but also in international agreements and legislative frameworks. The recognition that both human and non-human life must be safeguarded through ethical standards is fundamental to ensuring that environmental laws are effective, equitable, and just.

Thus, environmental ethics and legal frameworks must evolve to reflect a more inclusive and holistic view of the environment, recognizing the interdependence of all life forms and the ethical responsibility to protect them. Whether in India, the UK, the US, or Nigeria, the moral obligations outlined in international treaties and national laws must be accompanied by rigorous enforcement and accountability. Without this, laws will remain ineffective, and the ethical dilemmas surrounding the exploitation of nature will persist.

CONCEPT OF DHARMA AND KARMA ITS SYNTHESIS IN INDIAN PHILOSOPHY AND ITS APPLICABILITY IN ENVIRONMENTAL ETHICS (EE)

The concept of *Dharma* originates from the Sanskrit root *dhri*, meaning “to hold together,” and represents the principles that integrate the diverse aspects of existence into a cohesive whole (Long, et al., 2022). Traditionally associated with righteousness and duty, *Dharma* extends beyond religious connotations to signify an individual’s responsibility toward all living and non-living entities. This expansive understanding makes it a powerful framework for addressing environmental consciousness. It advocates for a symbiotic relationship between humans and nature, emphasizing a sustainable way of living that respects the intrinsic value of the natural world.

Karma, another cornerstone of Indian philosophy, complements *Dharma* by emphasizing the cause-and-effect relationship inherent in actions. It underscores that every action has a consequence, thereby fostering accountability for the impact of human activities on the environment (Baig, 2024). Together, these concepts create a synthesis of ethical principles that align ecological balance with personal and societal responsibility. They challenge exploitative attitudes and foster a deeper appreciation of the interconnectedness of all life forms, presenting a moral imperative for sustainable practices.

In the realm of environmental ethics (EE), *Dharma* provides a structural model to enhance ecological awareness and cultivate practices that align with environmental preservation. It advocates a duty-bound approach to safeguarding ecosystems, promoting a balance between development and sustainability. The principle of *Dharma* integrates the moral obligation to protect the environment with practical frameworks for governance, aligning seamlessly with global efforts to uphold ecological integrity. It informs the creation of policies that prioritize long-term ecological health over short-term economic gains, urging individuals, corporations, and governments to act responsibly.

Karma introduces the element of consequence, emphasizing that ecological harm caused by exploitative actions will ultimately affect human well-being. It fosters a culture of accountability by linking actions to their environmental outcomes, encouraging behavior that minimizes harm to ecosystems. This principle also supports the ethical dimension of regulatory measures, advocating for stringent enforcement against environmental degradation and the incentivization of sustainable practices. Through *Karma*, ethical behavior becomes a central aspect of environmental stewardship, promoting actions that nurture rather than exploit nature.

The synthesis of *Dharma* and *Karma* within Indian philosophy offers profound insights into environmental ethics. These principles advocate for a self-realization that extends beyond individual needs to encompass the well-being of all life forms. They provide a philosophical foundation for opposing destructive attitudes and fostering a harmonious relationship with nature. This perspective resonates with Warwick Fox’s concept of *transpersonal ecology*, which extends moral obligations to the environment and encourages an ecological self that recognizes the interdependence of all life (Fox, 1990). In practical terms, *Dharma* and *Karma* encourage sustainable practices such as conservation, reforestation, pollution reduction, and the use of renewable energy. By embedding these principles into environmental education and policy-making, they cultivate a sense of ethical responsibility and long-term thinking (Rankin, 2019). These concepts align with international frameworks like the United Nations’ Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), enriching global efforts to combat climate change and environmental degradation.

Through their focus on responsibility, accountability, and harmony, *Dharma* and *Karma* present a holistic approach to environmental ethics. They inspire individuals and societies to act with mindfulness, ensuring that human progress aligns with the preservation of ecological balance. These principles not only deepen the understanding of environmental ethics but also offer actionable pathways to address contemporary ecological challenges.

INHERENT VALUES OF NON-HUMAN ENTITIES OF THE ENVIRONMENT

Instrumental Value of the Environment

A central debate in environmental ethics revolves around whether non-human entities possess only instrumental value or also have intrinsic value. Aristotle, in his philosophical discourse, suggested that “nature has made all things specifically for the sake of man,” framing non-human entities as instruments designed to serve human purposes. This anthropocentric perspective views cruelty to animals as wrong not because of the harm caused to the animals themselves but because it fosters insensitivity in humans toward all forms of life. Peter Singer, in his seminal work *Animal Liberation*, challenged this view by introducing a framework that advocates ethical treatment of animals. In the Indian context, the Constitution acknowledges the instrumental value of nature under Article 51-A(g), emphasizing a duty to care for living creatures (Roy, 2023). Yet, proponents of instrumentalism argue that environmental harm, such as deforestation, is wrong primarily because it disrupts resources essential for human survival, rather than because it is inherently unethical.

