

## ENVIRONMENTAL ETHICS AND ITS SIGNIFICANCE TOWARDS SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT

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### **ABSTRACT:**

*Environmental ethics is a new sub-discipline of philosophy that deals with the ethical problems surrounding environmental protection. It aims to provide ethical justification and moral motivation for the cause of global environmental protection. Environmental ethics believe that non human living creatures like plants and animals are also very important part of the world and are considered to be a functional part of human life. So it is essential that every human being value and respect this theme and also use morals and ethics when dealing with these creatures. Thus environmental ethics studies the moral and ethical relationship of human beings to the environment and how ethics play a role in this. It exerts influence on a large range of disciplines including environmental law, environmental sociology, ecotheology, ecological economics, ecology and environmental geography. Environmental ethics along with human values make for challenging philosophical debates over man's interaction with the environment.*

**Key words:** *Environmental ethics, sustainable development, resources, conservation, preservation.*

### **INTRODUCTION:**

Though there has been a long standing debate over ethical issues pertaining to the environment environmental ethics has emerged as a philosophical discipline in the 1970s. Its emergence was the result of increased awareness about impact of growing population on limited environmental resources as well as the environmental consequences with the growing use modern technology. By environment means the entire collection of habitats-including humans, all other life forms, all other living and nonliving entities and systems, from all ecosystems to solar systems-in which, with which and with whom we, humans live. Although environmental ethics has developed over nearly thirty years, its development has been asymmetric. Earth's biodiversity is in more jeopardy

today than previously in the history of life. If we do not shift our present development course, “at least a fifth of the species of plants would be gone or committed to early extinction by 2030, and half by the end of the century” (1). The consumption of resources is going at a faster rate than they can naturally replenish. The stronger demand for resources is also a factor that contributes to the problem as we all need food and shelter. With the rapid increase in world’s population, the consumption of natural resources has been increased several times. Engineering developments are resulting in resource depletion and environmental destruction. This has degraded our planet’s ability to provide the services we humans need. There are several environmental issues that have created havoc on our environment and human life. If ignored today, these ill effects are sure to curb human existence in the near future (2). The major environmental issues include overpopulation, industrial and household waste, acid rain, climate change, ozone layer depletion, urban sprawl, resource degradation, genetic engineering, deforestation and global warming. These environmental issues have taken toll on our environment and resulted some disastrous on humans; like rise in sea level, depletion of non-renewable resources, melting of glaciers, extinction of species, polluted landfills, toxic dust, decreasing soil fertility, rise in air and water pollution and many more. Cutting down of trees or using fossil fuels erratically, industrialization, pollution, disturbing ecological balance, all these are attributable to human activities, for their own benefit, without any concern for the animals which also depend on natural resources for survival. Just because humans are in possession of all of these natural resources does not mean that they can use those resources in any manner they want. Human values are unique to each individual because not everyone places the same importance on each element of life. For example, a person living in poverty in an undeveloped country may find it morally acceptable to cut down the forest to make room for a farm where he can grow food for his family. However a person in a developed country may find this action morally unacceptable because the destruction of forests increases carbon dioxide emissions into the atmosphere which can negatively impact the environment.

### **CHARACTERISTICS:**

There are several distinctive features of environmental ethics. First, environmental ethics extends the scope of ethical concerns about the whole biosphere; it considers the whole of nature including all living systems. Second, environmental ethics is interdisciplinary. There are many overlapping concerns and areas of consensus among environmental ethics, environmental sciences, environmental politics, environmental economics, environmental literature and so. Third, environmental ethics has been an area in which different ideas and perspectives compete with each other. Anthropocentrism, animal liberation/rights theory, biocentrism and ecocentrism all provide unique and reasonable justifications for environmental protection (3). The pluralism of theories and multicultural perspectives is essential for environmental ethics to retain its vitality. Fourth, environmental ethics does not

respect national boundaries. No person or country can deal with this issue alone. People across the world need to reach a consensus to cope with this major global issue (4). Fifth, environmental ethics is a revolutionary idea and it challenges the dominant and deep-rooted anthropocentrism of modern mainstream ethics and reminds us of our duty and obligation towards future generations and non-human beings.

