

Ecocentrism and Environmental Governance in Africa: Conserving Nature for its Intrinsic and Spiritual Value?

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Ecocentrism and Environmental Governance in Africa: Conserving Nature for its Intrinsic and Spiritual Value?

Kariuki Muigua*

Abstract

This paper critically examines how Africa can embrace sound environmental governance through ecocentrism. The paper conceptualizes ecocentrism. It argues that ecocentrism is a vital approach towards strengthening environmental governance by conserving nature for its intrinsic and spiritual value. Due to its important role in ensuring sound environmental governance, the paper suggests ways through which Africa can adopt ecocentrism towards effectively conserving nature for Sustainable Development.

1.0 Introduction

The concept of environmental governance covers rules, practices, approaches and processes that guide the management of the environment and natural resources¹. It has been argued that environmental governance extends beyond government regulations and interventions to involve other stakeholders such as the private sector, non-governmental organizations (NGOs), and the public in environmental decision-making². According to the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP), environmental governance refers to the rules, policies and institutions that shape how humans interact with the environment³. In addition to rules, policies and norms that guide how humans interact with the environment, the concept of environmental governance also addresses

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¹ Environmental Governance., Available at <https://www.manglai.io/en/glossary/environmental-governance> (Accessed on 23/09/2025)

² Ibid

³ United Nations Environment Programme., 'About environmental rights and governance' Available at <https://www.unep.org/explore-topics/environmental-governance/about-environmental-rights-and-governance> (Accessed on 23/09/2025)

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who makes environmental decisions, how environmental decisions are made and carried out, the scientific information needed for environmental decision-making and how the public and major stakeholders can participate in the decision-making processes⁴. Environmental governance therefore includes a wide range of legal and other tools employed in both the public and private sectors to strengthen environmental protection⁵.

Sound environmental governance plays a key role in fostering Sustainable Development. It has been argued that building robust environmental governance systems can safeguard the planet and human rights including the right to a clean, healthy and sustainable environment⁶. Sound environmental governance ensures inclusive, participatory, just and fair approaches in managing the environment and natural resources⁷. Through this, it is possible to maintain and improve the ability of environmental systems to function appropriately and provide ecosystem services such as clean air, water, food, energy and climate regulation on an ongoing basis⁸. Sound environmental governance is therefore vital in fostering a healthy and prosperous planet for both humanity and nature, now and in the future⁹.

Strengthening environmental governance is therefore vital in the quest towards Sustainable Development. However, achieving this ideal remains elusive for the global community. For instance, environmental threats including the triple planetary crisis of climate change, pollution and biodiversity loss, are worsening all over the world

⁴ United Nations Environment Programme., 'Environmental Governance' Available at <https://www.unep.org/regions/west-asia/regional-initiatives/environmental-governance> (Accessed on 23/09/2025)

⁵ Environmental Law Institute., 'Environmental Governance' Available at <https://www.eli.org/environmental-governance> (Accessed on 23/09/2025)

⁶ United Nations Environment Programme., 'About environmental rights and governance' Op Cit

⁷ Bennett. N.J., & Satterfield. T., 'Environmental governance: A practical framework to guide design, evaluation, and analysis' Available at <https://conbio.onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/conl.12600> (Accessed on 23/09/2025)

⁸ Ibid

⁹ United Nations Environment Programme., 'Environmental Governance' Op Cit

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demonstrating weaknesses in environmental governance systems¹⁰. Further, it has been pointed out that environmental governance systems in most countries are strained, with marginalized groups including women, the youth, indigenous peoples and local communities often excluded from environmental decision-making processes¹¹. In the African context, challenges such as weak institutions and capacity, lack of political incentives, and insufficient public awareness including limited access to information related to environmental rights and limited access to the appropriate decision-making forums, especially at the local level undermine effective, inclusive and accountable environmental governance¹². The shortcomings in environmental governance systems both globally and in Africa are contributing to challenges such as poverty, climate change, loss of biodiversity, water scarcity, environmental degradation, inequitable distribution of natural resources, loss of arable land, food insecurity, and coastal degradation and wetlands intrusion¹³. Strengthening environmental governance is therefore a key agenda at all levels towards Sustainable Development.

This paper critically examines how Africa can embrace sound environmental governance through ecocentrism. The paper conceptualizes ecocentrism. It argues that ecocentrism is a vital approach towards strengthening environmental governance by conserving nature for its intrinsic and spiritual value. Due to its important role in ensuring sound environmental governance, the paper suggests ways through which Africa can adopt ecocentrism towards effectively conserving nature for Sustainable Development.

