

Applying Environmental Ethics for Sustainability

Kariuki Muigua

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Applying Environmental Ethics for Sustainability

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Abstract

The ideal of sustainability envisions striking a balance between environmental conservation, economic development and social progress. However, realizing this ideal is hindered by several challenges including the triple planetary crisis of climate change, biodiversity loss, and pollution. In light of such challenges, it is necessary to forge a new relationship between people and the planet in order to achieve sustainability. One of the key approaches that can be embraced towards fostering harmony between humanity and nature is environmental ethics. Applying environmental ethics can therefore lead to sustainability. This paper critically examines the role of environmental ethics in the sustainability agenda. It argues that environmental ethics can be a vital tool in fostering sustainability. The paper defines environmental ethics and discusses how this concept can enhance sustainability. It also discusses some of the concerns with utilizing environmental ethics as a tool for sustainability. Further, the paper suggests ideas towards applying environmental ethics for sustainability.

1.0 Introduction

Achieving sustainability refers to creating and maintaining the conditions under which humanity and nature can exist in productive harmony to support present and future generations¹. The concept of Sustainable Development embraces sustainability and seeks to foster development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs². Sustainable Development aims to promote sustainability by embracing an integrated approach towards development that takes into consideration environmental conservation along with economic and social development³. The United Nation's 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development⁴ sets out the

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¹ United States Environmental Protection Agency., 'What is Sustainability?' Available at <https://www.epa.gov/sustainability/learn-about-sustainability> (Accessed on 03/04/2024)

² World Commission on Environment and Development., 'Our Common Future.' Oxford, (Oxford University Press, 1987)

³ United Nations., 'Sustainability' Available at <https://www.un.org/en/academic-impact/sustainability> (Accessed on 03/04/2024)

⁴ United Nations General Assembly., 'Transforming Our World: the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development.' 21 October 2015, A/RES/70/1., Available at <https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/content/documents/21252030%20Agenda%20for%20Sustainable%20Development%20web.pdf> (Accessed on 03/04/2024)

global blueprint for sustainability. The Agenda envisions attainment of the ideal of Sustainable Development through 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) which aim to strike a balance between social, economic and environmental facets of sustainability⁵.

Sustainability thus envisions striking a balance between environmental conservation, economic development and social progress⁶. However, realizing sustainability is hindered by problems such as climate change, pollution, and loss of biodiversity together with issues of poverty, increasing disparity between societies and the tensions brought by social inequalities⁷. Further, it has been noted that the triple planetary crisis of climate change, biodiversity loss, and pollution are major threats to environmental sustainability⁸.

In light of the foregoing challenges, it is necessary to forge a new relationship between people and the planet in order to achieve sustainability⁹. One of the key approaches that can be embraced towards fostering harmony between humanity and nature is environmental ethics¹⁰. Applying environmental ethics can therefore lead to sustainability¹¹. This paper critically examines the role of environmental ethics in the sustainability agenda. It argues that environmental ethics can be a vital tool in fostering sustainability. The paper defines environmental ethics and discusses how this concept can enhance sustainability. It also discusses some of the concerns with utilizing environmental ethics as a tool for sustainability. Further, the paper suggests ideas towards applying environmental ethics for sustainability.

⁵ Ibid

⁶ Fitzmaurice. M., 'The Principle of Sustainable Development in International Development Law.' *International Sustainable Development Law.*, Vol 1

⁷ Giovannoni. E., & Fabietti. G., 'What Is Sustainability? A Review of the Concept and Its Applications.' In: Busco, C., Frigo, M., Riccaboni, A., Quattrone, P. (eds) *Integrated Reporting*. Springer, Cham. Available at https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-02168-3_2 (Accessed on 03/04/2024)

⁸ United Nations Environment Programme., 'The Triple Planetary Crisis: Forging a New Relationship Between People and the Earth' Available at <https://www.unep.org/news-andstories/speech/tripleplanetary-crisis-forging-new-relationship-between-people-and-earth> (Accessed on 03/04/2024)

⁹ Ibid

¹⁰ United Nations Environment Programme., 'The Role of Environmental and Spiritual Ethics in Global Environmental Governance' Available at <https://www.unep.org/resources/policy-and-strategy/role-environmental-and-spiritual-ethics-global-environmental#:~:text=Adopting%20an%20ethics%20and%20values,essential%20requirement%20for%20Sustainable%20Development> (Accessed on 03/04/2024)

¹¹ Ibid

2.0 Environmental Ethics and Sustainability

Ethics have been defined as well-based standards of right and wrong that prescribe what humans ought to do, usually in terms of rights, obligations, benefits to society fairness, or specific virtues¹². Ethics refers to the guidelines for conduct that address questions of morality¹³. It has been noted that ethics shape human conduct by determining what is right or wrong¹⁴. Ethics relate to an individual's morals and their sense of right and wrong¹⁵. They provide a lens for humanity to base its morality and shape its decision-making process¹⁶.

