

Ecosystem for Sustainable Development Goals from Islamic Perspective

Salman Ahmed Shaikh
Abdul Ghafar Ismail

Defining and naming ecosystems are difficult, because it is not always clear where the boundaries lie. Sometimes ecosystems are based on natural topographic features, such as a mountain range or the edges of a lake. Other times, scientists outline ecosystems based on shared characteristics, such as an area with similar snowfall or flooding patterns. And sometimes, an ecosystem is defined based on man-made boundaries, such as all the counties that rely on water from a particular river. Therefore, ecosystems may overlap and can also be subsets of one another. Then, what would be the ecosystem for sustainable development goals, especially from Islamic perspective. In this article, we propose that the ecosystem from Islamic perspective is bounded by the concept of tawheed and khilafah,; and the ethics.

Concept of Tawheed and Khilafah & their Implications to Ecosystem Relations

The concepts of *Tawheed*, *Khilafah* and *Akhirah* govern the Islamic way of life. Belief in the single source of creation defies racial, ethnic or gender basis of biases. According to Islam, all creations belong to Allah. Animals and plants are partners to man in the universe (Mian et al., 2013).¹ Simultaneously, the concept of *Khilafah* raises the stature of human beings as moral beings with inbuilt and active conscience, which provides the ability to differentiate moral from immoral acts. It inculcates the responsibility of custodianship, trusteeship and stewardship in human beings with regards to the use and ownership of physical property and environmental resources. The two worldly view of life in Islam extends the decision horizon of economic agents, be they firms or consumers.

While the concept of *Tawheed* creates an equal basis for humans to use what is bestowed in nature, the concept of *Khilafah* instils stewardship towards the responsible use of natural and environmental resources without pushing planetary boundaries and causing precious loss of biodiversity. Hope and Jones (2014) investigate the link between faith and attitudes to environmental issues.² As per the findings, the Muslim participants argued that the continued burning of fossil fuels would be immoral because they could disrupt the balance of nature, leave a dubious inheritance for future generations, and would constitute poor stewardship of Allah's creation, for which they would be judged. According to World Values Survey sixth wave (2010-2014), 29% respondents in 21 OIC member countries state that 'looking after the environment and to care for nature and save life resources' best describes their view and attitude towards environment as compared to 21% stating the same view in 39 non-Muslim majority countries. Ansary (2010) also gives account of how religious motives in practice prove to be strong motivators for environment friendly actions like conservation and tree plantation than the laws of the land.³

¹ Mian, H. S; Khan, J. & Rahman, A. (2013). "Environmental Ethics of Islam", *Journal of Culture, Society and Development*, 1, 69 – 74.

² Hope, A. L. & Jones, C. R. (2014). "The impact of religious faith on attitudes to environmental issues and Carbon Capture and Storage (CCS) technologies: A mixed methods study", *Technology in Society*, 38, 48 – 59.

³ Ansary, W. E. (2010). "Islamic Environmental Economics and the Three Dimensions of Islam: 'A Common Word' on the Environment as Neighbour". In *Muslim and Christian Understanding* (pp. 143 – 157). Palgrave Macmillan US.

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Environmental stewardship requires that we use natural resources ethically so as to equally improve the welfare of society, other living organisms, and future generations (Alghamdi, 2014).⁴ The relationship between human and nature is one of custodianship or guardianship, and not of dominance (Islam & Islam, 2015).⁵ The earth's resources are available for humanity's use, but these gifts come from God with certain ethical restraints. We may use the resources to meet our needs, but only in a way that does not upset ecological balance and that does not compromise the ability of future generations to meet their needs (Riham, 2014).⁶ These principles lead Kula (2014) to conclude that Islam is an environment friendly religion.⁷

The Islamic moral injunctions influence preferences through moral filtering of the consumption set by identifying the moral 'BADS'. The moral philosophy imbued with socio-ethical spirit extends the decision horizon of consumers. It encourages the transformation of self-centric self-interest into self-cum-social centric self-interest. The moral injunctions explicitly extol virtuous philanthropy. Finally, by flattening all other basis of distinction except on piety, Islamic values garner contentment whereby, the consumer is asked to shun envious and conspicuous consumption of luxuries.

