

Towards Sustainable Governance: An Ecological Ethics Perspective

Smt. Imlinungla¹ and Dr. E. Benrithung Patton²

¹Associate Professor & HoD, Department of Zoology,
Fazl Ali College (Nagaland University), Mokokchung, Nagaland, India.

Email: anunglongchar@fac.ac.in

²Associate Professor, Department of Political Science,
Fazl Ali College (Nagaland University), Mokokchung, Nagaland, India.

Email: pattonbenri@fac.ac.in

DOI: 10.29322/IJSRP.16.06.2026.p17421
<https://dx.doi.org/10.29322/IJSRP.16.06.2026.p17421>

Paper Received Date: 10th May 2026

Paper Acceptance Date: 20th June 2026

Paper Publication Date: 28th June 2026

Abstract: The current ecological crisis of climate change, biodiversity loss, pollution and depletion of resources has shown that anthropocentric and growth-oriented systems of governance are insufficient. The article discusses the role of ecological ethics in changing public policy by rethinking human-nature relationships. The paper criticizes exploitative developmental paradigms and highlights the ethical foundation of sustainable governance through perspectives such as biocentrism, ecocentrism, deep ecology, ecofeminism, indigenous ecological worldviews. It continues to investigate the relevance of ecological ethics in climate policy, environmental justice, resource management, agriculture and biodiversity conservation. The paper contends that successful governance requires that public policy structures contain ecological responsibility, participation, justice and sustainability. Finally, it proposes a model of ecologically ethical governance based on interdependence, coexistence and long-term environmental sustainability.

Keywords: Ecological Ethics, Environmental Governance, Human-Nature Relations, Sustainable Development, Biodiversity Conservation.

Introduction

The 21st century is an age of ecological crisis, a crisis in human history like never before. It is marked by climate change, loss of biodiversity, deforestation, pollution, desertification and fast depletion of natural resources. International scientific reports have repeatedly warned that ecological degradation is now threatening not only environmental sustainability, but also global political stability, economic security and human survival. Many parts of the world are now experiencing recurrent realities of extreme weather events, sea level rise, food insecurity and ecological displacement. The developments show that environmental issues cannot be considered as purely scientific or technical; they are inherently connected to governance, ethics, economics and public policy.

However, governance systems predominantly in operation are still heavily influenced by anthropocentric paradigms where human interests take precedence over ecological integrity. Economic growth, industrial growth, urbanization and technological growth are the main determinants of modern developmental policies. Nature is often seen as a resource to be exploited for the benefit of man. These

practices have nurtured extractive economic activities that emphasize short-term economic gains at the expense of long-term ecological sustainability. This means much policy is reactive and managerial rather than transformative.

Ecological ethics has become an important intellectual and political movement in response to the environmental crisis. Ecological ethics challenges the idea of unlimited human control over nature and emphasizes the interdependence of humans with nonhuman life and ecosystems. It attempts to argue that we have moral duties to the environment and that nature has intrinsic value beyond its utility to humans. Thus, ecological ethics includes animals, forests, rivers, and ecological systems in the moral community, in addition to human beings.

The increasing importance of ecological ethics has had a major impact on the governance discourse in areas such as climate policy, sustainable development, environmental justice, conservation of biodiversity and resource management. There is growing recognition in public policy debates that ecological degradation is not just a technological failure but a moral and political failure arising from unsustainable models of development and consumption. Thus, ethical considerations are emerging in the debates on environmental governance.

The article deals with the potential of altering existing public policy through the re-conception of the human-nature relationship through ecological ethics. Drawing on environmental philosophy, political ecology, sustainability studies and governance theory, the paper critiques anthropocentric models of governance and considers alternative ecological perspectives such as biocentrism, ecocentrism, deep ecology, ecofeminism and indigenous ecological worldviews. The article argues that sustainable governance is possible only when human-centred developmental paradigms are transformed into ecologically ethical policy paradigms. The paper discusses issues of sustainability, justice, participation and ecological responsibility.