Environmental ethics is a concept that examines the moral basis of humanity's responsibility towards the environment¹⁷. It governs human beings' ethical relationship with the natural environment¹⁸. The purpose of environmental ethics is to guide how humanity should interact with the natural environment, including the nonhuman individuals that populate it and respond to environmental challenges more appropriately¹⁹. This concept emphasizes for the increased and improved moral regard for nonhuman and ecological system²⁰. According to environmental ethics, lack of moral responsibility towards the environment is a fundamental cause of environmental damage and degradation²¹. Environmental ethics is therefore concerned with the issue of responsible human conduct with respect to natural landscapes, resources, species and non-human organisms²².

¹² Velasquez M., Andre C., Shanks, S.J., and Meyer M., (1987), "What is Ethics?", *Journal of Issues in Ethics*, IIE Vol. 1(1).

¹³ Evans. W. G., 'Ethics, Values and Practice' Available at http://www.scielo.org.za/scielo.php?script=sci_arttext&pid=S0011-85162019000600013 (Accessed on 03/04/2024)

¹⁴ Ibid

¹⁵ Sustainability Methods and Perspectives., Available at <https://pressbooks.pub/sustainabilitymethods/chapter/ethics-in-sustainability/#:~:text=Environmental%20ethics%20focuses%20on%20the%20relationship%20between%20human%20beings%20and,it%20can%20best%20be%20protected> (Accessed on 03/04/2024)

¹⁶ Ibid

¹⁷ Bourdeau. Ph., 'The Man Nature Relationship and Environmental Ethics' *Journal of Environmental Radioactivity* 72 (2004) 9-15

¹⁸ Hossain. S., 'Environmental Ethics and Sustainable Development: An Analysis of Rampal Coal Power Plant in Bangladesh' Available at <https://philarchive.org/archive/HOSEEA-2> (Accessed on 03/04/2024)

¹⁹ Ibid

²⁰ Ibid

²¹ Ibid

²² Michael. J., 'Environmental Ethics and Sustainable Development: Ethical and Human Rights Issues in Implementing Indigenous Rights' *Macquarie Journal of International and Comparative Environmental Law*, 2005

Environmental ethics are fundamental in achieving sustainability²³. It has been argued that with the increasing deterioration of the environment as evidenced by problems such as climate change, pollution, and loss of biodiversity, humanity cannot entirely rely on economic and judicial interventions alone to address these challenges.²⁴ Therefore, there is need to appeal to human beings' limitless internal ethical resources for enhanced environmental conservation²⁵. It has been argued that it is only through embracing an appropriate attitude towards nature and establishment of a new ethical relationship between humanity and nature that it will be possible to forge a harmonious relationship between human beings and the environment²⁶. According to the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP), transitioning to a more sustainable future requires a new environmental governance system and the engagement of the full spectrum of society and the employment of innovative approaches that protect the natural environment based on behavioural and ethical changes in environmental governance²⁷.

Environmental ethics seek to fill the gaps in political, legal, scientific, economic, and technological approaches towards environmental conservation²⁸. It has been noted that for a long time, human effects on the environment were regarded as neutral since it was assumed that nature was both impersonal and too vast to be injured by human interventions²⁹. However, environmental ethics acknowledge that human actions can result in massive and permanent damage to natural landscape, resources and ecosystems³⁰. Environmental ethics seek to instill a sense of moral obligation to act with care, foresight and at times, with forbearance and constraint for enhances environmental conservation³¹.