Islamic philosophy of life prioritizes equitable distribution over Pareto efficiency. Overreliance on Pareto efficiency paralyses the equity and ethical concerns of development policy change. As per Pareto efficiency, it is inefficient to help millions of poor to make them better off while making any single rich person worse off. While Islamic principles allow freedom and liberty in lawful consumption within the moral boundaries, they induce affirmative action to promote wellbeing when people possess the means. In contrast, according to consumer sovereignty, as long as people can put up dollar votes for their preferences, resources will be allocated on producing, marketing and distributing inessential goods even if a quarter of world population lives in poverty and suffer from hunger, malnourishment and curable diseases.

Rather than complimenting humans in their animalistic instincts to keep having one-eyed focus on material well-being only, Islam inculcates pioussness, kindness, cooperation and communal responsibility in humans. In some instances, Islam guides explicitly to avoid extravagance, lavishness and using certain products and services which harm a human's ethical existence and well-being either individually and/or harm the society in the process. Islamic economics incorporates ethical values and excludes from the consumption bundle various goods which bring either private loss or welfare loss to the society.

Islamic philosophy of life brings a long term perspective to the pursuit of self-interest by informing humans about the positive and negative consequences of their actions and choices in the life hereafter. In the secular worldview, due to the absence of afterlife accountability, the rich people with absolute and inviolable property rights can command natural and environmental resources whose potential lifespan is much more than the lives of their owners. But, if the rich people believe in no afterlife accountability, they can extract and exploit these resources quickly and deprive future generations of their use.

⁴ Alghamdi, M. (2014). "Deforestation and the Islamic Stewardship Ethic". Masters Thesis. Rochester Institute of Technology.

⁵ Islam, M. N. & Islam, M. S. (2015). "Human-Animal Relationship: Understanding Animal Rights in the Islamic Ecological Paradigm, *Journal for the Study of Religions and Ideologies*, 14(41), 96 – 126.

⁶ Riham, R. R. (2014). "Islamic Environmental Ethics", *Journal of Islamic Accounting and Business Research*, 5(2), 194 – 204.

⁷ Kula, E. (2014). "Islamic Ethics towards Environmental Protection", *Afro Eurasian Studies*, 3(1), 34 – 45.

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Extinction of species, global warming, climate change, depletion of ozone layer and massive carbon emissions are inevitable results of the secular and individualistic paradigm. Climate change is a slow, but cumulative process. Individual human lifespan is only an infinitesimally small fraction of the life of environmental resources and eco-system services. Hence, the self-centric and this worldly view of life are incompatible with the concerns of sustainability and socially responsible behaviour. Rather, the dogmatic commitment to self-centric secular worldview results in inevitable proliferation of pollution as a right and product to be bought and sold in the market economy.

Mortazvi (2004) contends that Western economics has become a discipline devoid of values.⁸ Exploitation of the natural environment can be abated when individuals consider intergenerational welfare and justice to be important factors in their economic decisions. Na'iyah (2007) suggests that the effective solution to the environmental problems lies on the overall worldview which spells out the relationship between man, nature and his Creator as well as the implications of one's actions in the hereafter.⁹

Islamic worldview provides such meaningful conditioning which enables bringing the right balance between human aspirations and the physical limits of nature. Religion also promises salvage from the limitedness of this worldly life in heaven which will be awarded to the most righteous people. This, in turn, provides a permanent incentive to choose righteous behaviour as an end with the hope and fear of deterministic results in the life hereafter.

Ethics in Relation to Environment

This section will provide the coverage of Quranic verses and hadith which define the ethics. It will highlight how ethics shape up the responsible attitude towards the use of environmental and ecological resources and to live in harmony with bio-diversity.

In this article, we look at how Islamic environmental ethics encapsulated in Islamic principles compliment Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and can act as a catalyst to foster commitment, responsibility and affirmative action for sustainable and congenial co-existence with environment.

The discussion of 'protection of progeny' as Maqasid-e-Shari'ah by Imam Ghazali shows the ethical commitment for sustainable existence in an Islamic paradigm much well before the reactionary focus in West about sustainable development. Below, we mention several verses from Quran and sayings of Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon Him) which discuss the responsibilities to the environment.

It is pertinent that humans incorporate social cost in their private actions for achieving environment related SDGs. If we want clean air, fresh water and proper sanitation for ourselves, then we must also like these things for others living in the present age as well as those who are to come in this world in the next generations. Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon Him) said:

⁸ Mortazavi, S. (2004). "Islamic Economics: A Solution for Environmental Protection, Trade, Growth and the Environment". Oxford University.

⁹ Na'iyah, I. I. (2007). "Environmental Issues & Islamic Economics: Nature & Solutions", *Proceedings of the 2nd Islamic Conference*. Islamic Science University, Malaysia.