The Epistemological Foundation of Ecological Ethics

Ecological ethics or environmental ethics is the study of the moral relationship of human beings to the environment. It is about how human beings should relate to nature, and whether non-human things should have moral value. Ecological ethics expands the range of moral consideration from human welfare and social relations to animals, plants, ecosystems and the biosphere as a whole. This was underlined by the environmental movements of the twentieth century when ecological degradation demonstrated the limitations of traditional anthropocentric systems of ethics.

Anthropocentrism has been the dominant world view of modern industrial societies. Anthropocentrism: The idea that humans are the center of the world, the most important beings. Viewed in this way Nature is an instrument, a resource to be exploited for human purposes and for economic development. Forests provide timber. Rivers provide hydroelectric power. Land is a commodity for industrial and urban expansion. Anthropocentrism has been an important driving force for scientific and technological progress but critics argue it has also been used to justify the exploitation of nature and the destruction of the environment. Anthropocentric developmental thinking is marked by over-industrialization, consumerism and resource extraction.

These limitations have prompted the formulation of alternative ecological ethical points of view. One of the major views is biocentrism. This is the view that all living things have value in themselves, regardless of their usefulness to human beings. The moral respect for all living beings and reverence for life has been emphasized by Albert Schweitzer and Paul Taylor. Biocentrism rejects the idea that only humans deserve moral consideration.

Another major view is that of ecocentrism which gives moral consideration not just to the individual organism but to whole ecosystems. In "The Land Ethic," Aldo Leopold questioned human dominion over the ecological community. For Leopold, ethical behavior is to leave ecosystems intact, stable and aesthetically pleasing. Ecocentrism, then, promotes a holistic ecological consciousness rather than an individualistic concern for human interests.

Deep ecology was developed by Arne Naess. This was another radicalization of environmental thought, for they were attacking modern industrial civilization itself. Deep ecology claims that ecological crises are due to man's domination of nature and materialism and

consumer culture. It promotes ecological harmony, simplicity and respect for the interconnectedness of all beings. Deep ecologists reject shallow environmentalism that wants techno-fixes without challenging exploitative social and economic structures.

A second major direction of ecological ethics is ecofeminism. Ecofeminist thinkers, such as Vandana Shiva and Karen Warren, have argued that the domination of nature is closely linked to patriarchy and systems of social domination. Ecofeminists argue that women and nature have been exploited in similar ways throughout history by patriarchal and capitalist systems. Ecofeminism links ecological sustainability to social justice and gender equality.

Indigenous ecological worldviews are also extremely relevant to ecological ethics. Many indigenous communities relate the sacredness of nature to human life, not property. Traditional ecological knowledge is often rooted in the concept of reciprocity, balance and respect for natural systems. Such views challenge dominant extractive development models and offer alternative routes to sustainability.

These ecological ethical perspectives collectively challenge traditional governance frameworks by foregrounding interconnectedness, intrinsic ecological value and moral responsibility to the natural world.

Contemporary Governance Discourse and Ecological Ethics

The growing ecological crisis has radically changed the discourse of contemporary governance. Traditional environmental governance was mostly associated with pollution control, resource regulation and environmental management in state-centric administrative systems. However, the complexity of modern ecological problems has led to the development of more general approaches to the ecological governance that include ethical, political, social and economic aspects into policymaking. One of the major changes in governance discourse is the shift from environmental governance to ecological governance. Environmental management tended to treat ecological problems as technical problems, to be solved through scientific regulation and administrative action. Ecological governance, by contrast, recognizes that environmental problems are embedded in problems of power, economic systems, social inequality and ethical values. Governance is no longer the sole prerogative of the state, but is increasingly shared with civil society organisations, indigenous communities, international institutions, environmental movements and local communities. The participatory approach indicates an awareness that ecological sustainability is dependent on collective responsibility and democratic participation.

Ecological ethics has also played an important role in the development of ecological citizenship. The traditional concept of citizenship is essentially a matter of political rights and obligations in the nation-state. Ecological citizenship expands upon these obligations by emphasizing environmental duties to present and future generations. Citizens are not only consumers or political actors but also ecological actors, whose way of life and consumption habits have an impact on the planet. In this regard ecological citizenship fosters sustainable living, responsible consumption and environmental accountability.

