



# ENVIRONMENTALISM

*For M.A (Semester – 4)  
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# Introduction

Political and ethical movement that seeks to improve and protect the quality of the natural environment through changes to environmentally harmful human activities; through the adoption of forms of political, economic, and social organization that are thought to be necessary for, or at least conducive to, the benign treatment of the environment by humans; and through a reassessment of humanity's relationship with nature. In various ways, environmentalism claims that living things other than humans, and the natural environment as a whole, are deserving of consideration in reasoning about the morality of political, economic, and social policies.

# Intellectual Foundation

Environmental thought and the various branches of the environmental movement are often classified into two intellectual camps: those that are considered anthropocentric, or “human-centred,” in orientation and those considered biocentric, or “life-centred.” This division has been described in other terminology as “shallow” ecology versus “deep” ecology and as “technocentrism” versus “ecocentrism.” Anthropocentric approaches focus mainly on the negative effects that environmental degradation has on human beings and their interests, including their interests in health, recreation, and quality of life. It is often characterized by a mechanistic approach to nonhuman nature in which individual creatures and species have only an instrumental value for humans. The defining feature of anthropocentrism is that it considers the moral obligations humans have to the environment to derive from obligations that humans have to each other—and, less crucially, to future generations of humans—rather than from any obligation to other living things or to the environment as a whole. Human obligations to the environment are thus indirect.



## Intellectual Foundation (Continued...)

Critics of anthropocentrism have charged that it amounts to a form of human “chauvinism.” They argue that anthropocentric approaches presuppose the historically Western view of nature as merely a resource to be managed or exploited for human purposes—a view that they claim is responsible for centuries of environmental destruction. In contrast to anthropocentrism, biocentrism claims that nature has an intrinsic moral worth that does not depend on its usefulness to human beings, and it is this intrinsic worth that gives rise directly to obligations to the environment. Humans are therefore morally bound to protect the environment, as well as individual creatures and species, for their own sake. In this sense, biocentrists view human beings and other elements of the natural environment, both living and often nonliving, as members of a single moral and ecological community.

## Intellectual Foundation (Continued...)

By the 1960s and '70s, as scientific knowledge of the causes and consequences of environmental degradation was becoming more extensive and sophisticated, there was increasing concern among some scientists, intellectuals, and activists about the Earth's ability to absorb the detritus of human economic activity and, indeed, to sustain human life. This concern contributed to the growth of grassroots environmental activism in a number of countries, the establishment of new environmental nongovernmental organizations, and the formation of environmental ("green") political parties in a number of Western democracies. As political leaders gradually came to appreciate the seriousness of environmental problems, governments entered into negotiations in the early 1970s that led to the adoption of a growing number of international environmental agreements. The division between anthropocentric and biocentric approaches played a central role in the development of environmental thought in the late 20th century. Whereas some earlier schools, such as apocalyptic (survivalist) environmentalism and emancipatory environmentalism—as well as its offshoot, human-welfare ecology—were animated primarily by a concern for human well-being, later movements, including social ecology, deep ecology, the animal-rights and animal-liberation movements, and ecofeminism, were centrally concerned with the moral worth of nonhuman nature.

# Anthropocentric schools of thought

- **Apocalyptic environmentalism**

The vision of the environmental movement of the 1960s and early '70s was generally pessimistic, reflecting a pervasive sense of "civilization malaise" and a conviction that the Earth's long-term prospects were bleak. Works such as Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring* (1962), Garrett Hardin's *The Tragedy of the Commons* (1968), Paul Ehrlich's *The Population Bomb* (1968), Donella H. Meadows' *The Limits to Growth* (1972), and Edward Goldsmith's *Blueprint for Survival* (1972) suggested that the planetary ecosystem was reaching the limits of what it could sustain. This so-called apocalyptic, or survivalist, literature encouraged reluctant calls from some environmentalists for increasing the powers of centralized governments over human activities deemed environmentally harmful, a viewpoint expressed most vividly in Robert Heilbroner's *An Inquiry into the Human Prospect* (1974), which argued that human survival ultimately required the sacrifice of human freedom. Counterarguments, such as those presented in Julian Simon and Herman Kahn's *The Resourceful Earth* (1984), emphasized humanity's ability to find or to invent substitutes for resources that were scarce and in danger of being exhausted.



