

Legal and Social Perspectives in Environmental Ethics

1. **What** are the legal and social perspectives in environmental ethics?

Perspectives are viewpoints, and both the international legal system and its representatives, and the people of the world in their various societies, have different perspectives on environmental ethics. There is considerable variation within these two perspectives; however, there are also enough similarities to support some general observations about them. Generally, both the legal perspective and the social perspective reveal concern for the environment; however, it is the citizens of the world, rather than their governments, who appear to be advocating for change with the greatest urgency.



The United Nations Secretariat Building:
where international treaties are monitored.

Legal perspective: the attitude towards the value of the environment adopted by the international legal system and its representatives. This perspective is manifested in a number of United Nations environmental treaties, including the Montreal Protocol, the Kyoto Protocol, and the Paris Agreement, although there are many others.

Social perspective: the attitude towards the value of the environment adopted by the people of the world in their various societies (especially those in more economically developed countries). This perspective is manifested in environmental activism, including the People's Climate March, Earth Strike, and the activities of organisations like Extinction Rebellion.

2. **How** do the legal and social perspectives in environmental ethics work?

The legal perspective in environmental ethics is varied; however, there is some consensus at the international level among most members of the United Nations. The legal perspective is anthropocentric, which means it is supported by the belief that human beings are the most important things in the universe, but it is also pragmatic. Generally, obviously serious and urgent environmental issues are vigorously addressed, but others are not.

Montreal Protocol: signed in 1987, this treaty was designed to protect the ozone by reducing the production of ozone-depleting chemicals (e.g. CFCs) found in aerosols and refrigerators (among other things). It will likely restore the depleted ozone by 2050.

Kyoto Protocol: signed in 1997, this treaty was designed to slow global warming by reducing the production of greenhouse gases (e.g. carbon dioxide, methane, and nitrous oxide). However, it did not receive the support of several heavy polluters, which undermined its efficacy.

Paris Agreement: signed in 2016, this treaty was designed to prevent environmental issues by reducing global warming to between 1.5-2°C above pre-industrial levels. Like the Kyoto Protocol, its success was limited by the high profile withdrawal of the United States.

Just like the legal perspective, the social perspective in environmental ethics is varied. Nevertheless, it is generally more biocentric, which means it is supported by the belief that life is the most important thing in the universe, and its anthropocentric wing is weak (i.e. it is concerned for future generations of human beings, not just those alive today). Generally, it is ideological and prioritises environmental issues over all others.

People's Climate March: held on 27 April 2017, this protest involved over 200,000 people marching on Washington, D.C., in opposition to Donald Trump's environmental policies. It also enjoyed popular support in 300 other locations across the United States.

Extinction Rebellion: founded in 2018, this organisation has held several nonviolent protests in the United Kingdom designed to disrupt industries associated with climate change. It attracted a great deal of media attention, but has failed to achieve most of its aims.

Earth Strike: held between 20-27 September 2019, this protest involved over six million people across the world engaging in a strike for climate action. It was a significant global event, led by a number of famous environmentalists (e.g. Noam Chomsky, and Greta Thunberg).

3. **Why** are the legal and social perspectives in environmental ethics important?

The legal and social perspectives in environmental ethics govern how seriously environmental issues are taken; consequently, they are capable of affecting significant change. Even though United Nations treaties are frequently criticised, because environmentalists argue they do not go far enough, they can lead to large-scale change. For example, the Montreal Protocol was particularly successful, and is credited with single-handedly preventing a potential ozone catastrophe. Likewise, the Paris Agreement has made climate projections significantly more positive, despite the United States withdrawal initiated by Donald Trump. Contrastingly, even though large numbers of people have protested across the world, the social perspective has been less effective at changing the status quo. Nevertheless, it is possible that the pressure applied by the public will lead to more serious political and legal solutions. Beyond this, both perspectives are important because they attempt to address a universal, unlimited, and unrepairable problem, which is of consequence to everyone.



The People's Climate March: United States citizens express their discontent.

George Thinks

I certainly don't think legal perspectives on environmental ethics take environmental issues seriously enough, perhaps with the lone exception of the Montreal Protocol. However, United Nations treaties do reveal that most of the world's governments are deeply concerned by climate change and global warming, even if a small number of the worst polluters aren't. Importantly, the international system, as it presently stands, appears to require legal action if large-scale change is ever to be achieved. So, even if environmental issues aren't taken seriously enough from the legal perspective, it's this perspective that's required to achieve the ends that environmentalists seek (something even deep ecologists like Arne Næss recognised).

Nevertheless, this doesn't mean engaging in environmental activism is a waste of time. The social perspective, which is generally more extreme, exerts a tremendous amount of pressure on political systems across the world. Whilst this doesn't always translate into government action, it keeps environmental issues near the top of the policy agenda. Of course, you may have a different opinion; there are plenty of people who think environmental organisations are a terrible nuisance. However, they couldn't exist without wider support from the general public, so it's best to think of them as the tip of an iceberg. In the United States, opinion polls reveal that concern for the environment is at its highest level since the turn of the millennium; there are worried people out there.

