

Environment



“If the desert is growing, forests disappearing, malnutrition increasing, and people in urban areas living in very bad conditions, it is not because we are lacking in resources but because of the kind of policy implemented by our rulers, by the elite group. Denying people’s rights and people’s interests is pushing us to a situation where it is only poverty that has a prosperous future in Africa ... It is only free people, people who have rights, who are mature and responsible citizens, who can then participate in the development and in the protection of the environment.”

*Speaker from the floor, WECD
Public hearing, Nairobi, 23
September 1986*

Related activities

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It is not possible to separate the environment - the deserts, forests or urban sprawl - from people and human rights issues, especially those of social justice and development. This is not only true in Africa, but also everywhere, including Europe. The environment and people have a two-way relationship: all human activity impacts on the environment and the environment impacts on human life. One example is the “greenhouse effect”. 300 years of using oil, coal and gas to fuel industrial development worldwide has contributed significantly to global warming. The consequent catastrophic climatic events we have witnessed in the last four years affect people all over the globe. However, people in the rich countries of the North, which are largely to blame for the carbon dioxide emissions, are better able to protect themselves against “natural disasters” than those living in developing countries of the South. These are questions of justice and therefore also questions of human rights.

Some other examples of links between the environment and human rights are:

- agricultural land that has been poisoned with landmines during wars and which becomes a threat to human security;
- people being forced by poverty to grow crops on marginal land, which leads to desertification and more poverty;
- the Baia Mare accident, which caused cyanide pollution first in the Szamos river, then in the Tisza and ultimately in the Danube.

Our environmental base

We use the environment to provide us with the raw materials for development and we also use it as a dustbin for our waste. Yet at the same time, to sustain life, it must provide us with stable temperatures, oxygen in the air and clean water. We live on a finite globe where everything is connected to everything else, for example through food chains and the water and rock cycles. There is some natural resilience, but serious disruption of these cycles, for example by pollution,

unsuitable farming practices, irrigation projects or over-fishing, destabilises the natural balance. The Chernobyl disaster in Ukraine, the death of the trees in the Black Forest in Germany, desertification in southern Spain, mad cow disease in Britain, the drying up of the Aral Sea in Uzbekistan and the Ilisu dam project in Turkey are all examples of how humans in the process of development are damaging the environmental base for all economic activity and life itself.

? **Can you identify local examples? For example, what impact are road building projects or industrial mining or other developments having on the environment near where you live?**

The idea of sustainable development

In 1989, the United Nations World Commission on Environment and Development (WCED), also called the Brundtland Report, promoted the principle of “sustainable development”, which it defined as “development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs”. This was followed in 1992 by the Rio Declaration, which stated: “Human beings are at the centre of concerns for sustainable development. They are entitled to a healthy and productive life in harmony with nature”.

The real and urgent problem is how to address the human rights issues of poverty, globalisation and the right to development within a framework that does not destroy the environment that supports us.

One approach is through international agreements about specific issues. For example, at the 1997 United Nations Climate Change conference in Kyoto, industrialised countries made specific commitments to reduce their emissions of greenhouse gasses. There was much bargaining about exemptions for developing countries and many criticisms about both the ultimate effectiveness and fairness of the final agreement.

An alternative approach is to take a human rights approach, which would ensure that principles of justice and equality are central to all agreements. Some people argue that environmental questions are already sufficiently covered through existing human rights legislation, for example through rights to property, health and life. Others talk in different ways about new or “emerging” environmental rights.

One idea is that there should be an environmental human right added to the list of existing human rights. For example, the 1994 draft Declaration of Principles on Human Rights and the Environment declares: “All persons have the right to a secure, healthy and ecologically sound environment. This right and other human rights, including civil, cultural, economic, political and social rights, are universal, interdependent and indivisible”.

Some people, especially ecologists, criticise such a demand for an environmental human right. They fear that if human life and health are the aims of environmental protection, then the environment will only be protected as a consequence of, and to the extent needed to protect, human well-being. Instead, they argue for a more holistic human rights approach. They say that people are part of the biosphere (the web of life on earth) and therefore their duty to humanity is inseparable from their duty to environmental protection. Within a broader framework, human rights claims should take into account intrinsic values and the needs of future generations as well as the competing interests of states and peoples.

Some people argue that other species should have “animal rights” in the same way that people have human rights.

World disasters²²

Catastrophic events	1996	2000
Hurricanes	62	99
Floods	69	153
Droughts	9	46

“The environmental movement can only survive if it becomes a justice movement. As a pure environmental movement, it will either die or it will survive as a corporate “greenwash”. Anyone who’s a sincere environmentalist can’t stand that role. But it has limitless possibilities as both an ecological and justice-based movement.”

Vandana Shiva

- In law, animals do not have rights as such. However, they are often protected by legislation.
- For example, there are laws in most European countries to safeguard the welfare and conditions of farm animals.

Ecological human rights

Ecological human rights can be seen as a response to the global environmental situation. They are a product of our time, in the same way that political and civil rights were a product of historical events in earlier times.

