Environmental Ethics in Islam
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Islamic Sources of Environmental Ethics
Qur’an

• The primary source for guidance for Muslims in all areas is the Qur'an, which Muslims believe is the direct Word of God.

• The Qur'an contains over 650 references to ecology as well as important principles which are able to be applied to the environment.
**Sunnah**

- The sayings and actions of the Prophet Muhammad (Sunnah and Hadith) are the secondary source of guidance for Muslims.
- It also contains numerous important ecological guidelines.
- There is an abundance of hadith (sayings of Prophet Muhammad \(^\text{pbuh}\)) concerning plants, trees, land cultivation, irrigation, crops, livestock, grazing, water distribution and treatment of animals.
Shari’ah Law

• **Shari'ah law** includes many teachings explaining how to apply Qur'anic principles and guidelines of Prophet Muhammad pbuh.

• Collectively, the sources of authority in Islam provide clear teaching and direction to Muslims in their relationship with the environment.
Key Principles of Islamic Environmental Ethics
Tawhid
Tawhid

- The basis of Islam is *tawhid*, which affects every component of Islam, including environmental ethics.
- *Tawhid* is God’s Unity and Oneness and includes not ascribing any form of partnership with God.
- *Tawhid*, means that God is the Owner and Creator of everything in the universe.
  - “To God belongs all that is in the heavens and on earth” (Qur’an, Al-Nisa, 4:126) (Tr. Ali).
- This includes the human being, which is part of this interdependent universe as all is created by God.
Signs of Allah - Ayat

- The word *ayat*, which means signs, is used in the Qur’an for both Creation and the verses of the Qur'an.
- This gives them equal status, both as signs for human beings to read and understand.
- By describing nature as signs of God in the Qur’an, He is instructing us to reflect on them to learn about God’s *tawhid*, His Attributes and about the connectivity of the universe.
Balance

• Recognition of God’s *tawhid* means recognition that God created the universe in perfect balance and measure, so it should not be altered by human beings.
  - "Verily, all things have We created in proportion and measure" (Qur'an, 54:49).

• God tells human beings not to disturb this balance;
  - “And the sky has He raised high, and has devised (for all things) a balance, so that you might never transgress the balance: weigh, therefore (your deeds) with equity, and do not upset the balance” (Qur’an, 55:7-9).
Balance

- These verses demonstrate that everything in the universe was created to operate with unified purpose and that each element is critical to maintain the balance and functioning of the universe.

- This perfect balance can be seen from the examination of any component of the universe, including the Earth’s ability to clean itself.

- Despite the amount of waste produced from animals, as well as the deaths of species, the earth has the ability to clean itself, to the point that this death and waste is not even visible.
Balance

- The death and waste products of the species living in the oceans should mean the oceans do not have any clean water, yet the perfect balance created by God means that clean water is maintained, allowing the ecosystems to function perfectly.

- The balance of creation is so detailed that the reproduction rate of species changes according to lifespan; species with higher reproduction rates have shorter lifespans and vice-versa meaning that balance is maintained.

- This allows us to reflect on God’s Perfection.
Caliph (Steward)
Human beings, stewards on earth

- “And when your Lord said to the angels: Lo! I am about to place a caliph (vicegerent) on the earth...” (Qur’an 2:30)
- “It is He that has made you caliph (vicegerent), over the earth.” (Qur’an, 6:165)

- The Qur’an says that God gave human beings the role of steward – caliph – on earth.

- Caliph translates as steward, deputy, guardian.

- This role gives the human being responsibility for God’s creation, which includes maintaining and protecting it.
Amanah
Amanah - Trust

• As God’s deputy, steward and trustee, human beings should feel honoured to protect the environment since:
  – it belongs to God
  – it maintains the perfect balance created by God
  – it honours the trust that God assigned human beings the role of caliph

• Human beings should protect the environment that belongs to God, just as people protect the belongings of an employer, friend or anyone whose goods are entrusted to them.
Amanah - Trust

“Allah made subservient to you the sea ... that you may seek of His grace, and that you may give thanks. And He has made subservient to you whatsoever is in the heavens and whatsoever is in the earth.” (45:12-13)

- While human beings have the use of the resources of the world, they do not have a right to exploit or destroy these resources that have been given to them in a trust but which belong to God.

- The use of the world’s resources should be in keeping with the nurturing and sustaining responsibilities of their role as steward.
Accountability
Accountability

• Since Muslims believe that all actions are rewarded and punished, there are almost no incidents involving human beings that do not contain responsibility and accountability.

