

Role and Relationship of Man With Nature : From Past to Present

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Abstract

The inseparable relationship between man and environment dates back to the time since life started on the planet earth. The fact cannot be denied that humans have been always completely dependent on nature for the fulfillment of their varied needs. Nature has been offering its resources and services to mankind since a long time. Though since past itself humans had a measurable impact on the environment, but their influence was relatively manageable owing to their less population size and simple pattern of living. However in modern days, with the rapid growth of population and altered lifestyles, the stress on environmental resources has increased. As a result all across the world, people are facing a wealth of new and challenging environmental problems. This paper, which is based on secondary data, tries to trace the relationship of man and nature from past to present and to reflect the disheartening fact that how in the mad race for development man has started the ruthless exploitation of nature, thereby leading to various environmental problems. This paper also points out that time is ripe for change, a change on the part of the humans to reconsider their role and relationship with nature and to use it for sustenance rather than for greed.

KEYWORDS: Relationship, Nature, environment,

Introduction:

Earth as we know it is an incredibly complex and fragile network of interconnected systems that have developed slowly over the last 4.5 billion years or so. From the ashes of the Big Bang this planet emerged as a mass of energy and elements. From that newly born mass of energy and elements evolved structured, dynamic systems of solids, liquids, and gases. The evolution of this planet continued to unfold over billions of years in such a unique way that eventually conditions arose with the ability to foster life.

From the smallest microorganisms to the largest animals, all life on Earth has a common ancestor. Everything is connected to everything. No one would reject the fact that human has been completely depending on nature right from the moment that Adam in companion of Eve have put their foot on this planet. Stephan Kaplan starts his *The Restorative Environment* with the claim that “early human beings were a part of nature” (134). Humans have been dependent on nature for fulfillment of all their basic and essential needs. Hence there had been and still is a profound, though changed, connection and relationship between the two.

History: Man in the Realm of Nature: The Unity of Man and Nature:

The two words ‘Man’ and ‘Environment’ are not new to human history and the interrelationship between them is well established. Thinking about the environment is as old as our first human

ancestors. Human beings live in the realm of nature, they are constantly surrounded by it and interact with it. Actually people have a fundamental physical, emotional, and intellectual dependence on nature. So we can confidently declare that the beginning of the history of the relation of human and nature completely matches to the beginning of human's history on the Earth planet. In short, we are connected with nature by "blood" ties and we cannot live outside nature. Our environment, although outside us, has within us not only its image, as something both actually and imaginatively reflected, but also its material energy and information channels processes. This presence of nature in an ideal, materialized, energy and information form in man's self is so organic that when these external natural principles disappear, man himself disappears from life. If we lose nature's image, we lose our life.

On the plane of the historical development of man- nature relations we may define certain stages. The first is that of the complete dependence of man on nature. At first, humans were incredibly in-tune with their surroundings. Our distant ancestors floundered amid the immensity of natural formations. Nomadic hunter-gatherer tribes used to roam the lands, following the ebb and flow of the seasons. These tribes had a measurable impact on the environment, but their influence was relatively manageable due to their low population size and simple pattern of living. As society evolved, there was a mammoth growth of population. As the population started growing at a rapid rate, the stress on environmental resources increased. More and more resources were required to fuel the expansion. With breakthroughs in agriculture, settlements became more permanent and cities began to take shape. This shift to city life inadvertently led to a distancing from nature. While many people were still in-tune with nature on a subsistent level, the need for more and more resources began to change our regard for nature. The growth of cities allowed for a separation between people and nature and our obsession with convenience and efficiency beckoned a new perspective on the environment. With technological advancements, nature became something we were no longer a part of and entirely subject to, but something that we could control and profit of. These developments enabled humans to truly dominate the landscape and disrupt the natural systems that have been in place for billions of years. According to White, "Man's relation to the soil was profoundly changed. Formerly man had been part of nature; now he was the exploiter of nature". A gap or better to say a deep gap thus flourished between human and nature.

According to Kaplan, "over the millennia the gulf between humanity and the natural environment has steadily widened". Nature has lost its importance. The role of nature has changed and it has become something created to be extracted for human physical welfare. A number of factors are responsible for the crisis that results in damage of environment and rise in use of natural resources. The effect of environmental problems is not only serious for the present generation but also for future generations.

As we have removed ourselves further and further from nature, we have developed a willing ignorance of our role and relationship within it. As a species we are assigned the duty to provide and proliferate. Our goal is to achieve stability for ourselves and our kin. However we also have an obligation to maintain the environment, as we depend on the resources and services it provides. Thus we have the responsibility to consider other human beings and ecosystems when we engage in any sort of social action. Our actions must embody an ethic of appreciating and sharing the earth's bounty. The options available to our children will depend on what actions we

take now. Many environmental problems are not impossible or difficult to solve if they are properly understood and well addressed with well defined policies

Man's influence on Nature:

Although every species plays a unique role in the biosphere and inherently has its own impact, not every species has the cognitive ability to measure their influence or the capacity to change it. Humans are unique in that respect, which is the root of the problem. Man is not only a dweller in nature, he also transforms it. He is the only animal capable of modifying its surrounding environment according to the need.