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“A Muslim is the one who avoids harming Muslims with his tongue and hands.” (Source: Sahih al-Bukhari, Vol 1, Book 2, Hadith No. 9)

The realization of enormous value of nature and environment even if it is in no one’s private ownership is vital for fostering a culture of caring and responsibility towards environment. Quran refers to nature as ‘Ayat’ (signs). The book of nature is also a revealed scripture, each page of which reveals a truth (Ansary, 2010). Affirmative actions towards preserving and conserving environment are needed as a culture for achieving environmental sustainability. Islamic philosophy of life provides the necessary impetus and deterministic rewards for affirmative action towards promoting positive externalities in the environment. Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon Him) said:

“There is none amongst the Muslims who plants a tree or sows seeds, and then a bird, or a person or an animal eats from it, but is regarded as a charitable gift for him.” (Source: Sahih Al-Bukhari, Vol 3, Book 39, Hadith No. 513)

In another Hadith, Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon Him) said:

“Whoever plants trees, God will give him reward to the extent of their fruit.” (Source: Musnad, Vol 5, Hadith No. 415)

Climate change and environmental degradation is a slow and cumulative process. To resurrect environment, the efforts also need to be cumulative and consistent. A self-centric secular worldview encourages self-centric use of private property resources. However, even small things done collectively and consistently can have compounding effect. The two-worldly view of life in Islam encourages socially responsible behaviour as one of the prime determinants of salvage in life hereafter. Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon Him) said:

“If the Resurrection were established upon one of you while he has in his hand a sapling, then let him plant it.” (Source: Musnad Ahmad, Hadith No. 12491)

Quran informs that other species also praise and thank the Creator for the blessings. Quran says: *“Do you not see that to Allah bow down in worship all things that are in the heavens and on earth - the sun, the moon, the stars; the hills, the trees, the animals; and a great number among mankind?”* (Chapter 22, Verse 18). The single source of creation as encapsulated in the concept of *Tawheed* undermines the tendency to feel ‘fittest survivors’. It brings humbleness, niceness and peaceful co-existence with other life in the environment. Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon Him) said:

“A good deed done to a beast is as good as doing good to a human being; while an act of cruelty to a beast is as bad as an act of cruelty to human beings”, and that: “Kindness to animals was promised rewards in life hereafter.” (Source: Mishkat al-Masabih; Book 6; Chapter 7, 8:178)

In another narrative, *the Prophet (peace be upon Him) was asked whether acts of charity even to the animals were rewarded by Allah or not. He replied: ‘yes, there is a reward for acts of charity to every beast alive.’ (Source: Sahih Muslim, Book 26; Hadith No. 5577).*

Islam and Islam (2015) explicate that killing animals for fun or mere sport is strictly disallowed in Islam. In order to protect land, forests and wildlife, the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon

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Him) created sacred zones known as *hima* and *haram*, in which resources were to be left untouched. *Hima* applies particularly to wildlife and forestry and usually designates an area of land where grazing and woodcutting are restricted, or where certain animal species are protected.

Almost half of food goes wasted while on the other hand, one out of every 9 people in the world suffers from hunger, according to Food and Agriculture Organization. Islamic principles discourage conspicuous consumption on luxuries. The Quran says:

“But waste not by excess: for Allah loveth not the wasters.” (Source: Holy Quran, Chapter 6: Verse 141)

When the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon Him) saw Sa’d performing wudu, He (peace be upon Him) said: “What is this? You are wasting water.” Sa’d replied: “Can there be wastefulness while performing ablution?” The Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon Him) replied: “Yes even if you perform it in a flowing river.” (Source: *Ibn-e-Maja*, VI, Hadith No. 425)

Even with finite resources, we can still do much better in reducing hunger, malnourishment, child mortality and deaths from easily curable diseases. This requires a transformation of self-centric self-interested view of life into self-cum social centric one. Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon Him) said:

“Among the three types of people with whom God, on the Day of Resurrection, will neither exchange neither words, nor look at is the one who possesses an excess of water but withholds it from others. God will say to him: ‘Today, I shall withhold from you my grace as you withheld from others, the excess of what you had, but which you did not create.’” (Source: Sahih Al-Bukhari, Vol 3, Book 40, Hadith No. 557)

Thus, we see that Islamic environmental ethics can play a catalyst role to increase commitment, encourage affirmative action and responsible co-existence with environment.