Environmental justice is another important dimension of the discourse on ecological governance. Communities are not equally impacted by environmental degradation. Indigenous peoples, economically disadvantaged communities and marginalized populations often bear the brunt of environmental impacts such as pollution, displacement, deforestation and climate vulnerability. Environmental justice movements point out how environmental problems overlap with social inequality, race, class and power relations. The issue of climate justice relates to the uneven allocation of responsibilities and impacts of global climate change, in particular between industrial and developing nations.

The idea of sustainable development is also central in the discourse of governance. The Brundtland Report in 1987 famously defined sustainable development as ‘development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs’.

Global frameworks, such as the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), aim to link environmental protection with economic and social development. However, many of the critics say the sustainability efforts are still framed within the paradigm of economic growth based on industrial expansion and consumption.

Ecological ethics reveals the contradictions of current systems of governance. Environmental rhetoric is gaining ground among governments but many policies continue to support extractive industries, dependence on fossil fuels and unsustainable development models. It is often a proxy for real ecological change, in the form of greenwashing and symbolic environmental pledges. Thus, ecological governance tends to be about management rather than transformation.

Besides this, ecological ethics questions the conception of the human as separate from the nature. Systems of governance based on domination and control seem to be increasingly inadequate to the task of addressing ecological crises. Instead, ecological ethics suggests relational models of governance founded on interdependence, sustainability, participation and ecological responsibility. Thus, the current debate over governance is slowly shifting towards the recognition that ecological sustainability cannot be achieved by technical regulation or economic adjustments alone. What is needed is an ethical turn in the way societies think about development, citizenship, justice and the human-nature relationship.

Ecological Ethics and Public Policy

Ecological ethics are playing an increasingly important role in public policy frameworks in many sectors, particularly in climate governance, resource management, urban development, agriculture, and biodiversity conservation. But the extent to which the principles of ethical ecology are actually embedded in policy is subject to debate.

Climate change policy is a key site of intersection between ecological ethics and governance. Climate change poses deep ethical questions about responsibility, justice and intergenerational equity. Historically, industrialized countries have been the greatest producers of greenhouse gases and developing countries and vulnerable groups tend to be the most affected. This imbalance has led to the debate on climate justice and differentiated responsibilities.

These are dealt with by international cooperation, emission reduction targets and adaptation strategies within such agreements as the Paris Accord. Ecological ethics questions the continuance of development models based on fossil fuels and the insufficient commitments of the leading industrial economies of the world.

The governance of natural resources also stresses the value of ecological ethics in the process of policy making. Economic growth is often pursued at the expense of ecological sustainability and local communities through the exploitation of forests, water bodies, minerals and land resources. Ecological ethics asks us to manage resources in a manner that highlights ecological balance, community participation, and long-term sustainability, rather than short-term profits. For example, India, Chipko Movement. It was a sign of resistance to commercial deforestation, a sign of the connection between local livelihoods and ecological protection. The Forest Rights Act was also to recognize the rights of indigenous and forest dependent communities, and reflect a growing sensitivity to environmental justice and participatory governance.

Another big ecological problem is urbanization. The fast growing cities brought pollution, waste, destruction of habitats and ecological imbalance. Many cities today are characterized by unsustainable consumption patterns and environmental planning. Ecological ethics for sustainable urban governance are advocated through promotion of green infrastructure, public transportation, waste management systems, renewable energy and environmentally sensitive urban planning. More and more sustainability goals are being embedded in smart city initiatives, but critics say many projects are more about technology than about transforming ecologically. Agricultural policy also illustrates the contradiction between industrial development and ecological sustainability. Today's agriculture depends on chemical fertilizers, pesticides, monoculture farming and intensive extraction of resources. However, these methods have increased agricultural productivity, but also caused soil degradation, loss of biodiversity, water pollution and ecological instability. The ecological ethics encourages other forms of agriculture as agroecology, organic farming, sustainable agriculture and food sovereignty. The methods are based on the ecological balance, local knowledge and sustainable use of resources.

