

# **Perspective of Islam on Life, Ecology, Environment and Human Role Within**

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## **Human Role as the Steward of Earth**

The holy book of Muslims, the Qur’an tells us that human beings are created from an earthly essence (Qur’an, 7:11, 17:61) and more generally every living being is created from water. “*Have not those who disbelieve known that the heavens and the earth were of one piece, then We parted them, and We made every living thing of water? Will they not then believe?*” declares the Qur’an in (21:30). We do have a common physical existence as with everything else on earth. There is, however, a profound difference between the way humans and the plants and animals function on the common home we call the earth.

When we examine nature and living beings from the perspective of contribution to its natural environment, we realise that every living being adds value to its ecological system. Consider the vine plant for example. It sucks muddy water from soil and turns it into pockets of sweet and nutritious grapes. The sheep consume plain grass off the meadows and produces milk, wool and meat. Trees inhale carbon dioxide in and exhale oxygen out, thus, cleansing the atmosphere for animals and humans. Every animal and plant species add value to its natural environment, either by the end products that they produce or by the functions that they perform. Human beings, on the other hand, consume the best of what the kitchen of nature has to offer and turn it into a waste that is flushed down in a hurry. Humanity, in a physical sense, adds no value to the ecological environment. This observation has two consequences.

1. Humanity is not really part of the ecological system. Humans are designed utilising the same material to live in the ecosystem but are really alien to it.
2. For human existence, one has to look for a purpose other than his mere physical existence. The finer intellectual and spiritual faculties are given to us for spiritual enlightenment and worship (Qur’an, 51:56)

We live on earth and inevitably interact with the environment. Not being part of the ecosystem, the result of our inevitable interaction with the environment is in the form of consuming its value-added products without returning any tangible value. Human life and ecosystems are not mutually exclusive and certainly not interdependent. Humanity depends on the environment but the environment does not depend on humanity. In fact, the whole planet would rejoice if we all packed our bags and left the planet for good.

Is there anything we can do as human beings? Can there be reconciliation between the environment and us? The only real value we can add to the environment is its protection and preservation. The reality is that we simply cannot do more than this. Since, all human action depends on people’s choices and choices depends on attitudes and conditioning, the only thing the religion can do is educate people and give them the responsibility to take care of the environment. Islam addresses the issue in three tiers.

We only take care of things if we believe they are valuable. So, the first thing that Islam does is to give immense worth the environment. Islam asserts that all life is special and valuable

because it is the life and the art displayed on each creature that connects it to the Divine. To a Muslim, God has created this universe like a majestic palace. He fashioned the earth like a huge exhibition hall within the palace. He, then, decorated the hall with his fine works of art for those conscious beings who can appreciate the art and recognise the Artist behind it all. It is this connection, work of art with the Artist, that makes every living entity valuable because of the Artist, God, just as the painting of a master artist gains immense value, beyond its material worth, because of the art in the painting. Therefore, in Islam, the natural environment and animal forms are sacred and valuable. Non recognition of God on the other hand reduces the value of all creatures to their material worth.

Although Islam treats the life of all creation as valuable, it gives greater honour to human life. Humanity and therefore human life is distinguished from the rest of the creation in three distinct ways.

1. Humanity is created in the best composition (Qur'an, 95:4). A human cannot compete with a bird in physical sense, but has great depth and capacity in mental and spiritual dimensions. He is but a tender child fostered and protected in a cradle called the earth that spins around the sun faster than a speeding bullet.
2. Humanity has been given the capacity to learn through reflecting over the universe and also gain knowledge of God (Qur'an, 2:31-33) that leads to worship of God.
3. Humanity's acceptance of God's trust. This trust is said to be the self-awareness and freedom of choice enabling humans to develop spiritually leading to belief in and submission to God willingly and consciously (Qur'an, 33:72).

However, this honourable position is not absolute. The level of human development one attains is the measure of every person's status with respect to other beings. Just as it is possible to reach to levels above creation, it is also possible to fall far below it. What might appear to be an advantage can turn out to be disadvantageous. The reality is that we have the opportunity and the freedom to determine our own destiny.

With the freedom of choice comes accountability. This is the second tier in Islam's education of humans with respect to environmental protection. One of the roles given to humanity in the Qur'an is the role of vicegerent (*caliph*) on earth (Qur'an 2:30). This role gives the human being authority over the creation rendering the creation on earth to human disposal. This is not an unconditional authority, as accountability is a natural consequence of authority. Therefore, Islam teaches that humanity will be questioned of its treatment of animals and the environment in the Day of Judgement., "*Fear God in your treatment of animals.*" and, "*Verily, there is heavenly reward for every act of kindness done to a living animal*" declared the Prophet Muhammad<sup>pbuh</sup>.

Third tier is the recognition that vegetation and animal world establish ecosystems just like humans develop interdependent communities. The Qur'an clearly talks about living beings existing in ecological systems. "*There is not an moving creature on earth, nor a bird that flies with its two wings, but are communities like you. We have neglected nothing in the Book (of Our decrees). Then unto their Lord they will be gathered*" declares the Qur'an in (6:38). The comparison of animal species to human communities is very significant. Since human societies are complex systems made up of numerous interdependent individuals; the comparison in this verse leads us to the modern concept of ecosystems for the vegetation and the animal world. The plural 'communities' also leads us to the conclusion that there are many concurrently existing independent ecosystems.

As a consequence of the caretaker role given to us, the only value we can add to the environment is its protection and preservation. Otherwise, we would not be able to fulfil our role as human beings.