• Islam teaches that on the Day of Judgment humanity will be questioned about every action, including how we treat the environment and animals.

  – *So whoever does an atom's weight of good will see it, And whoever does an atom's weight of evil will see it.*”

(Qur’an 99:7-8)
Stewardship Necessitates Accountability

- Being a steward means having authority over Creation, but also accountability over their treatment of the environment.

- Prophet Muhammad[^pbuh] said,
  - "The world is beautiful and verdant and God has appointed you as His stewards over it. He sees how you acquit yourselves".
Islamic View of the Environment
We only take care of things we perceive as valuable

- The first thing Islam does is to give immense worth to the environment.
- Islam asserts that all life is special and valuable because it is the life and the art displayed by each creature that connects it to the Divine.
- To a Muslim, God has created this universe like a majestic palace.
- Therefore, in Islam, the natural environment and animal forms are sacred and valuable.
Value Given to Creation

• Not only is there a commonality with all creation, but the following verse highlights the value given to the creation of the environment:

“The creation of the heavens and the earth is indeed greater than the creation of mankind; yet, most of mankind know not.” (Qur’an, 40:57)
All of Creation is Sacred

- Prophet Muhammad\(^{pbuh}\) also said, "The earth has been created for me as a mosque and as a means of purification".
- Not only is he saying the earth is sacred, as it can all be used for praying, but it is also a means of purification, demonstrated through *tayammum* (ritual cleansing using the earth).
- Islamic environmental ethics states that human beings must recognise that all of Creation is created by God, represents God and is therefore sacred.
The Qur’an also says that everything that is in the heavens and the earth praises God:

“Glorify Him and there is not a thing but glorifies His praise. But you understand not their glorification..” (Qur’an, 17:44)

“See thou not that to God 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” (Qur’an, 22:18)
Everything Praises God

“And the herbs and the trees – both (alike) bow in adoration” (Qur’an, 55:6)

- If a tree praises God and if animals praise God, then how must they be treated?
Creation

• The Qur’an tells us that human beings are created from an earthly essence and more generally that every living being is created from water. “...the heavens and the earth were joined together as one united piece, then We parted them? And We have made from water every living thing....”

(Qur’an, Prophets, 21:30)

• Therefore, we have a common physical existence with everything else on earth.

• There is also a law of interdependency between all natural elements and if humans abuse one element, the natural world as a whole will suffer the direct consequences.
Humanity and the ecological system

- Every living being adds value to its ecological system.
- Human beings, on the other hand, consume the best of what nature has to offer and turns it into waste that is flushed away in a hurry.
- Humanity, in a physical sense, adds no value to the ecological environment.
Adding value to the environment

- Humanity depends on the environment but the environment does not depend on humanity.
- The only real value we can add to the environment is by protecting and preserving it.
The purpose of human existence

- For human existence, one has to look for a purpose other than its mere physical existence.

- The finer intellectual and spiritual faculties are given to us for a more comprehensive and willing spiritual enlightenment and worship.

- The Qur’an also talks about the worship of everything that is in the heavens and the earth. (Qur’an, 51:56)
Waste Minimisation, Water Conservation, Use of Resources and Sustainable Land Cultivation
Waste Minimisation

The Qur’an talks about how God does not like those who waste:

- “... Eat of their fruits when they come to fruition, and give (to the poor and the needy) the due thereof on harvest day. And do not be wasteful; indeed He (God) does not love the wasteful.”

  (Qur’an, 6:141)

- “O children of Adam! Dress cleanly and beautifully for every act of worship; and eat and drink, but do not be wasteful: indeed, He does not love the wasteful.”

  (Qur’an, 7:31)
Waste Minimisation

- Islam teaches that waste and excess leads to ingratitude and arrogance.
- When we limit our use of resources it leads to greater appreciation of each resource used.
Water Conservation

• Islam forbids extravagance in using water. It is related that the Prophet Muhammad passed by his companion Sa’ad, who was performing his wudu (ablution), and said:
  – “Water should not be wasted when making ablution even if you are by a flowing river.”

• This restriction is not to waste water even if when it is plentiful, that is, in a flowing river.
Resource Use

• Prophet Muhammad (pbuh) had few material possessions.

• He said, “The worldly comforts are not for me. I am like a traveller, who takes a rest under a tree in the shade and then goes on his way.”

• He also mended his clothes and repaired his shoes, not wasting God's resources and therefore implementing the modern campaign “Reduce, Re-use, Recycle”.

