ENVIRONMENTAL ETHICS, JUSTICE, AND THE FUTURE OF HUMAN SURVIVAL

Kenneth Oduma Chiabuotu Odanwu
Department of Philosophy, Faculty of Humanities,
Alex Ekwueme Federal University, Ndufu-Alike, Ebonyi
Kenneth.odanwu@funai.edu.ng
https://orcid.org/0009-0002-2906-8204

Abstract

The contemporary environmental crisis presents one of the most serious ethical challenges to human survival. Climate change, biodiversity loss, pollution, deforestation, resource depletion, and ecological degradation increasingly threaten human health, food security, livelihoods, and the integrity of ecosystems. This paper examines the relationship between environmental ethics, environmental justice, and the future of human survival. It argues that environmental degradation is not merely a scientific, technological, or economic problem but fundamentally a moral problem concerning human responsibility toward nature, vulnerable populations, and future generations. The study draws on utilitarianism, deontological ethics, virtue ethics, deep ecology, land ethic, ecofeminism, biocentrism, ecocentrism, Rawlsian justice, the capabilities approach, and African communal ethical perspectives. Methodologically, the paper employs qualitative philosophical analysis, conceptual clarification, critical interpretation, and normative argumentation. Particular attention is given to African cases, including environmental degradation in Nigeria's Niger Delta, sacred-grove conservation among communities in southwestern Nigeria, Igbo totemic and sacred-grove practices in southeastern Nigeria, the Konso people of Ethiopia, and Yoruba environmental thought concerning reciprocal relations with the natural world. Evidence from these cases demonstrates that environmental ethics can be strengthened when philosophical principles are connected with concrete social and cultural practices. The paper argues that environmental justice requires an equitable distribution of environmental benefits and burdens, meaningful participation in environmental decision-making, recognition of indigenous ecological knowledge, and stronger obligations toward future generations. It concludes that human survival depends upon an ethical transformation from domination and excessive exploitation toward ecological responsibility, justice, restraint, reciprocity, and stewardship.

Keywords: Environmental Justice; Climate Change; Biodiversity; Sustainability; African Environmental Ethics; Human Survival

Introduction

The contemporary environmental crisis has become one of the defining challenges of human existence. Climate change, biodiversity loss, deforestation, pollution, desertification, water scarcity, and unsustainable exploitation of natural resources increasingly affect the conditions necessary for human flourishing (IPCC, 2022). These problems are particularly significant in Africa, where many societies have made relatively small historical contributions to global greenhouse-gas emissions but experience substantial climate-related losses and vulnerabilities. The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change reports that African development sectors are already experiencing losses associated with human-induced climate change, including biodiversity loss, water shortages, reduced food production, loss of lives, and reduced economic growth (IPCC, 2022). Africa's vulnerability is further complicated by high dependence on climate-sensitive livelihoods, including agriculture, pastoralism, fisheries, and forestry (IPCC, 2022).

Environmental degradation is also inseparable from questions of justice. Environmental benefits and burdens are not equally distributed. Communities that contribute relatively little to global environmental degradation may experience disproportionate exposure to pollution, climate-related disasters, food insecurity, displacement, and loss of livelihoods (Schlosberg, 2019). The IPCC similarly observes that Africa faces significant climate-justice challenges because vulnerable communities are already experiencing serious impacts despite the continent's comparatively low historical contribution to global emissions (IPCC, 2022).

Environmental degradation in the region consequently raises questions of distributive justice, responsibility, accountability, participation, compensation, and human dignity. The problem addressed in this study is therefore the insufficient integration of ethical responsibility, environmental justice, and culturally situated ecological knowledge in responses to the environmental crisis. Scientific and technological approaches are indispensable, but they cannot by themselves determine what human beings ought to value, what obligations present generations owe future generations, or how environmental burdens should be distributed. The **main objective** of this paper is to critically examine the relationship between environmental ethics, justice, and human survival. Specifically, the study seeks to:

1. Examine the philosophical foundations of environmental ethics.
2. Analyze the relationship between environmental degradation and justice.
3. Examine the implications of environmental degradation for human survival.
4. Evaluate selected African environmental practices and ethical traditions.