¹⁰ United Nations Development Programme., 'Environmental Governance: Bolstering inclusive and effective governance systems that champion environmental justice and sustainability' Available at <https://www.undp.org/nature/our-work-areas/environmental-governance> (Accessed on 23/09/2025)

¹¹ Ibid

¹² The Access Initiative., 'The Road to Realizing Environmental Rights In Africa: Moving From Principles to Practice' Available at https://accessinitiative.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/10/22.01_rep_access_initiative_v583-4.pdf (Accessed on 23/09/2025)

¹³ Environmental Governance in Africa., Available at <https://www.connect4climate.org/learn/article/environmental-governance-in-africa> (Accessed on 23/09/2025)

2.0 The Place of Ecocentrism in Environmental Governance

Ecocentrism is the idea that everything in the natural world has its own intrinsic value and deserves moral consideration¹⁴. This concept 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 generations¹⁵. Further, ecocentrism has been described as an ethical and moral perspective that emphasizes the intrinsic and spiritual value of the natural world, advocating for its importance independent of human interests¹⁶. It is an ideal which recognizes the intrinsic value in all lifeforms and ecosystems themselves, including their abiotic components¹⁷.

Ecocentrism therefore finds inherent value in all of nature. It has been argued that this approach takes a much wider view of the world than anthropocentrism¹⁸. The concept of anthropocentrism presupposes that human beings are more valuable than all other organisms¹⁹. While anthropocentrism predicts a moral obligation only towards other human beings, ecocentrism emphasizes the interconnectedness of all species and ecosystems and places an ethical and moral obligation on human beings to live in harmony with nature²⁰. Ecocentrism recognises the Earth as the ultimate source of value, meaning and enablement for all beings, including – but not only – human beings²¹. It focuses on ecological integrity of the Earth's ecosystems, wild places, and natural

¹⁴ Proctor. J. D., 'Nature, Concepts of: Environmental and Ecological' Available at <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/abs/pii/B0080430767041280> (Accessed on 23/09/2025)

¹⁵ Ibid

¹⁶ Ecocentrism., Available at <https://www.ebsco.com/research-starters/science/ecocentrism> (Accessed on 23/09/2025)

¹⁷ Washington, W et al., 'Why Ecocentrism is the Key Pathway to Sustainability' Available at <https://scholarlypublications.universiteitleiden.nl/access/item%3A2901740/view> (Accessed on 23/09/2025)

¹⁸ Ibid

¹⁹ Ibid

²⁰ Rulke. J et al., 'How Ecocentrism and Anthropocentrism Influence Human-Environment Relationships in a Kenyan Biodiversity Hotspot' Available at <https://www.mdpi.com/2071-1050/12/19/8213#:~:text=Among%20the%20different%20types%20of,%E2%80%9Cwhy%E2%80%9D%20is%20more%20important.> (Accessed on 23/09/2025)

²¹ What is Ecocentrism? (A Definition), Available at <https://www.ecologicalcitizen.net/what-is.php?t=ecocentrism-definition> (Accessed on 23/09/2025)

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processes upon which all beings are completely dependent²². Ecocentrism is therefore a worldview that recognizes the intrinsic value in ecosystems and the biological and physical elements that they comprise, as well as in the ecological processes that connect them²³.

Applying ecocentrism is a suitable approach towards fostering sound environmental governance²⁴. For example, it has been argued that in order to preserve a healthy environment for current and future generations, ecocentrism must prevail over anthropocentrism²⁵. Through its recognition of humanity's duties towards nature, ecocentrism is central in solving environmental challenges facing the planet including climate change, biodiversity loss and pollution²⁶. Under ecocentrism human needs, like the needs of other species, are secondary to those of the Earth as the sum of its ecosystems²⁷. This ideal therefore places a moral obligation on humanity to protect the planet for the benefit of all living species and ecosystems, now and in the future²⁸. It offers a robust ethical analysis of the negative impact that humans are having on the community of life on Earth and the physical systems on which it is dependent²⁹.