From the very beginning of his existence, and with increasing intensity human society has adapted environing nature and made all kinds of incursions into it. An enormous amount of human labour has been spent on transforming nature and converting nature's wealth into the means of the cultural, historical life of society. Man has subdued and disciplined electricity and compelled it to serve the interests of society. Not only has man transferred various species of plants and animals to different climatic conditions; he has also changed the shape and climate of his habitation and transformed plants and animals. If we were to strip the geographical environment of the properties created by the labour of many generations, contemporary society would be unable to exist in such primeval conditions.

Throughout the ages, man has struggled to derive his sustenance from the earth and has fought to survive against all the challenges that nature presents. First man started hunting the animals and cutting trees for his basic needs. Gradually with the time he started cultivating food grains and cutting forests and converting them into grasslands/ agricultural fields. To increase his comforts he started disturbing each and every component of the environment, resulting into the interaction between man and nature being characterized by accelerated subjugation of nature. At present, the interaction between man and nature is determined by the fact that in addition to the two factors of change in the biosphere that have been operating for millions of years—the biogenetic and the abiogenetic—there has been added yet another factor which is acquiring decisive significance—the technogenetic. With the start of the industrial revolution, the total scenario has changed. As a result, the previous dynamic balance between man and nature and between nature and society as a whole, has shown ominous signs of breaking down. Thus, man, though an integral part of the environment, has been the arch – enemy of it. His quest to make life simpler and more luxurious, has made him turn a blind eye to the damage caused by him and his activities to the environment. Human activity can be directly attributed to the cause of hundreds of extinctions in the last two centuries, versus the millions of years that extinctions naturally occur. As we progress through the 21st century, humans have changed the environment in unprecedented ways.

Man's tendency to discriminate and his self-centred nature has led him to exploit and tamper every element of the environment, be it land or water. The motto of the people goes like "If it suits you, carry on and forget about everything else. Unfortunately, the word "everything" is that seems to refer to the 'environment' because it is that one thing which everyone tends to forget

about. As a result, many serious problems pertaining to urbanization, deforestation, global warming, pollution, release of toxic chemicals into air, water and land, increase in waste generation, ozone depletion are on an increase at an alarming rate, thereby causing an imbalance in ecosystem.

The size of our population and its incessant desire to expand has an obvious degrading impact on the environment. In order to meet the basic needs of the increasing population, the present society has undertaken a series of steps that have contributed significantly to the degradation of environment around us. Humanity continuously requires space, and lots of it, whether it is for farmland or industries; that demands clear-cutting, thereby resulting in severely damaged ecosystems. According to an international data, an estimated 18 million acres of trees are clear-cut each year to make way for new developments - that is just under half of all the trees on the planet since the industrial revolution began. To millions of species that live in forests, deforestation is thus a major threat to their survival and a big conservation issue. It also increases the greenhouse gases within the atmosphere which leads to global warming i.e., gradual increase in world temperatures. The extensive set up of industries adds to the effect forest depletion already has. It has been reported that the average global surface temperature has risen by 0.56 degree C. One of the effects of this surge is that the Antarctic ice caps have started melting thereby making the sea level rise. Some of the low-lying areas are already facing the threat of being submerged by rising sea levels. The increase in average temperature has also caused warming of sea waters. Thus, global warming is arguably the greatest cause of impact to the environment. As global temperatures increase, Earth's weather patterns will drastically change, promising more intense hurricanes in both size and frequency, as well as intensifying and prolonging droughts and heat waves. The problem of pollution further devastates our ecosystems. Pollution, that refers to the presence of substances in air, water and land which have adverse effect on humans and on the environment, is everywhere. From the trash thrown out on the freeway, to the millions of metric tons of pollution pumped into the atmosphere every year - it's obvious, pollution and waste are inescapable. Right from the festivals, to holiday trips to part celebrations, our actions disrupt the balance in nature. Starting with the festival, many of them involve submerging sacred statues in rivers or seas causing water pollution. Year after year, millions of tons of garbage, mainly consisting of plastics is dumped into the ocean. Marine life, including the loggerhead sea turtles, are tricked into thinking they are eating food when really it is only a floating plastic bag or other poisonous plastic that will cause starvation or suffocation to any unfortunate animal that mistakenly ingests it. Many varieties of fish are known to have become endangered due to our negligence. Some festivals involve blasting crackers which causes air pollution. Not only this, stray animals suffer severe trauma because of the unbearable noise of the crackers. Moving on to our overzealous vacation trips, we somehow damage the environment there also. Some of our hill stations have started getting warmer. People do not mind taking their high emission vehicles to these serene places, thus disturbing their ecology. Acid rain, a cocktail of sulphuric acid and nitric acid, is another grave global ecological problem threatening forests and farms, human health and aquatic life, and causing extensive damage to the buildings and artifacts sculpted or made from marble. Ozone layer depletion (that attracted attention in the 1980's), another major environmental issue is again the outcome of disruptive human activities. The ozone layer is renowned for its ability to absorb harmful UV rays that would otherwise be detrimental to the health of all walks of life. Ocean Acidification, that is a direct impact of excessive production of CO₂ has its impact on shellfish and plankton in the same way as human osteoporosis. Human activity is thus undoubtedly leading to the