Methodologically, the paper adopts a qualitative philosophical approach based on conceptual analysis, critical interpretation, and normative argumentation. It engages philosophical literature alongside selected empirical and policy evidence concerning African environmental conditions and conservation practices. This approach is interdisciplinary because environmental questions require engagement with philosophy, ecology, development studies, political theory, and environmental governance. The use of Indigenous Knowledge is particularly relevant because the IPCC recognizes Africa's Indigenous and Local Knowledge as an important strategic resource for sustainable development and climate adaptation (IPCC, 2022).

Conceptual Clarifications

Environmental Ethics: Environmental ethics is the branch of moral philosophy concerned with the moral relationship between human beings and the natural environment. It examines whether nature possesses intrinsic value and whether human beings have moral duties toward non-human entities and ecological systems (Callicott, 1989). The philosophical significance of environmental ethics is therefore its attempt to reconsider the moral status of nature. Rather than viewing forests, rivers, animals, and other natural entities exclusively as resources, environmental ethics asks whether human beings have responsibilities toward them independently of their economic utility.

Environmental Justice: Environmental justice concerns the fair distribution of environmental benefits and burdens and the equitable participation of affected communities in environmental decision-making. It includes distributive, procedural, recognitional, and corrective dimensions (Schlosberg, 2013, 2019). Environmental justice is therefore broader than environmental protection. A society cannot be considered environmentally just if it protects ecosystems while systematically excluding vulnerable communities from decisions affecting their land, health, livelihoods, and cultural resources.

Human Survival: Human survival refers not merely to biological continuation but to the

preservation of the ecological, social, economic, and cultural conditions necessary for dignified human existence. Human beings depend upon functioning ecosystems for food, water, breathable air, climate regulation, medicine, and livelihoods (Millennium Ecosystem Assessment, 2005). Human survival must therefore be understood in ecological as well as biological terms. If ecological systems are systematically degraded, the conditions necessary for human flourishing are simultaneously undermined.

Theoretical Framework

Utilitarianism: Utilitarianism evaluates actions according to their consequences for overall well-being. Bentham's classical utilitarianism emphasizes the maximization of pleasure and minimization of pain, while Mill develops a more sophisticated account of happiness and human welfare (Bentham, 1789/1996; Mill, 1863). Applied to environmental questions, utilitarianism provides a framework for evaluating environmental policies according to their consequences. Pollution, deforestation, and climate change are morally objectionable when they generate widespread suffering, disease, economic losses, ecological damage, and insecurity.

Deontological Ethics: Kantian ethics emphasizes duty, moral law, and respect for persons (Kant, 1785/1998). Applied to environmental questions, deontological reasoning suggests that human beings have duties not to destroy the ecological conditions necessary for the dignity and flourishing of present and future persons. A deontological approach is particularly relevant to environmental justice because it emphasizes the moral prohibition against treating persons merely as means to economic or political ends. Communities should not be sacrificed for economic development without consideration of their rights and dignity.

Virtue Ethics: Aristotelian virtue ethics emphasizes moral character and the cultivation of virtues necessary for human flourishing (Aristotle, 2009). Environmental responsibility can be understood through virtues such as moderation, humility, prudence, care, responsibility, and ecological solidarity. Environmental degradation frequently reflects vices such as greed, excessive consumption, irresponsibility, wastefulness, and indifference to long-term consequences. Environmental sustainability therefore requires not merely regulations but morally responsible citizens and institutions. Virtue ethics is particularly useful because environmental sustainability cannot be achieved exclusively through external laws. It also requires internal dispositions that encourage individuals and institutions to exercise restraint and responsibility.