It has been argued that ethics are important to consider when solving major challenges related to sustainability since they take into account the needs and rights of a variety of

²³ Ibid

²⁴ Muigua. K., 'Nurturing Our Environment for Sustainable Development' Glenwood Publishers Limited, 2016

²⁵ Ibid

²⁶ Ibid

²⁷ United Nations Environment Programme., 'The Role of Environmental and Spiritual Ethics in Global Environmental Governance' Available at <https://www.unep.org/resources/policy-and-strategy/role-environmental-and-spiritual-ethics-global-environmental#:~:text=Adopting%20an%20ethics%20and%20values,essential%20requirement%20for%20Sustainable%20Development> (Accessed on 03/04/2024)

²⁸ Michael. J., 'Environmental Ethics and Sustainable Development: Ethical and Human Rights Issues in Implementing Indigenous Rights' Op Cit

²⁹ Ibid

³⁰ Ibid

³¹ Ibid

groups³². Ethics consider the needs of present and future generations in the sustainability agenda. Therefore, when environmental decision-makers use ethical approaches to solve sustainability challenges, they consider how their decisions can have effects on the environment, economy, and humanity in general – now and in the future³³. Environmental ethics are therefore key in promoting the ideal of Environmental Justice³⁴. The idea of Environmental Justice refers to the right to have access to natural resources; not to suffer disproportionately from environmental policies, laws and regulations; and the right to environmental information, participation and involvement in decision-making³⁵. It envisages the fair treatment and meaningful involvement of all people regardless of race, color, national origin, or income with respect to the development, implementation, and enforcement of environmental laws, regulations, and policies³⁶. Environmental Justice seeks to ensure equality, equity and fairness in environmental matters³⁷. Applying ethics is key in realizing Environmental Justice which considers how environmental problems and benefits are divided among groups³⁸. It has been argued that Environmental justice is a subset of environmental ethics since it places the environment at the center of the sustainability debate and considers social and economic effects stemming from environmental problems³⁹. Applying environmental ethics is thus crucial in realizing Environmental Justice towards sustainability.

According to UNEP, adopting an ethics and values-based approach where humans learn to live in harmony with nature and with one another is critical in achieving the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development that is people-centered and acknowledges that a healthy planet is an essential requirement for Sustainable Development⁴⁰. The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development identifies key problems facing the planet including climate change, environmental degradation, depletion of natural resources, loss of

³² Sustainability Methods and Perspectives., Op Cit

³³ Ibid

³⁴ Ibid

³⁵ Ako. R., 'Resource Exploitation and Environmental Justice: the Nigerian Experience' Available at <https://www.elgaronline.com/display/edcoll/9781848446793/9781848446793.00011.xml> (Accessed on 03/04/2024)

³⁶ United States Environmental Protection Agency; 'Environmental Justice.' Available at <https://www.epa.gov/environmentaljustice> (Accessed on 03/04/2024)

³⁷ Schlosberg. D & Collins. L., 'From Environmental to Climate Justice: Climate Change and the Discourse of Environmental Justice.' *WIREs Clim Change*, 2014

³⁸ Sustainability Methods and Perspectives., Op Cit

³⁹ Ibid

⁴⁰ United Nations Environment Programme., 'The Role of Environmental and Spiritual Ethics in Global Environmental Governance' Op Cit

biodiversity and pollution⁴¹. It has been argued that some of these problems especially climate change, depletion of natural resources, and deforestation have more negative impacts on future generations compared to the present⁴². As a result, human beings have an ethical obligation to solve such environmental problems for the benefit of both the present and future generations⁴³. Applying environmental ethics can therefore aid in solving environmental problems and achieving Sustainable Development.

One of the key sources of environmental ethics is the *Earth Charter*⁴⁴. This Charter stands apart from the many other United Nations Declarations, Conventions, and Treaties that address sustainability since it sets out a set of principles to live by, rather than a prescription for action⁴⁵. One of the fundamental purposes of the Earth Charter is to encourage all people to identify with the Whole Earth community as well as their local communities and to expand their moral concern and caring to include the present and future well-being of the entire humanity and the larger living world⁴⁶. According to the Charter, the world needs a shared vision of basic values to provide an ethical foundation for addressing challenges facing planet⁴⁷. The Charter presents a holistic worldview driven by such *ethical* concerns including respect for nature(Emphasis added)⁴⁸.