extinction of species and habitats and loss of biodiversity. Eco systems, which took millions of years to perfect, are in danger as any species population is decimating. An example is the destruction of coral reefs in the various oceans, which support the rich marine life.

The problem is further magnified with the demands of industry and capitalism. In his book, *Regarding Nature*, Andrew McLaughlin identifies industrialism and the capitalist mindset as being especially influential on our regard for nature: “The economic systems that we construct and live within are, I suggest, the primary immediate causes of our relations between society and the rest of nature” (*Regarding Nature*, P. 12). We not only encourage a division amongst ourselves through the commoditization of the world’s resources, we encourage a division between man and nature. Thus, we no longer associate ourselves as a part of nature because we use it for profit. Forests are cut down for the profits of the lumber industry and to make room for livestock. Animals that we are undoubtedly related to, that have senses and the ability to socialize are slaughtered by the billions to feed an increasingly carnivorous population. Resources such as oil and food are all unevenly distributed throughout the world and therefore used as a platform for profit. Thus, all the while the environment bears the grunt of our greed. It should not be surprising that after enduring so much, the environment also runs out of patience sometimes. And then its fury is unleashed. Many examples clearly indicate that whenever man disturbs the environment balance, he is in fact digging his own grave. In order to reconstruct our views of nature and understand our place within it, it is important to reconsider our relationship with each other and our surroundings.

Time for Change :

Our relationship with nature has historically been one of imbalance and overuse. Nearly every step in human history has unfortunately been accompanied with a leap in environmental degradation. As a result, the threat of a global ecological crisis hangs over humanity like the sword of Damocles. Our planet is poised at the brink of a severe environmental crisis. We are in a state of planetary emergency, with environmental problems piling up high around us. Its solution lies in the plane of rational and humane, that is to say, wise organization, both of production itself and care for mother nature, not just by individuals, enterprises or countries, but by all humanity, linked with a clear awareness of our planetary responsibility for the ecological consequences of civilization that has reached a state of crisis. Therefore it is necessary that we make major changes and that we make them soon.

In order to achieve a sustainable future in which humans assume a more natural role and have less of an impact it is imperative that we reconsider our role and relationship with nature. Right relationship with life and nature is both a personal and a collective choice, but it is a choice that we must make. Right relationship is based on feeling a sense of awe for the cosmos and embracing an ethic of humankind’s appropriate place in, and relationship to, the cosmos and the earth. People everywhere need to envision having fulfilling lives, and then start living them by walking more lightly on the earth. Realisation must come to us that nature today is fragile. Nature is finite.

Changing attitudes are a primary component in achieving a sustainable future – one in which nature is allowed to run its course without human intervention. Gregg Easterbrook discusses a similar future in his *The Ecocorealist Manifesto*: “...the long-term purview of nature might be combined with the short-term insights of the genus *Homo* in ways that allow people, machines,

and nature to work together for each other's mutual benefit" (The Ecorealists Manifesto, P. 1). In order for the Earth to retain its balance, it is important that we not overstep our bound as a species. Our role within nature should be one of subsistence rather than commercialization. We have no right to infringe on the livelihood of any other species. We must respect the natural order of things and find a way to live accordingly. A universal education program would go a long way in encouraging change in how we view each other and our environment. Effective advertising campaigns, proper education imparted to people will also pave the way for a better environment.

The earth is our home and we have the duty to take care of it for ourselves and for our later generations. If we wish to see Earth as survivable, livable, tenable for our children, and grandchildren, we need to treat mother nature well, and maybe, just maybe we can make up for the damage that has already been done. Both the developed and the developing nations should come together to protect the environment. In fact, every country should do its bit. Closing the tap properly and switching of appliances when not in use are some of the basic measures that require almost no effort on one's part but still can make a huge difference. Other measures like using public transport, ensuring that surroundings are not polluted during festival celebrations can go a long way towards protecting environment. Society needs to help itself in order to survive. The best time to act, was yesterday, the best we can do is today, but if we wait for tomorrow, it may just be too late. Better safe than sorry. World summits have been held and responsibility has ever been fixed at lowest levels, viz., women, individuals, and local governments in favour of protection of environment from degradation. But more has to be done; laws for protecting environment have to be strictly adhered to and trespassers are to be seriously prosecuted. Many environmental problems are not impossible or difficult to solve if they are properly understood and well addressed with well defined policies.

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