

# The importance of environmental ethics

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**E**THICS is a science which deals with the norm of humans and that is why William Lillie (1989) gives definition of ethics as "Ethics is the science of the conduct of human beings living in society -- a science which judges this conduct to be right or wrong, to be good or bad, or in some similar way". On the other hand, environment is a combination of various physical and biological elements that affect the life of an organism. In the term 'organism' the man is included. So, human philosophy and its practices in human society is not only for the man but also for all physical and biological factors surrounding him. The superior brain of human beings and their cerebral activities can bring most suitable condition for all other organisms in the environment where the human is a part. Jordan (1995) says environmental ethics is a branch of philosophy concerned with the moral relations between humans and the natural world. It examines questions such as:

Does nature have any value, apart from those commodities it supplies to economic man? Do species have the right to exist? Or, conversely, do humans have the right to drive a species to extinction in the course of their pursuit of material well-being? Do humans have any right to cause animals to suffer, or to kill them? Do humans have the right to kill any living thing? Do animals and plants have rights? Do humans have a responsibility toward nature? Does this generation have a responsibility toward future generations?

Although conservation deals with some of the same questions that concern environmental ethicists, conservation is not synonymous with environmental ethics. For environmental ethicists, philosophy is an end in itself. In contrast, many conservationists are interested in environmental ethics primarily to justify doing what they already believed to be important. In other words, they seek an ideological basis for their actions. Two philosophical questions are of particular interest to Conservationist: (1) Do humans have a responsibility toward nature? (2) Does this generation have a responsibility toward future generations?

In rich countries the post-war period created an exception for prosperity. As the fruits of technology were being harvested, nature was exploited thoughtlessly. "Nature is made for man," was the guiding force. Now, the optimism of post-war period has been replaced by the pessimism

of 1970s. We have realised that a global culture of a primarily techno-industrial nature is now encroaching upon the world's environment. It is desecrating living condition for future generations. Fauna, flora, rare species, and natural habitats are being overwhelmed by man-made developments. And today we are faced with an environmental crisis of massive proportions.

Alternations of the environment can destroy our nature. Indeed we are exploiting nature without any restrictions. When we use the nature then we think the production of goods is more important than people. We also think that we have no obligation

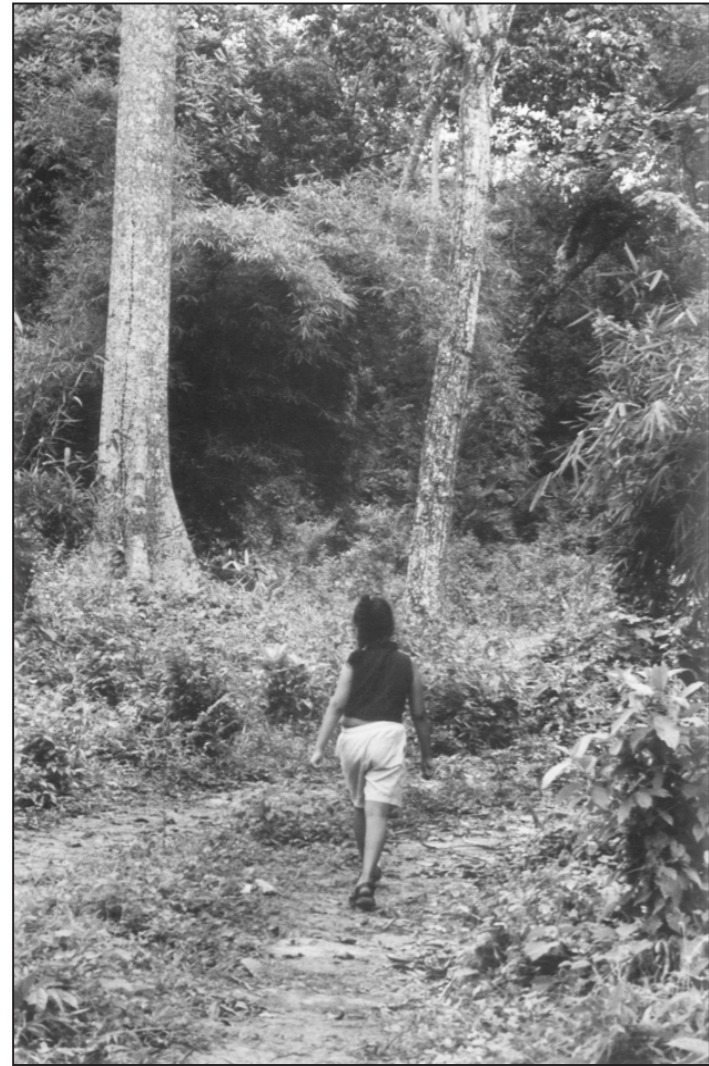


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## How ethical is an intervention here?

to future generations to conserve resources. We want more technological development and the present situation is an "exponentially increasing, and partially or totally irresponsible environmental deterioration or devastation perpetuated through firmly established ways, production and consumption and a lack of policies regarding human population increase."