Intrinsic Value of the Environment

The concept of intrinsic value posits that nature and its components hold value independently of their utility to humans. Historian Lynn White Jr., in his 1967 essay, critiqued the anthropocentric ethos rooted in Judeo-Christian thought, which places humans at the center of creation and promotes the exploitation of natural resources. White argued that this worldview alienates humans from nature, fostering the misconception that humanity is separate from and superior to the natural world. Utilitarianism, as propagated by philosophers like Bentham, further reinforced this idea by treating nature as a mere resource for human consumption.

Environmentalists advocating ecocentrism challenge this anthropocentric perspective, arguing for an egalitarian relationship between humans and non-human entities. Ecocentrism recognizes that all forms of life—humans, plants, animals, and ecosystems—are interconnected and possess equal value. This paradigm shift calls for acknowledging the inherent rights of all natural entities, irrespective of their utility to humans.

Moral Responsibility

Environmental ethics compel us to reflect on our moral responsibilities toward the environment, not just for ourselves but for future generations. The depletion of non-renewable resources and the environmental degradation caused by unrestrained consumption pose significant ethical questions. Should we prioritize short-term convenience over long-term sustainability? The analysis of over 2,000 project proposals in India between 2014 and 2020 highlights the delicate balance between development and conservation. While developmental projects, including those near protected areas, have received high approval rates, they underscore the need for stricter environmental safeguards.

Indian constitutional provisions, such as Article 48-A and Article 51-A(g), enshrine the principle of environmental protection as a fundamental duty (Shekhar, 2023). Prime Minister Narendra Modi's emphasis on sustainable development underscores the moral obligation to balance human needs with environmental preservation. Ethical considerations extend beyond humans to include plants, animals, and other non-human entities, as echoed in the works of scholars like Peter Singer and A. Singh. The unchecked destruction of wildlife habitats often results in human-animal conflicts, posing threats to both humans and animals. In many instances, animals are killed for consumption, religious rituals, or as a consequence of habitat loss. These actions raise critical ethical questions: How can we justify depriving animals of their habitats and lives? Who granted humans the authority to exploit other species for convenience? The extinction and endangerment of numerous species, driven by human activities, demand a reassessment of our relationship with nature.

Sustainable Consumption of Natural Resources

Sustainable consumption is a cornerstone of environmental ethics. The natural environment is not a limitless storehouse to be exploited but a reserve of resources vital for the continuity of life. Overexploitation and excessive consumption of resources not only jeopardize current ecological balance but also endanger the well-being of future generations. This indiscriminate depletion of resources is inherently unethical and calls for immediate action guided by legal and ethical frameworks.

Environmental ethics encourage us to adopt a mindset of stewardship, where the preservation of nature and its resources becomes a collective moral obligation. By aligning consumption patterns with the principles of sustainability, we can ensure that the needs of present and future generations are met without compromising the planet's ecological integrity.

DESTRUCTION OF ENVIRONMENTAL RESOURCES

The destruction of natural resources caused by industrial processes raises critical questions: Is it not the responsibility of industries to restore depleted resources? Furthermore, can a restored environment truly compensate for the loss of the original one? Mining operations, for instance, often disrupt ecosystems, damaging plant and animal life without offering alternatives for restoration. Similarly, slash-and-burn techniques used for clearing land lead to widespread deforestation and environmental degradation. Can the loss of vast tree cover and the resultant ecological imbalance ever be justified?

In many cases, such activities result in severe consequences like landslides and floods in affected regions, yet accountability remains elusive. Who grants the authority for such destructive practices, and how are they regulated? In Nigeria, illegal logging and resource extraction have led to significant deforestation, despite the existence of laws like the *Nigerian Forest Act* (1938, as amended), which provides guidelines for forest management and conservation. Weak enforcement, corruption, and limited community involvement have undermined these efforts, creating a trust deficit between citizens and the government.

In the United States, the *National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA)* of 1969 aims to prevent environmental degradation by requiring environmental impact assessments for federal projects. However, the challenge remains in balancing industrial development with environmental sustainability. Similarly, in the United Kingdom, the *Environment Act* of 1995 established the Environment Agency and emphasizes sustainable development, pollution control, and waste management. Yet, like in other nations, gaps

in enforcement and public consultation persist, allowing industries to exploit natural resources with limited accountability.

The global pattern is evident: laws are often passed without adequate input from the communities most affected by environmental destruction. This exclusion further aggravates distrust in governance and weakens the implementation of environmental laws. Governments worldwide must adopt inclusive and transparent approaches, ensuring that industrial development does not come at the expense of environmental and community well-being.

