

# Environmental ethics and social responsibility



**ASSIGN  
BUSTER**

Environmental ethics has become a hot topic of the modern era. Gone are the days of our natural surroundings being an afterthought. We, as a society, are now fully aware of the natural habitat in which we are a part of, what it does for us, and what we do and can do for it. This is significant as this recognition was, for the most part, absent until just a few decades ago. The following paper will illustrate how although we have come a long way in realizing nature's true essence and our negligence of this respect, we still have a lot of work to do in honing these moralistic views, because the Earth is not just for human beings and if we don't continue to acknowledge this, it may just fight back.

In centuries past, society paid little attention to nature and its non-human inhabitants other than how it can benefit mankind. Whether it was for food, work, or pleasure, nature only was recognized for human gain. We were very much an anthropocentric civilization, meaning, we only assigned intrinsic value to human beings only or there was a greater intrinsic value placed on humans above all non-human life forms (Brennan & Lo, 2008). It was even a strong religious belief that everything on Earth was put here by God for human consumption. Everything was assumed to be at our disposal. From trees to animals, if we had a need for it, it was used. Add to this that our population throughout history has grown exponentially and this means even more people contributing to this carelessness. Over time, individuals were not the only ones disregarding nature, entities such as businesses were too. As industries were discovered and grew they not only used our natural resources but contaminated them as well through pollution and waste. Though noted historical figures such as naturalist Aldo Leopold (1949),

biologist Rachel Carson (1963) and historian Lynn White Jr. (1967) helped to pioneer environmental awareness, it wasn't until April 22, 1970 that reform really began to take place. That particular day was labeled Earth Day in the United States and it was a day used to bring consciousness to the endangerment and value of our environment (Earth Day still is recognized annually every April to this day). In addition to this event, NASA produced a shocking and enlightening image of the Earth taken from space at Christmas 1968 and featured in the *Scientific American* in September 1970 that really propelled public interest. Here, plain to see, was a living, shining planet voyaging through space and shared by all humanity, a precious vessel vulnerable to pollution and to the overuse of its limited capacities (Brennan & Lo, 2008), concern became evident. All of the use and subsequent abuse combined with a constant booming population produced a need for a change, hence environmental ethics was born.

Environmental ethics, defined, is a branch of philosophy that considers the moral relations between human beings and their natural environment; as a field of study, it assumes that humans have certain responsibilities to the natural world, and it seeks to help people and their leaders become aware of them and to act responsibly when they do things that impact the natural world (ScienceClarified, 2010). Not only do environmental ethics highlight the human mistreatment of the environment and the effects of this mistreatment, but it emphasizes nature and all living organisms as having just as much right to live/exist on this Earth as humans do. Two schools of thought, though various forms exist, are consistent with environmental ethics: deep ecology and shallow ecology. Deep ecology is a philosophical

belief that all forms of life- plant, animal, human- have an intrinsic right to exist in the natural environment and that humans have a direct responsibility to maintain the environment for all life forms; whereas shallow ecology holds that humans have a responsibility to protect the environment so it can support human life both in the present and in the future (ScienceClarified, 2010). While deep ecology is more so the ultimate goal, both philosophies are a major change in thought when compared to our anthropocentric past. Do other species have an intrinsic right to exist? Does the Earth exist just for the benefit of humanity? Are humans responsible for being the guardians over the Earth? Do trees have any legal rights? Are we obligated to have concern for future generations? Questions such as these, among many others, are what drive environmental ethics.

Now that we know what environmental ethics is and a little of its history we can take a look at where we stand today on environmental ethics.

Unfortunately, today we still face an enormous amount of environmental issues which include: air and water pollution, erosion of soil, deforestation, diminishing natural resources, biodiversity destruction (plant and animal extinction), and ozone layer depletion, among others. Most of these matters were becoming a problem when we were first introduced to environmental ethics and have actually increased tenfold since. This doesn't make sense, why would these problems still exist, let alone be worse now when the human race has shown concern regarding them? The answer is not easy but it mostly has to do with human nature and overpopulation. The increase in human population increases the demands for the water resources; more land is required for housing; there is an increased demand for food for which

agricultural land is needed; more fuel is required; more automobiles and manufacturers cause more pollution etc.(Pillai, 2009). Compound this with the mere fact that humans always want more and something better, thus continually increasing one's lifestyle, whether it is through breakthroughs in technology or industrial progresses (among many others), takes it toll on the environment as well. Even though the realm of environmental ethics has enabled many agencies to exist, such as the EPA (Environmental Protection Agency), to help monitor and regulate the people and their treatment of the environment, as well as educating them, more must be done.

Looking towards the future, the function of environmental ethics will become even more substantial. As the planet is under enormous geological stresses, which are continually increasing, it will in the future no longer be able to support its population (Haan, 2009). Effort from nations, organizations, and groups are most certainly needed to improve, but our future may just depend on a better individual effort. Most people are under the impression that their individual effort is so minute in the grand scheme of things that they actually assume very little responsibility towards the environment.

Another problem is that the majority of humankind doesn't understand just how their actions of today can greatly affect the future generation. Just because something that is done today doesn't have an immediate effect it is often overlooked. It is important to understand that everyone plays a role in the overall process of life; each person's decision can ultimately affect the future (Haan, 2009). Some individual efforts that can make a difference concerning our environmental future are: reducing usage of plastic since it is not biodegradable, recycling garbage, promoting the development and use

of environment friendly technologies, and utilizing more organic agriculture. Another big change that may be needed, though it can be controversial, is to implement aggressive family planning to limit human population; there is only so much land available and no matter how many alterations we make in our lifestyles and mentality, too many people is too many people...but that is topic for another day. Nevertheless, our insights and actions towards the environment are critical for the future of our survival, environmental ethics are imperative.

In short, if we want to see a future it is imperative that we make more of an effort to curb our indulgences as we make progress. Yes, advancement in technology, big business and the like has benefited mankind greatly but we all must keep in mind that with greater success comes greater responsibility. The study of environmental ethics has opened our eyes but we must continue to respect nature in its own right and therefore it will in turn thrive again as it once did enabling us to live as we should. Yes, it shouldn't be a give and take scenario but being the humans that we are, this is inevitable. However, just as we have taken from nature for so many years, nature can and just may take something back, it may take us, the existence of the human race, if we don't take more responsibility as individuals and as a whole and continue to push the movement.