

Summary

This document covers the Islamic perspective on the environment, arguably one of the most important issues of our time. What is the environmental crisis? What caused it and what can be practically done to save the environment? Also discussed is its importance in Islamic teachings, e.g. kindness to animals, planting trees, and moderation in lifestyle.

Introduction

We have an environmental crisis. However, do we understand the extent of this crisis? Do we understand the causes of this crisis? Do we know how to address this crisis? What does Islam say about environmental issues? This presentation aims to answer these questions.

Discussion Point: What does the term “the environment” mean?

Literally, the term “environment” originally means something which surrounds us. Today we have different types of environments: home environment, learning environment and work environment, for example. These different environments have physical, social and psychological aspects. However, when we normally think of the environment, we usually mean the land, water and air which provide homes for people, creatures and plant life. These are all interconnected in a complex system of ecosystems, the water cycle and nitrogen cycle etc, which are balanced. The complexity of the environment is a sign from God.

However, today the environment is damaged! The damage is resulting in a crisis for all life on Earth!

Discussion Point: What do you think are the main environmental problems today?

The environmental crisis has many aspects: global warming, pollution (water and air), depletion of natural resources, waste disposal, loss of biodiversity, deforestation, etc. For example, 11 million tonnes of plastic pollute the oceans each year, harming sea life. Global warming has resulted in more severe bush fires in Australia, swarms of locusts destroying crops in Africa, and an increase in flooding, including in the UK. Over five hundred species of land animals are on the verge of extinction. Moreover, research indicates that there is a strong correlation between Coronavirus mortalities and air pollution.

One particular species in danger in the UK is bees. Over the last ten years, the British bee population has decreased by a third. Bees are vital to the ecosystem, not just for honey. They pollinate approximately 80% of our wildflowers, apples and beans. However, their natural habitat is being destroyed. They are also being negatively affected by climate change and pesticides (the latter does not kill bees but damages them).

Climate change has also resulted in people falling further into poverty in certain parts of the world, with an increased risk of flooding due to rising sea levels, hurricanes, forest fires and droughts. For example, Hurricane Maria in 2017 ravaged Puerto Rico, destroying homes, damaging water supplies along with schools and hospitals. Over two years later, this damage has not been rectified due to lack of funds. Moreover, The UN Secretary General Ban Ki-moon, in 2014, warned that unless climate change is urgently addressed the consequences could be an increase in poverty, food shortages, worsening of the refugee crisis and mass destruction of plant and animal life.

Causes of the environmental crisis

Discussion Point: Why do you think we have an environmental crisis?

Mostafa Al-Badawi (2002) points out that the environment was created in balance and has its own mechanisms for preventing disequilibrium, by removing pollutants through its ecosystems. However, today it has become overloaded with pollutants, which it cannot remove, creating disequilibrium including problems that directly affects us, such as food poisoning and damaging other life forms. Also, the disequilibrium of



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gases in the air caused by excessive production of carbon dioxide by factories and modes of transport (such as aeroplanes and cars), along with their parallel consumption of oxygen, has damaged the ozone layer. As a result, far more heat from the sun has come through the atmosphere to the Earth, facilitating global warming/climate change.

One important cause of the environmental crisis is that the environment is not treated as a trust but instead as something which can be exploited for the selfish benefit of humankind. There also appears to be a correlation between wealth and greed. Muhammad Hashim Kamali (2015) points out that the wealthiest countries of the world consume about ten times more natural resources than their poorer counterparts.

Why is this? We live in a consumerist society: we are encouraged by constant advertising not to be grateful for what we have but to buy more and more. We are encouraged to change our car every few years; to upgrade to the latest computer or smartphone; to buy the latest clothes which are in fashion. All of these require more energy consumption, increasing global warming. Rainforests are being destroyed at an alarming rate to provide more land for grazing cattle, in order to satisfy our greed for meat. Meat is now seen as a staple part of our diet, where once it was a luxury which was consumed rarely.

“Profit is king” is the mantra of consumer capitalism. Industrialists do not just supply to an existing market - they actually create markets for themselves. If people are exploited in the process and the environment is damaged, this does not matter for many of them due to their short-term goal of maximising profits. Though to be fair, there has been adoption of green policies by some major companies.