Due to its recognition of the intrinsic and spiritual value of nature, it has been argued that achieving a clean, healthy and sustainable environment starts with embracing and

²² Ibid

²³ Gray. J., & Whyte. I., & Curry. P., 'Ecocentrism: What it means and what it implies' Available at <https://www.ecologicalcitizen.net/pdfs/v01n2-02.pdf> (Accessed on 23/09/2025)

²⁴ Taylor. B., 'The Need for Ecocentrism in Biodiversity Conservation' Available at <https://conbio.onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/full/10.1111/cobi.13541> (Accessed on 23/09/2025)

²⁵ Open Global Rights., 'Ecocentrism: A Refusal to Compromise on Ecological Integrity' Available at <https://www.openglobalrights.org/ecocentrism-refusal-to-compromise-ecological-integrity/> (Accessed on 23/09/2025)

²⁶ Ibid

²⁷ Gray. J., & Whyte. I., & Curry. P., 'Ecocentrism: What it means and what it implies' Op Cit

²⁸ Ibid

²⁹ Ibid

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applying ecocentrism³⁰. By recognising the interconnectedness of all species and life systems on Earth, it is possible for human beings to take sound action towards conserving nature³¹. An ecocentric approach can foster sound environmental governance since it requires human actions to prioritize the well-being of ecosystems and other living species, particularly in situations where these interests conflict with human development³².

The *Earth Charter*³³ advances an ecocentric worldview towards strengthening environmental governance. The Charter recognizes that all beings are interdependent and every form of life has value regardless of its worth to human beings³⁴. It expresses compassion for humanity and nature as a whole, and urges justice for both³⁵. The Earth Charter therefore emphasizes harmony between humanity and nature which is a core ideal under ecocentrism. In addition, the *2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development*³⁶ envisions a world where humanity lives in harmony with nature and in which wildlife and other living species are protected³⁷. At its core are 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) which seeks to foster sustainability by promoting environmental conservation, economic development, and social progress³⁸. Applying an ecocentric approach can accelerate progress towards the SDGs by protecting the planet from degradation including through sustainable consumption and production, sustainably managing its

³⁰ A Sustainable Environment Starts With Ecocentrism., Available at <https://www.populationmedia.org/the-latest/a-sustainable-environment-starts-with-ecocentrism> (Accessed on 23/09/2025)

³¹ Ibid

³² Ecocentrism., Op Cit

³³ Earth Charter., Available at <https://earthcharter.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/06/Booklet-Earth-Charter-52-FINAL.pdf> (Accessed on 23/09/2025)

³⁴ Ibid

³⁵ Ibid

³⁶ 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 23/09/2025)

³⁷ Ibid

³⁸ Ibid

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natural resources and taking urgent action on climate change, biodiversity loss and pollution so that it can support the needs of present and future generations³⁹.

Embracing ecocentrism is therefore key towards fostering sound environmental governance for sustainability.

3.0 Embracing Ecocentrism for Sound Environmental Governance in Africa

It is imperative to apply ecocentrism towards strengthening environmental governance in Africa. It has been argued that sound environmental governance in Africa is constrained by weak governance systems which fail to integrate governance principles of inclusion, accountability and responsiveness in environmental policies and programs⁴⁰. As a result, key stakeholders including the civil society, women, indigenous peoples and local communities are often excluded from decision-making processes undermining sound environmental governance⁴¹. Failure to achieve sound environmental governance in Africa is harming nature through unsustainable exploitation of the continent's natural resources, deforestation, pollution, land degradation, climate change and biodiversity loss⁴².

Due to the environmental governance challenges in Africa, embracing ecocentrism provides a suitable approach towards conserving nature for its intrinsic and spiritual value. Ecocentrism finds intrinsic and spiritual value in nature and requires human beings to live in harmony with the natural world⁴³. It expands moral consideration to ecosystems as a whole, emphasizing the intrinsic worth of all living and nonliving

³⁹ Ibid

⁴⁰ United Nations Development Programme., 'Environmental Governance' Available at <https://www.undp.org/governance/environmental-governance> (Accessed on 24/09/2025)

⁴¹ Ibid

⁴² United Nations Environment Programme., 'Fostering Collaboration to Address Environmental Challenges in Africa.' Available at <https://www.unep.org/news-and-stories/speech/fostering-collaboration-address-environmental-challenges-africa> (Accessed on 24/09/2025)

⁴³ Frantz. P., Rego. F., & Barbas. S., 'Ecocentrism vs. Anthropocentrism: To the Core of the Dilemma to Overcome It' Available at <https://pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/articles/PMC12152000/> (Accessed on 24/09/2025)

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components of nature⁴⁴. Embracing an ecocentric approach can therefore bolster environmental governance by placing a moral and ethical obligation on human beings to conserve nature for its intrinsic and spiritual value.

Ecocentrism is a worldview that has a rich history in Africa. It has been argued that ecocentrism has been with humanity for many centuries with indigenous peoples and local communities living in harmony with nature and considering many aspects of the natural world as sacred⁴⁵. The land and natural resources on which indigenous peoples depend are inextricably linked to their identities, cultures, livelihoods, as well as their physical and spiritual well-being⁴⁶. It has been pointed out that indigenous and local communities in Africa attach importance to some natural resources that may be revered as shrines, dwelling places for ancestors and sacred sites where rites of passage and other cultural celebrations take place⁴⁷. For instance Africa's mountains and forests are important centres of cultural integrity and heritage⁴⁸. They are a source of cultural, spiritual, and religious significance for many communities in the continent⁴⁹.