Our environmental consciousness is a recent phenomenon. All

**"We abuse land because we regard it as a commodity belonging to us. When we see land as a community to which we belong, we may begin to use it with love and respect. There is no other way for land to survive the impact of mechanised man, nor for us to reap from it the aesthetic harvest, it is capable under science, of contributing to culture. That land is a community is the basic concept of ecology, but that land is to be loved and respected is an extension of ethics"...In Bangladesh 'environment' is very much talked about, but a little is taken into consideration for solving the environmental problems. Before bringing environment to the state of 'development' and 'fruitfully functioning' we should be philosophically oriented and concerned on the subject of environment at the individual level first, then at the level of community and at the national level.**

over the world there is a realisation of the necessity of environmental conservation. On January 22, 1970, US President Richard Nixon said, "The great question of

of what surrounds us, the immediate which we are within. We need to identify ourselves with nature. We do not have a master-slave relation with nature. We need to realize the nature's value. We are today blindly following the West where exploitation of nature and its resources was the order of the day. We say 'was' because recently, even the European public is becoming aware of the devastating effects of the exploitative tendencies of industrial societies. We should aim at quality of life rather than material standards of living. We require to develop an ecological attitude.

The transvaluation of which is needed will require fundamental changes in the social, legal political, and economic institutions that embody our values. It may require a fundamental change in our lifestyle. Sound evaluative conclusions on resource use require not only correct valuational premises but correct empirical premises. We need both facts and values. The evaluated conclusions have to be grounded in factual data. An ecophilosopher cannot isolate himself from factual premises. These factual premises are provided by the ecologist. Our ecological knowledge provides us with factual premises on the basis of which we derive valuational premises. So, there is an interrelationship between ecology and environmental ethics. There are two ecological movements -- the shallow ecological movement and the deep ecological movement. The shallow ecological movement often gives us recommendations for reform, but the deep ecologist on the contrary, is more interested in changing our attitude and our values. A project, which is harmful for the endangered species, is acceptable for the shallow ecologists. They will try to set up this project in a reforming way. But the environmentalists, specially the deep ecologists, will not accept this project because it is harmful for the endangered species which are becoming extinct.

In *Environment and the Moral Life: Towards a New Paradigm* S. K. Chahal considers some examples to clarify how specific situations could be approached with a deep ecological perspective. They are: (I) A forest fire burns in a natural park, putting visiting tourists in danger. Should the dangers put it out or let it burn? Fires are a natural part of the healthy existence of a forest. They are thus sometimes necessary. Conditions would have to be carefully considered before the fire is tampered with. (II) Before building a hydropower project it is customary to estimate the useful life of the dam and lake. How long would it last before it will become filled with silt and be unusable? A suitable lifetime according to the industry might be 30 years. The deeper opinion would be that such a solution to our energy needs is largely irrelevant. It may be useful in this limited period, but it is no substitute for long-term thinking and planning an irrigation project in an excessive dry area; one should see it as a pro-

cess to help the soil and the land itself, not only to improve productivity for man. It is the health of the soil which is at stake; man can only make use of this with due

respect for the earth." Deep ecology is to be seen as a root for practical work, not as a code of ethics. Deep ecology is a question of ontology, not ethics. He opines, "The appropriate framework of discourse for describing and presenting deep ecology is not one that is fundamentally to do with the value of the non-human world, but rather one that is fundamentally to do with the nature and possibilities of the self, or we might say the question of who we are, can become, and should become in the larger scheme of things."



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## Ravaged by unethical intervention .

respect for the earth."

In the essay *The Land Ethics*, Aldo Leopold, regarded as the prophet of environmental ethics, describes historical 'extension' of ethical concern, focusing first upon the family and village, then the community, nation, and international community. Late Leopold in this essay mentioned two ethics: (I) religion as a man-to-man ethics and (II) democracy as a man-to-society ethics.

He writes, here we have come to a stop, for "there is as yet no ethic dealing with man's relation to land and to the animals and plants which grow upon it. Land, like 'Odysseus' slave girls, is still property. The land-relation is still strictly economic, entailing privileges but not obligations. When godlike Odysseus returned from the wars in Troy, he hanged, all on one rope, some dozen slave-girls whom he suspected of misbehaviour during his absence. This hanging involved no question of property, much less justice. The disposal of property was a matter of expediency not of right and wrong. Criteria of right and wrong were not lacking from Odysseus' Greece. The ethical structure of that day covered wives, but had not been extended to human chattels."

"The extension of ethics to this third element in human environ-

ment is an evolutionary possibility and an ecological necessity," Leopold continues. The content of this next step in this ethical extension is "we abuse land

it. We may find environmental ethics in the pluralistic framework. "If only theory cannot account for the variety of things and situations around us our next alternative is moral pluralism."

Environmental ethics deals with the behaviour of human beings towards nature. It has an important role to protect the nature. Environmental pollution including industrial pollution should be controlled to preserve the nature (after: Jordan, 1995).

Environmental movement deals with *Reducing poverty by effective environmental management; Poverty reduction strategies; and economic growth that is environmentally sustainable.* Environmental management and reducing poverty is the subject of strategy to "Achieving sustainability, poverty elimination and the environment". This outlines the actions needed to achieve the international development targets which include halving the proportion of people in poverty, getting all children into school, reducing infant, child and maternal mortality and reversing the loss of environmental resources -- all by 2015. This focuses how environmental management can improve the health of the poor, improve their livelihoods, make them more secure and reduce their vulnerability. It is surely unacceptable to all decent people that one in five of the world's population -- two thirds of them women -- still live in abject poverty, in a world of growing material plenty. Environmental degradation and poverty are deeply intertwined.

In Bangladesh 'environment' is very much talked about, but a little is taken into consideration for solving the environmental problems. Before bringing environment to the state of 'development' and 'fruitfully functioning' we should be philosophically oriented and concerned on the subject of environment at the individual level first, then at the level of community and at the national level.

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