Ecological policy has also been a major concern of biodiversity. Conservation policies often entail a tradeoff between pressures from development and ecological protection. Infrastructure projects, mining, and industrial expansion can often threaten sensitive ecosystems

and wildlife habitats. Ecological ethics asserts that biodiversity is of intrinsic value and should not be preserved solely for economic or human interests. Ethical questions also arise in conservation debates around indigenous rights and displacement. Sometimes, protected area policies have excluded local communities that have traditionally been the custodians of the environment.

Increasingly public policy is being accepted as a framework of sustainability and ecological responsibility. But many policies still treat the environment as a second priority to the targets of economic growth. Ecological problems are usually expressed in technical language that calls for administrative management, not ethical change. Policy responses may address mitigation but not the structural causes of ecological degradation.

But ecological ethics requires a more radical reorientation of public policy. Policies must think beyond narrow economic calculations and embrace ecological interdependence, environmental justice and long-term sustainability. Ethical ecological governance requires a balance between human development and ecological integrity, acknowledging that the health of natural systems is the ultimate foundation for human wellbeing.

Towards an Ecological Ethics Governance Model

The current ecological crisis calls for the development of governance models inspired by ecological ethics, sustainability and environmental justice. Ecological ethical governance is a framework that recognizes the interdependence of human societies and natural ecosystems, and promotes long-term ecological balance rather than short-term economic gains. The principle of sustainability is the basis of ecological governance. Policies should ensure that economic and social development occurs within ecological limits. Sustainable governance means the responsible use of resources in harmony with ecological renewal and the reduction of ecological degradation. Ecological justice is closely connected to sustainability and concerns the justice of the distribution of environmental benefits and burdens among communities and generations. Participation is another important component of ecological governance. Effective environmental policy requires participation of local communities, indigenous peoples, civil society organizations and marginalized groups in decision-making. Participatory governance contributes to increase the democratic legitimacy, and the inclusion of different kinds of ecological knowledge into policy frameworks. Ecological governance should also include Indigenous and traditional ecological knowledge systems. For centuries indigenous peoples have been managing their resources sustainably, based on the principles of reciprocity, collective responsibility and ecological balance. Today, the application of this knowledge in governance can strengthen the efforts towards sustainability while respecting the cultural diversity.

Another important thing is to re-think the economic systems. Ecological economics challenges the growth paradigm of mainstream economics and offers alternatives such as circular economies, sustainable production and responsible consumption. In a similar vein, the question whether ecological sustainability is compatible with unlimited economic growth is raised in the context of the debates on degrowth. Such views encourage the redefinition of development as well-being and social equity and ecological health, not just as the mere accumulation of material things.

Recognition of the rights of nature is an important innovation in ecological governance. Different countries and legal systems are increasingly recognizing rivers, forests and ecosystems as legal persons. Such approaches thus challenge anthropocentric legal frameworks by recognizing that nature has intrinsic value and legal rights independent of human interests. Environmental education also promotes the development of ecological awareness. Public institutions, schools and universities should promote ecological awareness, ethical responsibility and sustainable life styles. Without a broader cultural change, a policy change alone may not be enough.

In the final analysis ecologically, ethical governance calls for a radical rethink of development, of citizenship and of human progress. Governance systems need to change from exploitative relationships with nature, to frameworks based on coexistence, sustainability and

ecological responsibility. This transformation is central to solving the environmental crises facing modern societies.

Conclusion

The ongoing ecological crisis has revealed the shortcomings of governance arrangements based on anthropocentric and growth-oriented development paradigms. Climate change, biodiversity loss, environmental degradation and resource depletion show that environmental problems are not just technical or scientific problems, but are in fact ethical and political problems. Existing governance structures tend to prioritize economic growth and industrial development over ecological sustainability and environmental justice.

