

Issues in Environmental Ethics

1. **What** are the key issues in environmental ethics?

Human beings have an unquestionably harmful effect on the environment; however, some human activities are more damaging and destructive than others. The most harmful activities are all key issues in environmental ethics, because they stimulate significant debate about the extent to which human beings should be allowed to damage or destroy the environment. Although there are several key issues in environmental ethics, three of the most important are sustainability, waste management, and climate change.



Melting ice: rising temperatures threaten to melt polar ice and raise world sea levels.

Sustainability: the issue of whether or not human beings should be allowed to use the environment's natural resources; and, if so, to what extent. Human use of natural resources is harmful because it leads to the destruction of natural habitats, species extinction, and accelerated global warming (through the destruction of carbon stores and the extraction of carbon-based fuels).

Waste management: the issue of whether or not human beings should pollute the environment with waste; and, if so, to what extent. Waste disposal is harmful because it permanently pollutes the land (hundreds of thousands of acres of landfill exist globally) and the sea (eight million tons of plastic is dumped into Earth's oceans every year).

Climate change: the issue of whether or not human beings should pollute the environment with greenhouse gases; and, if so, to what extent. Arguably, this is the most important issue in environmental ethics because its potential impact is so significant. Climate change is especially harmful, because it threatens natural habitats with desertification or flooding, and may render parts of the planet uninhabitable. It is unpredictable, and has the ability to disrupt global systems that promote the survival of life on Earth (including human life).

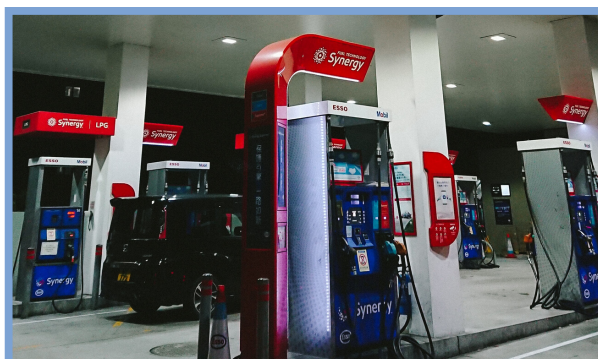
2. **How** are the key issues in environmental ethics approached?

The two significant approaches to environmental ethics are conservation and stewardship. Sustainability, waste management, and climate change are addressed differently depending on which approach is adopted.

Stewardship: stewards are theocentric, which means they believe God is the most important thing in the universe. They believe that human beings should live in agreement with God's will, which can be known from the Bible (among other traditions and texts). Stewards argue that human beings should be able to use natural resources and pollute the world as necessary to fulfil God's plan for them. Nevertheless, because the environment is a God-given gift they must otherwise treat it respectfully and use it responsibly.

Conservation (shallow ecology): some conservationists are anthropocentric, which means they believe human beings are the most important things in the universe. They argue that people should use Earth's natural resources to the maximum benefit of humanity, and pollute as necessary (as long as it does not harm other human beings).

Conservation (deep ecology): some conservationists are biocentric, which means they believe life is the most important thing in the universe. They argue that human beings should only use natural resources or pollute to fulfil their basic needs (e.g. clothing, shelter, and sustenance). Generally, they seek to preserve the environment in its natural state.



A petrol station: continued use of carbon-based fuels is a major source of debate.

3. **Why** are the approaches to the key issues in environmental ethics important?

The approaches to sustainability, waste management, and climate change are important for several reasons. Arguably most important is the fact that the approaches dictate what life looks like for human beings and the environment. Deep ecologists advocate living in isolated communities; stewards advocate living in hamlets and villages; and shallow ecologists advocate living in large towns and cities (or, at least, do not see a problem with it). Deep ecologists create few environmental issues, because they live sustainably and in harmony with the environment. Generally, stewards do not live quite as sustainably; however, their impact on the natural world remains relatively modest. On the other hand, shallow ecologists create and exacerbate many environmental issues, because they do not believe in substantially reducing natural resource consumption or pollution.

Beyond what life looks like for human beings and the environment, how environmental issues are addressed is important for other reasons. First, the effects of environmental issues are universal. They affect every human being and living thing on Earth, because the planet is a closed system. Second, environmental issues are unlimited by time. They are already destined to haunt generations of the future, but the total number of human beings and living things affected will only increase if natural resource consumption and pollution is not curtailed. Finally, some environmental issues have already caused irreparable damage to the environment. In some cases, the damage and destruction caused by human activity will be impossible to repair or reverse. In summary, the approaches are important because there are several potential responses and the problems they address are significant.

George Thinks

Learning about the issues in environmental ethics exposes the importance of the beliefs that underpin both conservation and stewardship. The problems created by natural resource consumption and pollution are the same regardless of how they're approached, but the approaches differ significantly in the extent to which they attempt to address them. This reveals something interesting: some approaches don't really accept that environmental issues are problems, and this is because of their underlying beliefs. For example, conservation motivated by anthropocentrism, or shallow ecology, only considers human activity problematic if it harms other human beings; if it doesn't, then it's not a problem (even if it harms billions of other living things).

On the other hand, conservation motivated by biocentrism, or deep ecology, considers almost all human activity problematic. This is because almost all human activity causes direct or indirect harm to the environment; and, because the environment is intrinsically valuable, this should be avoided. Whilst deep ecology may be considerably more considerate of living things, it creates a different problem: it ultimately requires a significant reduction in the human population and the abandonment of much modern technology. Whilst this may be a laudable ambition for the benefit of all life on Earth, it would likely require billions of people to forgo the joy of parenthood and voluntarily subject themselves to a relatively strenuous and frugal lifestyle.