It is the culmination of how Islam's gives value to the creation, the theological responsibility and accountability given to humankind and its recognition of ecosystems that shapes the Muslims' perspective of the environment and its protection.

## **Ecology and Environmental Protection in Islam and Muslim History**

The modern attention to the environment and its protection has been on the agenda for less than a century. Only after the full scale of the damage done to the environment, in fact to the whole planet, that we became serious about the environment and its preservation. Extinction of wildlife, clearing of rainforests, the hole in the ozone layer and the greenhouse effect threatening the climate of the globe underscores the contemporary concerns of not only sensitive individuals but also many governments. The irony is that the modern concern is raised for selfish reasons more than the sincere concern for the environment. 'After all we do not have another planet to go to' becomes the rationale for environmental activism. Environmental Protection as a scientific field rests on two main disciplines.

1. Waste minimisation and control
2. Conservation of environment – Conservation of air, land, water, vegetation, animal life and natural resources

One of the fundamental principles of Islam is expressed as "*la darar wala dirar*" meaning all damage and harm in its entire forms towards all - humans, animals or environment - are not allowed. "*O Children of Adam! Wear your beautiful apparel at every time and place of prayer. Eat and drink but waste not in excess, for God does not love the wasters*" states the Qur'an in (7:31). While Islam is encouraging people to enjoy the blessings of life it clearly lays the precondition of no waste. Also notice that the verse does not address just the 'Muslims' or 'believers' but the whole humanity with the proclamation "O children of Adam!"

Islam takes the waste minimisation efforts to a higher level in the worlds of the Prophet Muhammad<sup>pbuh</sup>, who asked people not to overuse water even while having the ablution next to a flowing river. While this recommendation is aimed at waste minimisation, it is also saying that waste minimisation should not only be confined to times of shortage but more importantly when there are ample resources. This is because of the fact that wastage usually occurs when there are more resources than needed. There is not much to waste when there is a shortage, is there? The attitude of waste in abundance causes shortages down the line.

The Prophet Muhammad<sup>pbuh</sup> has also said that it is the lowest manifestation for a believer that one should remove harmful objects in the path of people. Since it is good to remove waste and harmful objects, it is better not to litter in the first place, Muslim rationale worked in practice.

Three principles mentioned above summarise the main focus of the modern environment protection policies, that is, the prevention of harm to the environment and waste minimisation by proper use of resources and preventing them from depletion. Moreover, another narrative from Muhammad<sup>pbuh</sup> makes all people partners in three things - air, vegetation and fire (energy), meaning that no one should be deprived of these resources and that whoever controls them has a responsibility to make them available to the whole humanity.

It is a well-known recommendation of Muhammad<sup>pbuh</sup> “*to plant a tree even if it is the Last Day*” of earth. As it is the characteristics of the sayings of Muhammad<sup>pbuh</sup> behind a recommendation there is always the hint to a very important attitude. In this case, while people are being encouraged to plant a tree, the suggested attitude is not to do it for an immediate benefit, but to do it for future generations. We also know that when Muhammad<sup>pbuh</sup> migrated to Medina, he initiated a tree planting campaign along with a push to improve public literacy.

The Prophet Muhammad<sup>pbuh</sup> not only preached to the people to show kindness to each other but also to all living souls. He forbade the practice of cutting tails and manes of horses, of branding animals at any soft spot, and of keeping horses saddled unnecessarily (Sahih Muslim). 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.*” (Abu Dawud, Kitab-ul Jihad).

We see many examples of how Muhammad<sup>pbuh</sup> educated his followers in relation to the treatment of animals. Once, a companion came to him with the chicks of a bird in his sheet and said that the mother bird had hovered over them all along. He was directed to replace bird’s offspring in the same bush (Mishkat, Abu Dawud). During a journey, somebody picked up some bird’s eggs from a nest. The bird’s painful note and fluttering attracted the attention of Muhammad<sup>pbuh</sup>, who asked the man to replace the eggs (Bukhari, Sahih Bukhari). As his army marched towards Makkah to take it over peacefully, they passed a female dog with puppies. Muhammad<sup>pbuh</sup> not only gave orders that they should not be disturbed, but posted a man to see that this was actually done.

Islam is arguably the first religion that introduced animal rights next to human rights. Muhammad<sup>pbuh</sup> stated, “*Verily, there is heavenly reward for every act of kindness done to a living animal.*” It is also believed in Islam that humans will be judged on their treatment of animals in the Day of Judgement. While there is no earthly punishment in Islam if one kills an animal, there is the possibility of reprehension in the Day of Judgement. Ending the life of animals (even plants) is permissible only under the following regulations.

- If animals become pests.
- In the case of self-defence.
- Food for survival. Even this should be done in the name of God for it to be lawful.
- For research purposes, limited to experts only.

Clear pronouncements of the Qur’an and the example of Muhammad<sup>pbuh</sup>, gave Muslim enough impetus in preserving the environment and to get a good record of their treatment of wild life and domestic animals. During the Ottoman reign (1299 – 1923) for example, comprehensive waste and environmental management regulations were stipulated as early as 1539. In 1502, local government legislation regulated how much an animal could be loaded and number of days they could be worked in a week. There were organisations that were dedicated purely to treating stalks injured on their annual migration. Hunting was also regulated to only include on needs basis and no hunting was allowed during the breeding season centuries before similar regulations came to pass in the modern world. When mosques were built, the architects provided covered nesting areas under the facades for birds.

Islam in its long history not only produced a culture of charity but also a ‘green’ culture centred around a world view that places human life in harmony with nature and the environment.