# Anthropocentric schools of thought (Continued...)

## •Emancipatory environmentalism

Beginning in the 1970s many environmentalists attempted to develop strategies for limiting environmental degradation through recycling, the use of alternative-energy technologies, the decentralization and democratization of economic and social planning and, for some, a reorganization of major industrial sectors, including the agriculture and energy industries. In contrast to apocalyptic environmentalism, so-called “emancipatory” environmentalism took a more positive and practical approach, one aspect of which was the effort to promote an ecological consciousness and an ethic of “stewardship” of the environment. One form of emancipatory environmentalism, human-welfare ecology—which aims to enhance human life by creating a safe and clean environment—was part of a broader concern with distributive justice and reflected the tendency, later characterized as “postmaterialist,” of citizens in advanced industrial societies to place more importance on “quality-of-life” issues than on traditional economic concerns. Emancipatory environmentalism also was distinguished for some of its advocates by an emphasis on developing small-scale systems of economic production that would be more closely integrated with the natural processes of surrounding ecosystems. This more environmentally holistic approach to economic planning was promoted in work by the American ecologist Barry Commoner and by the German economist Ernst Friedrich Schumacher. In contrast to earlier thinkers who had downplayed the interconnectedness of natural systems, Commoner and Schumacher emphasized productive processes that worked with nature, not against it, encouraged the use of organic and renewable resources rather than synthetic products (e.g., plastics and chemical fertilizers), and advocated renewable and small-scale energy resources (e.g., wind and solar power) and government policies that supported effective public transportation and energy efficiency. The emancipatory approach was evoked through the 1990s in the popular slogan, “think globally, act locally.” Its small-scale, decentralized planning and production has been criticized, however, as unrealistic in highly urbanized and industrialized societies.

# Biocentric schools of thought

## • Social ecology and deep ecology

An emphasis on small-scale economic structures and the social dimensions of the ecological crisis also is a feature of the school of thought known as social ecology, whose major proponent was the American environmental anarchist Murray Bookchin. Social ecologists trace the causes of environmental degradation to the existence of unjust, hierarchical relationships in human society, which they see as endemic to the large-scale social structures of modern capitalist states. Accordingly, they argue, the most environmentally sympathetic form of political and social organization is one based on decentralized small-scale communities and systems of production.

A more radical doctrine, known as deep ecology, builds on preservationist themes from the early environmental movement. Its main originators, the Norwegian philosopher Arne Næss, the American sociologist Bill Devall, and the American philosopher George Sessions, share with social ecologists a distrust of capitalism and industrial technology and favour decentralized forms of social organization. Deep ecologists also claim that humans need to regain a “spiritual” relationship with nonhuman nature. By understanding the interconnectedness of all organisms—including humans—in the ecosphere and empathizing with nonhuman nature, they argue, humans would develop an ecological consciousness and a sense of ecological solidarity. The biocentric principle of interconnectedness was extensively developed by British environmentalist James Lovelock, who postulated in *Gaia: A New Look at Life on Earth* (1979) that the planet is a single living, self-regulating entity capable of reestablishing an ecological equilibrium, even without the existence of human life. Despite their emphasis on spirituality, some more extreme forms of deep ecology have been strongly criticized as antihumanist, on the ground that they entail opposition to famine relief and immigration and acceptance of large-scale losses of life caused by AIDS and other pandemics.



## •Animal rights

The emphasis on intrinsic value and the interconnectedness of nature was fundamental to the development of the animal-rights movement, whose activism was influenced by works such as Peter Singer's *Animal Liberation* (1977) and Tom Regan's *The Case for Animal Rights* (1983). Animal rights approaches go beyond a concern with ill-treatment and cruelty to animals, demanding an end to all forms of animal exploitation, including the use of animals in scientific and medical experiments and as sources of entertainment (e.g., in circuses, rodeos, and races) and food.

## •Ecofeminism

Oppression, hierarchy, and spiritual relationships with nature also have been central concerns of ecofeminism. Ecofeminists assert that there is a connection between the destruction of nature by humans and the oppression of women by men that arises from political theories and social practices in which both women and nature are treated as objects to be owned or controlled. Ecofeminists aim to establish a central role for women in the pursuit of an environmentally sound and socially just society. They have been divided, however, over how to conceive of the relationship between nature and women, which they hold is more intimate and more “spiritual” than the relationship between nature and men. Whereas cultural ecofeminists argue that the relationship is inherent in women's reproductive and nurturing roles, social ecofeminists, while acknowledging the relationship's immediacy, claim that it arises from social and cultural hierarchies that confine women primarily to the private sphere.

- *Thank you*

*The end.*