African Environmental Ethical Perspectives

African environmental thought should not be presented as one uniform philosophical system. Different communities have developed distinctive relationships with land, forests, water, animals, ancestors, and spiritual institutions. In southwestern Nigeria, Yoruba sacred groves demonstrate the connection between religious values and environmental conservation. Adeyanju et al. (2022) examined three sacred groves in southwestern Nigeria and found that their long-term preservation depended upon cooperation between customary institutions and formal government legislation. The study specifically identified Osun-Osogbo and Idanre among the cultural landscapes where religio-cultural practices intersect with biodiversity conservation (Adeyanju et al., 2022).

African environmental ethics can therefore contribute to contemporary environmental philosophy through concepts of communal responsibility, reciprocity, restraint, sacredness, relationality, and respect for ecological systems. However, such traditions must be examined critically and contextually rather than romanticized. These examples demonstrate that African environmental ethics should be understood through particular communities and historical practices rather than

through generalized claims about the entire continent.

Environmental Crisis and Human Survival

Climate Change

Climate change is among the greatest environmental threats to human survival. Rising temperatures, changing rainfall patterns, droughts, floods, heatwaves, sea-level rise, and other climate-related changes affect ecological and human systems (IPCC, 2022). Africa is particularly vulnerable because many communities depend heavily upon climate-sensitive activities such as rain-fed agriculture, pastoralism, fishing, and forestry. The IPCC reports that climate change is already affecting African food production, biodiversity, water availability, health, and livelihoods (IPCC, 2022). The ethical significance is clear: communities with limited historical responsibility for global greenhouse-gas emissions may nevertheless experience severe consequences. This creates questions of distributive justice, historical responsibility, international solidarity, and climate finance.

Biodiversity Loss

Biodiversity supports ecological resilience and provides essential services including pollination, water regulation, soil fertility, food, and medicinal resources (Millennium Ecosystem Assessment, 2005). Biodiversity loss consequently threatens both ecosystems and human societies. African biodiversity is particularly vulnerable to climate change and habitat destruction. The IPCC projects increasing biodiversity risks with increasing warming, including risks to terrestrial species, freshwater fish, and other ecosystems (IPCC, 2022). Concrete African conservation experiences demonstrate that cultural institutions can contribute to biodiversity protection. Research on three sacred groves in southwestern Nigeria found that long-term conservation depended upon cooperation between customary institutions and formal governmental legislation (Adeyanju et al., 2022).

Pollution and Public Health

Pollution represents another major threat to human survival. Air, water, and soil pollution affect human health, ecosystems, food systems, and livelihoods (WHO, 2021). The Nigerian Niger Delta provides a significant case of environmental injustice. Petroleum extraction has generated major economic benefits for Nigeria while environmental degradation has affected communities whose livelihoods depend upon fishing, farming, wetlands, and other ecological resources. From an ethical perspective, the problem extends beyond environmental damage to questions of responsibility, compensation, participation, dignity, and justice. The situation demonstrates why development should not be evaluated exclusively according to economic benefits.

Resource Depletion

Unsustainable exploitation of forests, minerals, fisheries, fossil fuels, and freshwater threatens the ecological foundations of future human life. Excessive consumption reflects an ethical problem because present interests may be prioritized at the expense of future needs. The problem is particularly significant because ecological resources are often treated as unlimited commodities. Leopold's land ethic challenges this mentality by insisting that human beings are members of an ecological community and should act in ways that preserve its integrity (Leopold, 1949). A sustainable ethical framework therefore requires moderation, responsible consumption, ecological restoration, and recognition of ecological limits.

Environmental Justice and African Case Studies

The Niger Delta, Nigeria

The Niger Delta illustrates the relationship between environmental degradation, economic development, and justice. Petroleum extraction has contributed substantially to Nigeria's economy, yet oil-producing communities have also experienced environmental costs. From an ethical perspective, the central issue concerns whether the distribution of benefits and burdens is fair. Communities that depend upon local ecosystems for agriculture and fishing may experience environmental harm while receiving inadequate participation in decisions concerning resource extraction.