ENVIRONMENTAL POLLUTION AND ITS ETHICAL STANDARDIZATION

Societal standards for resource extraction are deeply tied to socio-economic priorities, but the unchecked exploitation of nature has led to alarming levels of environmental degradation. The growing global population continues to strain Earth's resources, exceeding the planet's carrying capacity. Animal and plant habitats are increasingly being destroyed to make room for human habitation and development, often without considering the long-term ecological costs.

In Nigeria, pollution from oil exploration in the Niger Delta has devastated ecosystems and displaced communities, despite the existence of laws like the *Petroleum Act* (1969) and the *Environmental Impact Assessment Act* (1992). The United States has seen similar issues, particularly with industrial pollution and carbon emissions. Acts like the *Clean Air Act* (1963, as amended) and the *Clean Water Act* (1972) were introduced to combat pollution, but enforcement challenges remain, particularly in balancing economic growth with environmental protection. In the United Kingdom, the *Environmental Protection Act* (1990) focuses on controlling waste and reducing pollution, yet the demand for urban expansion often leads to biodiversity loss and deforestation.

These examples highlight a universal ethical dilemma: Is it ethical to prioritize short-term economic gains over long-term environmental sustainability? Cutting down trees and destroying habitats for human development results in the loss of biodiversity, yet such acts are rarely seen as unethical. This perception needs to change, and ethical standards must guide legal frameworks to strike a balance between development and environmental conservation.

Globally, environmental laws aim to address these issues. For example, the *Public Liability Insurance Act* (1991) in India provides relief to victims of environmental accidents involving hazardous substances. Similarly, the *Environmental Protection Act* (1986) empowers the Indian government to regulate industries contributing to pollution. These laws reflect the need for ethical and administrative measures to manage environmental challenges.

Incorporating ethical principles into legal standards is crucial for addressing pollution and resource depletion. Environmental governance should be informed by inclusivity, transparency, and the active involvement of communities. By enforcing robust laws, such as Nigeria's *Harmful Waste Act* (1988), the UK's *Climate Change Act* (2008), and the USA's *Endangered Species Act* (1973), governments can protect ecosystems while fostering trust and cooperation. As Daniel Henning (1974) observed, environmental law is inherently complex and requires clear ethical guidance to navigate ambiguities and address real-world challenges. Through these combined efforts, nations can work towards sustainable development and equitable environmental stewardship.

CONCLUSION

The Tiwari Committee of 1980 was a significant initiative in India, tasked with reviewing the country's environmental administration and legislative measures. The committee

identified five key areas essential for environmental protection: land and water management, natural living resources, environmental pollution and impact assessment, human settlements, and environmental education and awareness. However, the committee's recommendations fell short in addressing critical issues, such as preventing the construction of roads and other developmental projects within protected areas, which are essential for safeguarding forests and wildlife. While development is crucial, it should never come at the expense of the environment or the livelihoods of local communities.

Across the world, nations are grappling with similar environmental challenges, particularly in managing natural resources and preventing exploitation. Achieving sustainable, long-term solutions to these problems requires a strong moral framework for action. Despite the significant body of environmental law, its implementation often remains weak, highlighting a need for more robust enforcement mechanisms. Human attitudes toward nature, wildlife, and the environment are fundamental in shaping ethical behavior, and unfortunately, greed and selfishness frequently determine our relationship with the natural world.

In the context of environmental legislation, countries like Nigeria, the United Kingdom, and the United States have also faced significant challenges in ensuring the protection of nature. In Nigeria, for instance, environmental laws have been criticized for insufficient enforcement, often exacerbating issues such as deforestation, pollution, and resource exploitation. In the UK, the Environmental Protection Act 1990 and various environmental regulations have made strides in waste management and pollution control, but challenges remain in fully integrating sustainability into policy and practice. The United States, with its significant body of environmental laws, such as the Clean Air Act and the National Environmental Policy Act, continues to struggle with balancing development and environmental conservation, especially in the face of political opposition and economic pressures.

Environmental law functions as an ethical tool that seeks to protect the most vulnerable—both human and non-human populations. It works to defend the voiceless in the face of exploitation, particularly in countries where weaker nations are often treated as dumping grounds by wealthier, consumer-driven societies. As such, environmental law inherently aligns with some of the core principles of socialism, promoting fairness and justice for all.

From a Christian perspective, the Bible offers a profound moral foundation for environmental stewardship. The teachings in Genesis 1 and 2, as well as in Luke 12:16, emphasize humanity's responsibility to care for God's creation. This message is mirrored in many world religions, each acknowledging that the Earth and all living beings belong to God and that humans have a sacred duty to protect and cherish them. Environmental stewardship, therefore, is not merely a legal responsibility but a moral one, grounded in the ethical values shared across cultures and faiths.

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