• Prophet Muhammad (pbuh) said:
  – “Wealth is not a lot of goods but it is being satisfied with what one has”.

Environmental Ethics in Islam
Tree Planting

• There are numerous hadith about the importance of planting trees, such as:
  
  – “When doomsday comes, if someone has a palm shoot in his hand, he should plant it."
  
  – "There is none amongst the believers who plants a tree, or sows a seed, and then a bird, or a person, or an animal eats thereof, but it is regarded as having given a charitable gift (for which there is great recompense)".

• Planting a tree therefore is highly recommended and is even considered charity when eaten by another living being.
Tree Planting

- Prophet Muhammad regularly organised the planting of trees and date groves, similar to modern 'Plant a Tree' campaigns.

- In the forestry region of Al Ghaba, he ordered that when a tree is cut down another must be planted in its place.
Sustainable Land Management

- Prophet Muhammad also established sanctuaries, within which natural resources were protected.
- These areas, called *hima*, were areas of land set aside as sanctuaries, where resources were left untouched and plant and animal species were protected.
Animal Rights
Animal rights

• Islam introduced animal rights along with human rights, over 1400 years ago.

  – “The earth He has assigned to all living creatures” (Qur’an, Al-Rahman, 55:10)

  – “There is not a moving (living) creature on earth, nor a bird that flies with its two wings, but are communities like you...then unto their Lord they (all) shall be gathered” (Qur’an, 6:37).

• By referring to animals as communities like human beings its demonstrates their equal place in the environment.
Animal Rights

- The Prophet Muhammad said:
  - "Verily, there is heavenly reward for every act of kindness done to a living animal."

- Once, seeing someone call his horse using deception, he said:
  "You should give up deceiving animals. You should be trustworthy even in your treatment of them."

- If he saw any animal over-loaded or ill-fed he would pull up the owner and say, "fear God in your treatment of animals."
Animal Rights

• Prophet Muhammad told his companions of a previous Prophet who was stung by an ant so ordered the whole of the nest to be burnt, to which God said “Because one ant stung you, you burned a whole community that glorified me”.

• When the Prophet’s companions took baby birds from a nest he said to them, “Who has hurt the feelings of this bird by taking its young? Return them to her”.

• He had such a love of animals that he wiped the mouth of his horse with his personal cloth.
Islam Teaches Moderation
Moderation

• Islam teaches moderation in all aspects of life.
  – “And we have willed you to be a community of the middle path” (Qur’an, Al-Baqarah, 2:143).

• Prophet Muhammad said”
  – “Practice moderation, and if you can’t practice it perfectly, then strive towards it as far as possible”
  – “Allah loves to see the signs of His gifts on His servant”.

• Human beings, therefore, should appreciate the blessings of God, without going into excess.

• Moderation in our consumption of natural resources allows preservation of the balance and order created by God and is instructed by God.
Harm vs Benefit

• Hadith –
  – “The merit of utilisation lies in the benefit it yields, in proportion to its harm”.
  – “The averting of harm takes precedence over the acquisition of benefits”.

• Can be applied to technology, the plastic bag, disposable cups, plates.
Muslim academics have argued that the ecological crisis is a result of human greed and selfishness. Our misuse of the environment is our ego continually wanting more. The environment is another test for our ego and we seem to be failing the test at the moment...
History of the Islamic World

• The value given to creation, gave Muslims the impetus to preserve the environment and to get a good record for their treatment of wildlife and domestic animals.

• During the Ottoman reign (1299–1923), comprehensive waste and environmental management regulations were stipulated as early as 1539.

• In 1502, local government legislation regulated the loads of animals and the number of days they could be worked in a week.
History of the Islamic World

• The Ottoman Empire also established organisations that:
  – treated injured storks,
  – regulated hunting on the basis of need,
  – prohibited hunting during breeding season and
  – designed mosques to include covered nesting areas for birds.

• In Islamic Spain, water conservation was common practice, where rainwater was collected from rooves and stored underground in cisterns.

• In the thirteenth century Izzad-Din Ibn 'Abd As-Salam formulated a Bill of Animal Rights.
Summary

• Islamic Environmental Ethics incorporates principles of tawhid, balance, stewardship, trust and justice.

• Muslims believe they have been entrusted to be God’s stewards and are accountable for all actions, including treatment of all of God’s Creation.

• Muslims believe all of Creation praises Allah.

• Islamic environmental ethics covers areas of waste minimisation, water conservation, animal rights and sustainable land management.

• Islam is a religion of moderation.