Sacred Groves in Southwestern Nigeria

Sacred groves in southwestern Nigeria provide a contrasting example in which cultural and religious institutions can support conservation. Adeyanju et al. (2022) studied three sacred groves and found that their long-term preservation depended upon collaboration between customary institutions and formal government legislation. The researchers explain that sacred groves represent traditional forms of community-based conservation in which religious and cultural norms can restrict access and protect biodiversity (Adeyanju et al., 2022). The study therefore provides concrete evidence for the philosophical argument that environmental responsibility can be embedded within community institutions.

The Osun-Osogbo grove provides an especially important example of the interaction between religious beliefs and environmental protection. Research examining land-use changes between 1986 and 2017 found that, despite substantial urbanization around the grove, the sacred site remained relatively intact, with religious taboos identified as an important factor in its protection (Adewoyin, 2021). This case challenges the assumption that conservation must originate exclusively from modern scientific institutions. Traditional institutions can provide moral and social mechanisms for regulating access to ecologically important spaces.

Igbo Communities in Southeastern Nigeria

Recent research involving 27 communities in Enugu State investigated totems and sacred groves as traditional ecological knowledge systems. The study identified culturally significant plant species and documented the relationship between cultural practices and biodiversity conservation (Ogonegbu & Ogelenya, 2026). This example is philosophically important because conservation is not treated simply as resource management. Particular plants, animals, forests, and ecological spaces can possess cultural and spiritual significance, thereby generating obligations concerning their protection.

The Konso People of Ethiopia

The Konso of southwestern Ethiopia provide another distinctive case. Research conducted through interviews, focus groups, and observation examined the cultural and spiritual significance of *dinna*, or holy woodlands (Workneh, 2023). These woodlands provide spaces in which cultural practices and relationships with nature intersect. The Konso example illustrates the importance of understanding environmental conservation within local cultural systems rather than imposing universal models that disregard local meanings. The philosophical lesson is that environmental responsibility can emerge from cultural understandings of sacredness, community identity, and intergenerational continuity.

Ethical Dimensions of Environmental Degradation

Environmental degradation raises at least four major ethical questions: responsibility, interconnectedness, intergenerational justice, and the moral status of non-human life. First, human beings possess responsibility because they have the capacity to transform ecological systems on a massive scale. Industrial production, deforestation, fossil-fuel consumption, pollution, and unsustainable resource extraction are not morally neutral activities (IPCC, 2022). Second, ecological interconnectedness demonstrates that environmental harm cannot easily be isolated. Damage to forests can affect water systems; damage to wetlands can affect fisheries; climate change can affect food production and health. Human beings therefore exist within ecological relationships rather than outside them (Millennium Ecosystem Assessment, 2005). Third, intergenerational justice requires present generations to consider the interests of people who will live in the future. Future persons cannot participate in present environmental decisions, yet present choices can significantly determine the ecological conditions they inherit (Rawls, 1971). The moral problem is therefore not simply whether present generations can exploit natural resources but whether they may do so at a level that seriously restricts the options and capabilities of future generations.

Fourth, environmental ethics asks whether non-human entities possess moral value. Biocentrism and ecocentrism answer this question affirmatively (Taylor, 1986; Callicott, 1989), while anthropocentric approaches tend to locate environmental value primarily in human interests. A balanced environmental ethic should recognize both human needs and the integrity of ecological systems. The objective should not be to eliminate all human use of nature but to establish morally responsible limits to exploitation.

Toward a Sustainable and Just Future

Ethical Transformation

Sustainability requires transformation in the values governing production and consumption. Excessive consumption, waste, and unlimited exploitation cannot be reconciled with ecological limits. Virtues such as moderation, responsibility, humility, prudence, and care should therefore become central to environmental education and public policy (Warren, 2000). Environmental ethics requires a shift from the idea that nature exists primarily for human consumption toward an understanding of human beings as participants in ecological systems (Leopold, 1949).