Some of key ethical principles and considerations under the Earth Charter include the recognition that all beings are interdependent and every form of life has value regardless of its worth to human beings⁴⁹; faith in the inherent dignity of all human beings and in the intellectual, artistic, ethical, and spiritual potential of humanity⁵⁰; right to own, manage, and use natural resources which comes with the duty to prevent environmental harm and to protect the rights of people⁵¹; the need to build democratic societies that are just, participatory, sustainable, and peaceful; promoting social and economic justice and enabling all to achieve a secure and meaningful livelihood that is ecologically

⁴¹ United Nations General Assembly., 'Transforming Our World: the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development.' Op Cit

⁴² Rajalakshmi. S., 'Sustainable Development through Environmental Ethics' *International Journal of Applied Research.*, Volume 2, No. 3, 2016

⁴³ Ibid

⁴⁴ Earth Charter., Available at <https://earthcharter.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/06/Booklet-Earth-Charter-52-FINAL.pdf> (Accessed on 04/04/2024)

⁴⁵ Ibid

⁴⁶ Ibid

⁴⁷ Ibid

⁴⁸ Ibid

⁴⁹ Ibid

⁵⁰ Ibid

⁵¹ Ibid

responsible⁵²; and the need to transmit to future generations values, traditions, and institutions that support the long-term flourishing of Earth's human and ecological communities⁵³. The Earth Charter urges humanity to respect the environment and ensure protection of the Earth's diversity, prevent ecological harm, and foster sustainable lifestyles⁵⁴. It also focuses on protection and preservation of the traditional knowledge and spiritual wisdom of Indigenous peoples, as well as the eradication of poverty as an ethical, social and environmental imperative⁵⁵. It has been argued that since the Earth Charter is not a legal document that requires ratification, its implementation is premised on changes in attitude and ethical behaviour⁵⁶. The Charter can therefore be a common standard for ethical, just and environmentally sound behaviour towards sustainability⁵⁷.

From the foregoing, it is evident that environmental ethics are key in realizing sustainability. Environmental ethics are essential for protecting the environment, species, and resources⁵⁸. They can promote sustainable practices and encourage people to become more aware of the impact their actions have on the environment⁵⁹. Environmental ethics further emphasize the interconnectedness of all living organisms and the need to respect them⁶⁰. They can also help humanity to build better relationships with nature by recognizing its intrinsic value and not just its instrumental value⁶¹. In addition, environmental ethics can aid in the adoption of better public policies and laws for effective environmental governance⁶². It is therefore necessary to embrace environmental ethics for sustainability. However, there are several challenges in environmental ethics including defining the boundaries of ethical obligation and implementing ethical obligations towards the environment⁶³. These challenges may hinder the effectiveness of

⁵² Ibid

⁵³ Earth Charter.,

⁵⁴ Ibid

⁵⁵ Ibid

⁵⁶ Michael. J., 'Environmental Ethics and Sustainable Development: Ethical and Human Rights Issues in Implementing Indigenous Rights' Op Cit

⁵⁷ Ibid

⁵⁸ Environmental Ethics: Types, Importance, Examples., Available at <https://www.geeksforgeeks.org/environmental-ethics/> (Accessed on 04/04/2024)

⁵⁹ Ibid

⁶⁰ Ibid

⁶¹ Michael. J., 'Environmental Ethics and Sustainable Development: Ethical and Human Rights Issues in Implementing Indigenous Rights' Op Cit

⁶² Ibid

⁶³ Rolston. H., 'Challenges in Environmental Ethics' Available at <https://api.mountainscholar.org/server/api/core/bitstreams/db4c5a00-c1dc-4af7-abd7-4f76ee8dabd9/content> (Accessed on 04/04/2024)

environmental ethics in sustainability. It is therefore necessary to address such challenges in order to strengthen the role of environmental ethics for sustainability.

3.0 Way Forward

In order to embrace environmental ethics, there it is necessary to redefine the relationship between humanity and nature⁶⁴. There is need to establish harmony between humanity and nature in order to ensure that human beings preserve and protect nature while developing⁶⁵. It has been noted that for long time, human-beings have treated the environment as a commodity or resource to be exploited and discarded⁶⁶. This approach has resulted in the environment being susceptible to threat from human action through pollution, environmental degradation, climate change, and loss of biodiversity among other concerns⁶⁷. It is therefore necessary for humanity to build better relationships with nature by recognizing its intrinsic value and not just its instrumental value⁶⁸. Establishing harmony between humanity and nature can provide moral framework for how human beings interact with the natural environment⁶⁹. This approach can help humanity consider the effects its actions have on the planet and guide in making more ethical and sustainable decisions⁷⁰. Establishing harmony between humanity and nature is thus vital in applying environmental ethics for sustainability.