Communities in Africa therefore appreciate nature for its intrinsic and spiritual value. It is therefore imperative to embrace and apply ecocentrism towards strengthening environmental governance. This worldview is appreciated all over Africa and has been utilised by indigenous peoples and local communities in achieving harmony with nature. Indigenous philosophies in Africa including *Ubuntu* and the principles of Ma'at

⁴⁴ Ibid

⁴⁵ Washington, W et al., 'Why Ecocentrism is the Key Pathway to Sustainability' Op Cit

⁴⁶ World Bank Group., 'Indigenous Peoples' Available at <https://www.worldbank.org/en/topic/indigenouspeoples#:~:text=Indigenous%20Peoples%20are%20distinct%20social,which%20they%20have%20been%20displaced> (Accessed on 24/09/2025)

⁴⁷ Muigua. K., Wamukoya. D & Kariuki. F., 'Natural Resources and Environmental Justice in Kenya.' Glenwood Publishers Limited, 2015

⁴⁸ United Nations Environment Programme., 'Africa Mountains Atlas' Available at <https://www.unep.org/resources/report/africa-mountains-atlas#:~:text=The%20mountains%20of%20Africa%20provide,Environment%20under%20review> (Accessed on 24/09/2025)

⁴⁹ Ibid

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emphasize balance, harmony, and respect for the natural world for its intrinsic and spiritual value⁵⁰. They view humanity and nature as interconnected with human beings being an integral part of a greater cosmic order⁵¹. It has been argued that by applying these principles, it is possible to foster greater environmental stewardship by requiring human beings to respect nature and combat practices such as pollution, biodiversity loss, ecosystem degradation and climate change which threaten harmony with nature⁵².

Ecocentrism therefore has a long and rich history in Africa. It is therefore imperative to foster this approach towards achieving sound environmental governance in Africa. Human beings should therefore live in harmony with nature and conserve it for its intrinsic and spiritual value⁵³. Further, it is imperative to strengthen environmental education in Africa. It has been argued that environmental education can enable individuals, communities, and organizations learn more about the environment, and develop skills and understanding about how to address global environmental challenges⁵⁴. Environmental education can also influence humanity's attitudes and perceptions towards the environment⁵⁵. Environmental education has been described as a key tool that can transform values, behaviors and visions towards the environment⁵⁶. Strengthening environmental education can therefore enable human beings to appreciate and conserve nature for its intrinsic and spiritual value. Further, it is imperative to embrace the role of indigenous peoples and local communities in environmental governance Africa since they have been custodians of the environment for many

⁵⁰ Ayoub. R., 'The First Sustainability Practices on Earth: Ancient Egypt's 42 Laws of Ma'at' Available at https://www.researchgate.net/publication/388007800_The_First_Sustainability_Practices_on_Earth_Ancient_Egypt's_42_Laws_of_Maat (Accessed on 24/09/2025)

⁵¹ Ibid

⁵² Ibid

⁵³ Ibid

⁵⁴ 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 24/09/2025)

⁵⁵ Ibid

⁵⁶ Ibid

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centuries due to their traditional ecological practices which emphasize harmony with nature⁵⁷.

4.0 Conclusion

Ecocentrism provides an effective approach towards strengthening environmental governance in Africa. It places a moral and ethical obligation on human beings to conserve nature for its intrinsic and spiritual value. This worldview has a rich history in Africa and has been practiced by indigenous peoples and local communities for many centuries⁵⁸. It is therefore necessary to embrace and apply ecocentrism in Africa by fostering harmony with nature, strengthening environmental education and enhancing the participation of indigenous peoples and local communities in environmental governance. Embracing ecocentrism in Africa is a key and practical approach towards strengthening environmental governance by conserving nature for its intrinsic and spiritual value.

⁵⁷ Egeruoh-Adindu. I., 'Leveraging Indigenous Knowledge for Effective Environmental Governance in West Africa.' Available at <https://www.scirp.org/journal/paperinformation?paperid=121949#:~:text=Indigenous%20knowledge%20systems%20such%20as,effective%20in%20promoting%20environmental%20sustainability> (Accessed on 24/09/2025)

⁵⁸ Ayoub. R., 'The First Sustainability Practices on Earth: Ancient Egypt's 42 Laws of Ma'at' Op Cit

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