### IMPORTANCE:

The 1960s and 1970s witnessed an ecological crisis brought about by industrial civilization. This crisis was due to i) ecological imbalances (such as the rapid decrease of forest and biodiversity, the rapid growth of population and the desertification of land the world over) ii) resource shortages (such as shortages of energy, cultivated land, minerals and fresh water) and iii) environmental pollution (such as air pollution, water pollution, soil pollution, toxic chemical pollution and solid waste pollution). The gloomy prospect of such situation and also the life-threatening nature of chemical pesticides questioned the dominating concept of conquering nature and alerted people about the widespread use of pesticides that might be posing a serious threat to public health and destruction of wildlife (5). The population boom is another threat to the earth's carrying capacity (6). Both oil and coal are bad when burn, not only for the environment, but for all living creatures, including plants and animals. They pollute the air and ground and water. Most of the worlds' ills including climate change and global warming are derived from oil spills, mining accidents and fires. The ozone hole and global warming are becoming a nightmare today. It was Earth Day in 1970 when the concept of environmental ethics was adapted in the US, and soon thereafter developed in other countries. In 1972 Greenpeace launched its campaign against nuclear weapons and in favour of the environment. The first United Nations environmental conference was held in Stockholm in 1972. Today the environmental ethicists are trying to make environmental ethics more practical and policy-oriented, and directed towards problem solving. They focus on helping the environmental community present stronger ethical arguments in support of environmental protection policies. Amartya Sen writes: "Environmental sustainability has typically been defined in terms the preservation and enhancement of the quality of human life," (7). The three most common approaches are (a) the **development approach**, (b) the **preservation approach**, and (c) the **conservation approach**; the development approach suggests that improvement in the human condition requires converting more of nature to human use. The preservationists argue that nature has intrinsic value or inherent worth apart from human. The conservationist approach tends to strike a balance between unrestrained development and preservationism. Conservationist Gifford Pinchot argues with preservationist John Muir at the start of the twentieth century about how to manage American forests, thought that the forests should primarily be managed to serve human needs and interests. Hardin claims that developed countries are like crowded lifeboats while developing countries are like groups of people drowning in the sea. Hardin argues that the people in the

lifeboats should not help the poor swimmers struggling to get aboard because that would make the lifeboats capsize. In other words, if the developing countries progress, we shall exceed the carrying capacity of the earth and plunder the planet. In his view environmental welfare ought always to come before human welfare. But many people would regard this priority as another instance of ‘environmental fascism’ (8). In 1982 USA witnessed a series of protests from the low-income, minority community of Warren County, North Carolina, over a landfill filled with PCB-contaminated soil. This protest prompted the U.S. General Accounting Office (GAO) to initiate a study of hazardous waste landfills. **Sustainable development**, a term first used in 1987, is often defined as “meeting the needs of current generations without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs.” Like conservationism, sustainable development is a middle ground that seeks to promote appropriate development in order to alleviate poverty while still preserving the ecological health of the landscape. The United Nations Conference on Environment and Development in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, in 1992 produced a document entitled Agenda 21, which set out a roadmap for sustainable development (9). In 1994, when delegates from around the world gathered in Cairo for the International Conference on Population and Development, representatives from developing countries protested that a baby born in the United States will consume during its lifetime at least 20 times as much of the world’s resources as an African or Indian baby (10). The problem for the world’s environment, they argued, is over consumption in the Northern Hemisphere, not just overpopulation in the Southern Hemisphere, China, or India. Do we in the Northern Hemisphere consume too much? North Americans, only 5 percent of the world’s population, consume one-fourth of the world’s oil. They use more water and own more cars than anybody else. They waste more food than most people in sub-Saharan Africa eat. It has been estimated that if the rest of the world consumed at the rate at which people in the United States consume, we would need five more Planet Earths to supply the resources. Even Paul Ehrlich cautioned about the American lifestyle much before in 1968 in his book *The Population Bomb*. In 1998, the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) declares that environmental justice involves “the meaningful involvement of all people regardless of race, color, national origin, or income with respect to the development, implementation, and enforcement of environmental laws, regulations, and policies.” A follow-up conference in South Africa in 2002 drew up a plan of implementation for sustainable development. The daily tasks of industry, such as procuring raw materials, manufacturing and marketing products, and disposing of wastes, cause large amounts of pollution. The cost of controlling this waste can be very important in determining a company’s profit margin but it also bears some responsibility of the company for maintaining quality of the environment. Since humans have soul, personhood and languages and are also moral and more intelligent than other living organisms they extend moral standing to animals and plants. Therefore they must be concerned about the whole community of life/nature. Humans should strive to preserve ecological balance and stability and increase environmental awareness and caring and decrease

exploitation of the environment. To achieve this goal of environmental ethics at the optimum level following recommendations are made.

- From the school going children to leaders of the administration are to be made aware of the need of environmental ethics for sustenance of life. Higher education institutes should demonstrate the first year students about their commitment to sustainable growth.
- This should be included in the course curriculum as compulsory paper in order to explain how it is relevant to improving quality of life.
- It is required to have a continuous monitoring system and also timely review the system.
- Recognition and reward to the academic effort and administrative leadership is also important to spread the awareness on this issue.

## CONCLUSION:

The concept of environmental ethics brings out the fact that all the life forms on Earth have the right to live. Industrialization has given way to pollution and ecological imbalance. If an industry is causing such problem, it is not only the duty of that industry but all the human being to make up for the losses. By destroying nature, we are denying the life forms this right. This act is unjust and unethical. The food web clearly indicates that human beings, plants, animals, and other natural resources are closely linked with each other. All of us are creations of nature and we depend on one another and the environment. Respecting the existence of the non-human entities, and recognizing their right to live is our primary duty. With environmental ethics, morality extends to the non-human world. Many scientists have taken up the belief of philosophical aspect of environmental pollution thus giving rise to environment ethics. It is the responsibility of each and every human being to ensure that environmental ethics is always met.

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