In addition, it is imperative to foster an ecocentric approach towards environmental governance⁷¹. An ecocentric approach towards environmental governance acknowledges that the environment, species and ecosystems have value and interests that should be respected regardless of whether they serve human needs and aspirations⁷². Ecocentrism represents the idea that everything in the natural world has its own intrinsic value and

⁶⁴ Song. W., & Cao. H., 'Historical Evolution and Reflections on "Harmony between Man and Nature"' Available at <https://www.scirp.org/journal/paperinformation?paperid=120602#:~:text=Harmony%20between%20man%20and%20nature%20means%20that%20man%20needs%20to,to%20preserve%20nature%20while%20developing> (Accessed on 04/04/2024)

⁶⁵ Ibid

⁶⁶ Ibid

⁶⁷ Ibid

⁶⁸ Michael. J., 'Environmental Ethics and Sustainable Development: Ethical and Human Rights Issues in Implementing Indigenous Rights' Op Cit

⁶⁹ Michael. J., 'Environmental Ethics and Sustainable Development: Ethical and Human Rights Issues in Implementing Indigenous Rights' Op Cit

⁷⁰ Ibid

⁷¹ Taylor. B., 'The Need for Ecocentrism in Biodiversity Conservation' Available at <https://conbio.onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/full/10.1111/cobi.13541> (Accessed on 04/04/2024)

⁷² Ibid

deserves moral consideration⁷³. This idea has been posited as the only effective approach to environmental ethics⁷⁴. It emphasizes the intrinsic value of nature and places a moral obligation on humanity to respect and conserve the environment for the benefit of present and future generations⁷⁵. Fostering an ecocentric approach towards environmental governance is therefore key in entrenching environmental ethics for sustainability.

Finally, it is necessary to strengthen environmental education⁷⁶. It has been noted that there is a close link between environmental degradation, lack of environmental justice, poverty, and low levels of education among citizens and provision of education is the crucial first step towards eliminating environmental challenges⁷⁷. Environmental education is important in promoting Sustainable Development and improving the capacity of people to address environment and development issues⁷⁸. It can help individuals, communities, and organizations learn more about the environment, and develop skills and understanding about how to address global environmental challenges⁷⁹. Environmental education can also influence humanity's attitudes and perceptions towards the environment⁸⁰. Therefore, environmental education is vital in fostering good ethics and morals towards the environment. According to UNEP, environmental education is a key element to transform values, behaviors and visions towards the environment⁸¹. It is therefore necessary to strengthen environmental education in order to effectively apply ethics for sustainability.

4.0 Conclusion

Environmental ethics are fundamental in achieving sustainability. They can help humanity to build better relationships with nature by recognizing its intrinsic value and not just its instrumental value⁸². They can also promote sustainable practices and encourage people to become more aware of the impact their actions have on the

⁷³ Proctor. J. D., 'Nature, Concepts of: Environmental and Ecological' Available at <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/abs/pii/B0080430767041280> (Accessed on 04/04/2024)

⁷⁴ Ibid

⁷⁵ Ibid

⁷⁶ Muigua. K., 'Nurturing Our Environment for Sustainable Development' Op Cit

⁷⁷ Ibid

⁷⁸ Ibid

⁷⁹ United Nations Environment Programme., 'Environmental Education' Available at <https://www.unep.org/regions/latin-america-and-caribbean/regional-initiatives/strengthening-environmental-governance-3> (Accessed on 04/04/2024)

⁸⁰ Ibid

⁸¹ Ibid

⁸² Michael. J., 'Environmental Ethics and Sustainable Development: Ethical and Human Rights Issues in Implementing Indigenous Rights' Op Cit

environment⁸³. Environmental ethics can also aid in the adoption of better public policies and laws for effective environmental governance⁸⁴. However, the efficacy of environmental ethics in sustainability is limited by challenges such as defining the boundaries of ethical obligation and implementing ethical obligations towards the environment⁸⁵. In order to effectively apply environmental ethics for sustainability, it is necessary to redefine the relationship between humanity and nature⁸⁶; foster an ecocentric approach towards environmental governance⁸⁷; and strengthen environmental education⁸⁸. Environmental ethics is a viable tool that needs to be effectively applied for sustainability.

⁸³ Ibid

⁸⁴ Ibid

⁸⁵ Rolston. H., 'Challenges in Environmental Ethics' Op Cit

⁸⁶ Song. W., & Cao. H., 'Historical Evolution and Reflections on "Harmony between Man and Nature"' Op Cit

⁸⁷ Taylor. B., 'The Need for Ecocentrism in Biodiversity Conservation' Op Cit

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