A second normative framework that could shift the discourses of public policy and governance is ecological ethics. Ecological ethics challenges basic notions of human dominance and endless economic growth and stresses the interdependence of all life, the intrinsic worth of nature, the principles of sustainability, and the moral duties we have to nature. Biocentrism, ecocentrism, deep ecology, ecofeminism and indigenous ecological worldviews are perspectives that offer a wider understanding of ecological responsibility.

The article demonstrated the growing impact of ecological ethics in the debates on governance of climate policy, sustainable development, resource management, environmental justice, agriculture and biodiversity conservation. But there are major hurdles such as capitalist developmentalism, political constraints, global inequalities, technocratic governance and symbolic environmentalism. These difficulties illustrate the difficulty of embedding ecological ethics into policy frameworks that are so thoroughly embedded in extractivist economic systems.

The future of governance for sustainability needs a paradigm shift to an ecological ethics of policies based on participation, justice, sustainability and ecological balance. Policy must move beyond narrow economic calculations and recognize the long-term interdependence of human societies and ecological systems. Hence, a rethink of development in terms of ecological ethics is necessary not only for environmental protection, but also for social justice, democratic accountability and the survival of future generations.

On this point, the future of governance depends on humanity's ability to reconfigure its relationship with nature from domination and exploitation to coexistence, responsibility and ecological stewardship.

References

- [1] A. Leopold, *A Sand County Almanac*. New York, NY, USA: Oxford Univ. Press, 1949.
- [2] A. Naess, "The shallow and the deep, long-range ecology movement: A summary," *Inquiry*, vol. 16, no. 1–4, pp. 95–100, 1973.
- [3] G. H. Brundtland, *Our Common Future*. Oxford, U.K.: Oxford Univ. Press, 1987.
- [4] V. Shiva, *Staying Alive: Women, Ecology and Development*. London, U.K.: Zed Books, 1988.
- [5] K. J. Warren, *Ecofeminist Philosophy: A Western Perspective on What It Is and Why It Matters*. Lanham, MD, USA: Rowman & Littlefield, 2000.
- [6] P. W. Taylor, *Respect for Nature: A Theory of Environmental Ethics*. Princeton, NJ, USA: Princeton Univ. Press, 1986.
- [7] A. Dobson, *Citizenship and the Environment*. Oxford, U.K.: Oxford Univ. Press, 2003.
- [8] R. Eckersley, *Environmentalism and Political Theory: Toward an Ecocentric Approach*. Albany, NY, USA: State Univ. of New York Press, 1992.
- [9] H. E. Daly, *Beyond Growth: The Economics of Sustainable Development*. Boston, MA, USA: Beacon Press, 1996.
- [10] R. D. Bullard, *Dumping in Dixie: Race, Class, and Environmental Quality*, 3rd ed. Boulder, CO, USA: Westview Press, 2000.
- [11] F. Berkes, *Sacred Ecology*, 3rd ed. New York, NY, USA: Routledge, 2012.
- [12] J. Martinez-Alier, *The Environmentalism of the Poor: A Study of Ecological Conflicts and Valuation*. Cheltenham, U.K.: Edward Elgar, 2002.
- [13] United Nations, *Transforming Our World: The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development*. New York, NY, USA: United Nations, 2015.

- [14] United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change, *Paris Agreement*. Bonn, Germany: UNFCCC, 2015.
- [15] E. F. Schumacher, *Small Is Beautiful: Economics as if People Mattered*. London, U.K.: Blond & Briggs, 1973.
- [16] M. Bookchin, *The Ecology of Freedom: The Emergence and Dissolution of Hierarchy*. Palo Alto, CA, USA: Cheshire Books, 1982.
- [17] R. Carson, *Silent Spring*. Boston, MA, USA: Houghton Mifflin, 1962.
- [18] B. Devall and G. Sessions, *Deep Ecology: Living as if Nature Mattered*. Salt Lake City, UT, USA: Gibbs Smith, 1985.
- [19] E. Ostrom, *Governing the Commons: The Evolution of Institutions for Collective Action*. Cambridge, U.K.: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1990.
- [20] Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, *Climate Change 2023: Synthesis Report*. Geneva, Switzerland: IPCC, 2023.