- Another way forward being discussed by some people is the concept of ecological human rights. This approach attempts to reconcile the philosophy of human rights with ecological principles. Human rights (such as human dignity, liberty, property and development) need to respond to the fact that individuals operate not only in a political and social environment, but also in a natural environment. Just as each individual has to respect the intrinsic value of fellow *human* beings, the individual also has to respect the intrinsic value of *other* fellow beings (animal, plants and ecosystems).

- One of the biggest challenges facing teachers and youth workers today is educating people to understand the dual concepts of respect for human dignity and for the intrinsic value of life and how to live accordingly. In other words, to “think globally and act locally” and to find new lifestyles which can be sustained into the future.

Participation by young people and youth organisations

- Schools, environmental non-governmental organisations and other institutions in every country provide opportunities for young people to become actively involved in environmental issues. At the local level, they can make their homes, schools and youth clubs more environmentally friendly and they can participate in local decision-making processes. At the regional and national level, they can influence public discussion and political debate by, for example, writing letters, presenting plays and (peacefully) demonstrating about issues that concern them. At the international and global level, they can have influence through declarations such as the Earth Charter and through international campaigning organisations such as Greenpeace.

- At all levels, young people can participate through Internet correspondence, campaigns and global celebrations such as World Environment Day and Earth Day. World Environment Day, June 5, was established by the United Nations General Assembly in 1972. It can be celebrated in many ways, including street rallies, bicycle parades, green concerts, essay and poster competitions in schools, tree planting, recycling efforts and clean-up campaigns. Each

The Goldman Environmental Prize

The Goldman Environmental Prize is the world's largest prize programme honouring grassroots environmentalists work. In 2000, Oral Ataniyazova won the prize for her work with Uzbekistani communities affected by the Aral Sea crisis. She focused on education, medical and family welfare issues and human rights of women and children.

The 2001 award was won by Myrsini Malakou and Giorgios Catsadorakis who worked to save the endangered wetland ecology of Préspa in north-western Greece. One of their achievements was the signing of an agreement between Albania, the Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia and Greece to establish the first transboundary protected area in the Balkans, a model of peaceful collaboration between these countries.

year there is a theme for people to focus on. Examples of previous themes include “For Life on Earth - Save Our Seas”, “Poverty and the Environment - Breaking the Vicious Circle” and “Children and the Environment” (www.unep.org). Earth Day, April 22, is co-ordinated by the Earth Day Network, which works together with other environmental and human rights organisations, for example, the Sierra Club and Amnesty International, to generate public action through celebrations and activities in protest against human rights and environmental abuses. www.earthday.net/events/events-europe.stm

Council of Europe’s work

The Council of Europe launched its environment programme in 1961. Its activities in this field focus on the conservation of nature and landscapes. The programme is now integrated within the Culture and Cultural and Natural Heritage Department of the Council of Europe. It has three main directions: the Pan-European Biological and Landscape Diversity Strategy, the Convention on the Conservation of European Wildlife and Natural Habitats (Bern Convention, 1979) and the Promotion of Awareness on Biological and Landscape Diversity.

Information and awareness on environmental protection is carried out through the Council of Europe’s publications. Its network of national agencies also contributes to the promotion of the conservation of biological and landscape diversity.

International instruments and declarations

A few of the many treaties and other instruments that address both environment and human rights and that may be useful are:

1. The 1989 European Charter on Environment and Health
2. The 1992 United Nations Declaration on Environment and Development
3. The 1994 draft Declaration of Principles on Human Rights and the Environment
4. The 1999 Declaration of Bizkaia on the Right to Environment
5. The 2000 Earth Charter

References

- Boyle, A, Anderson, M.R., Human rights approaches to environmental protection: An overview, Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1996.
- Bosselmann, K., Human rights and the environment: redefining fundamental principles, www.arbld.unimelb.edu.au
- Caring for the Earth, The World Conservation Union (IUCN), United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP), World Wide Fund for Nature (WWF-UK), www.ciesin.org/IUCN
- The Council of Europe environment programme, www.nature.coe.int
- The 1994 draft Declaration of Principle on Human Rights and the Environment www1.umn.edu/humanrts/instreet/1994-dec.htm.
- The Earth Charter initiative, www.earthcharter.org
- Worldwatch, www.worldwatch.org.

Key date

- 5 June**
Word Environment Day
- 22 April**
Earth Day

“The salvation of the world lies in the human heart, in the human power to reflect, in human meekness and in human responsibility. We are still under the sway of the destructive and vain belief that man is the pinnacle of creation and not just a part of it, and therefore, everything is permitted. We still don’t know how to put morality ahead of politics, science and economics. We are still incapable of understanding that the only genuine backbone of all our actions - if they are to be moral - is responsibility. Responsibility is something higher than my family, my country, my firm, my success. Responsibility to the order of Being, where, and only where, they will be properly judged.”

Vaclav Havel