Environmental Education

Environmental education should cultivate both ecological knowledge and ethical responsibility. Schools and universities should help students understand the relationship between human choices and ecological consequences. In African contexts, environmental education can also engage indigenous ecological knowledge where such knowledge remains relevant and is critically evaluated. The IPCC identifies Indigenous and Local Knowledge as a strategic resource for climate adaptation and sustainable development in Africa (IPCC, 2022). Such education should not romanticize indigenous knowledge. Instead, it should establish dialogue between traditional ecological knowledge, modern environmental science, and contemporary ethical principles.

Responsible Technology

Technology can contribute to renewable energy, sustainable agriculture, environmental monitoring, waste management, and climate adaptation. However, technological development must be guided by ethical principles. Technological efficiency alone cannot determine whether an environmental policy is just. Questions of access, distribution, participation, unintended consequences, and effects on vulnerable communities must also be considered. The IPCC emphasizes that climate responses can produce maladaptation when they fail to account for interactions between sectors, communities,

ecosystems, and long-term consequences (IPCC, 2022). Technology must therefore serve ecological sustainability and human well-being rather than simply accelerate resource extraction.

Global Environmental Justice

Environmental problems transcend national boundaries. Climate change, biodiversity loss, ocean pollution, and atmospheric pollution require international cooperation. A just global environmental order should recognize differentiated responsibilities, particularly the historical contribution of industrialized economies to greenhouse-gas emissions. It should also provide adequate support for vulnerable countries to pursue adaptation and sustainable development. Climate justice therefore requires international solidarity as well as domestic environmental reform (Schlosberg, 2019).

Conclusion

The relationship between environmental ethics, environmental justice, and human survival demonstrates that the ecological crisis is fundamentally a moral crisis. Climate change, biodiversity loss, pollution, and resource depletion are not simply technical problems awaiting technological solutions. They raise questions concerning responsibility, justice, human dignity, ecological value, and obligations to future generations (IPCC, 2022; Schlosberg, 2019). The analysis has shown that different ethical theories provide complementary resources for responding to the crisis. Utilitarianism emphasizes consequences and collective welfare (Bentham, 1789/1996; Mill, 1863); deontology highlights duty and responsibility (Kant, 1785/1998); virtue ethics emphasizes moral character (Aristotle, 2009); deep ecology, biocentrism, and ecocentrism challenge anthropocentrism (Naess, 1989; Taylor, 1986; Callicott, 1989); ecofeminism emphasizes care and structures of domination (Warren, 2000); Rawlsian justice highlights fairness and the protection of the least advantaged (Rawls, 1971); and the capabilities approach draws attention to the substantive conditions necessary for human flourishing (Sen, 1999; Nussbaum, 2011).

The African cases considered in this study demonstrate the importance of contextualizing environmental ethics. The Niger Delta illustrates environmental injustice associated with resource extraction. Sacred groves in southwestern Nigeria demonstrate how customary institutions can contribute to biodiversity conservation (Adeyanju et al., 2022). Igbo communities in southeastern Nigeria provide examples of totemic and sacred ecological practices (Ogonegbu & Ogelenya, 2026). The Konso of Ethiopia demonstrate the relationship between cultural values, spirituality, and holy woodlands (Workneh, 2023), while Yoruba environmental thought provides a relational account of more-than-human care (Sunday, 2025). These cases confirm that Africa cannot appropriately be treated as a culturally homogeneous environmental space. Rather, African environmental ethics is plural, culturally situated, and historically diverse.

The original contribution of this paper lies in bringing environmental ethics, environmental justice, human survival, and selected African ecological traditions into a single normative framework. Rather than treating African environmental practices merely as cultural illustrations, the study argues that they can contribute philosophically to contemporary debates about ecological responsibility, provided that they are critically examined and placed in dialogue with modern environmental science, human rights, and democratic governance. Environmental sustainability requires more than technological innovation. It requires an ethical transformation in the way human beings understand their relationship with nature, vulnerable communities, and future generations. Human survival depends upon moving from domination toward stewardship, from excessive consumption toward responsible restraint, and from unequal environmental burdens toward justice. The preservation of the Earth is therefore not only an ecological necessity but a moral responsibility shared by present generations for the sake of both human and non-human life.

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