Governments are often slow to address the main root cause of environmental issues (the behaviour of corporations) as they do not want to lose the latter’s support. Nevertheless, due to public pressure, governments including the British government have introduced policies encouraging individuals to be more environmentally friendly by recycling, using solar panels on houses and they have supported renewal energy projects such as wind turbines.

This lack of care for the environment is also shown by the careless attitude in disposal of waste products such as plastics, which make their way to oceans and air pollution. Ultimately, by damaging the environment we face dire consequences.

‘Corruption does appear on land and sea because of (the evil) which people’s hands have done, that He may make them taste a part of that which they have done, in order that they may return.’

(Quran, Surah Ar-Rum, 30:41)

Pollution also has a direct impact on our health, particularly air pollution from factories and cars. The World Health Organisation (WHO) states that every year seven million people die through air pollution that is linked to heart attacks, strokes, and lung cancer. WHO also states that 93% of children around the world breathe in polluted air, which not only negatively impacts their health but also impairs their cognitive development.

Islam and the Environment

Discussion Point: What do you think are the Islamic teachings related to the environment?

A non-materialistic perspective

Abdal Hakim Murad points out that the Quran teaches us that that not only are humans, animals and plants alive but the physical environment is also living.

‘Do you not see that everything that is the heavens and the earth glorifies God?’

(Quran, Surah An-Nur, 24:41).

'Do you not realise that everything in the heavens and earth submits to God (bows down in worship to God): the sun, the moon, the stars, the mountains, the trees and the animals. So do many human beings...'

(Quran, Surah Al Hajj, 22:18)

Thus, the mountains, the land, and the sky are all living as they all praise God. It is narrated that the Prophet picked up some pebbles and his companions could hear them praising God (Abu Daud).

The Quran also tells us that all the animal species are communities with their own languages:

'There is not an animal (that lives) on the earth nor a being that flies on its wings, but (forms part of) communities like you.'

(Quran, Surah Al-Anam, 6:38)

There are hadith that describe that the Prophet understood the language of animals, such as when he learnt from a hummara bird that its two chicks had been taken by his companions (Abu Daud). Similarly, in the Quran we hear the prophet Sulaiman reassuring some ants that his army will not trample on them.

Unity of the Environment

Mohammad Hashim Kamali points out that the belief in Tawhid (the oneness of God) is reflected in the unity of nature – that everything is connected in nature. For example, plant and animal life are supported by minerals, and when the former die, decompose to produce the latter. This is an example of the interconnected ecosystems mentioned earlier.

Balance and Responsibility

God has created the universe in a balance which is necessary for our survival. He tells us in the Quran:

'We have produced there [the Earth] everything in balance.' (Quran, Surah Al-Hijr, 15:19)

As mentioned earlier, God has established corrective measures to maintain this balance. It has been entrusted to humans to be khalifah (stewards), to protect the environment.

'The world is beautiful and verdant, and truly God, be He exalted, has made you His stewards in it, and He sees how you acquit yourselves.'

(Sahih Muslim)

Therefore, Islam teaches us that we will be held responsible on the Day of Judgement for how we treat nature (the environment).

Respect for Nature

In the Quran, there are over 750 verses addressing the theme of nature. Moreover, fourteen Quranic chapters have titles associated with either specific animals or other natural phenomena such as 'The Cow', 'The Thunder', 'The Sun', 'The Night', 'The Fig' and 'The Elephant'. There are many examples in the *Quran* where God makes an oath by an aspect of nature, for example *'the dawn'* (89:1) and *'the fig and olive'* (95:1). These oaths show that these aspects of nature bear witness to the truth of the subsequent statement.

Mercy to Animals

Animals are a trust: they should be looked after by us. It is not allowed to kill them for fun. The Prophet once became angry when he witnessed two youth using a bird or chicken they had restrained for target practice.

Even if an animal is to be killed for food, it must be done in such a manner that causes it the least pain: by utilising a sharpened knife from behind so that it does not become distressed by seeing the knife. Using a sharp knife results in the animal becoming unconscious immediately. In addition, the animal must not be slaughtered in front of another one, to avoid emotional distress.

Moreover, Islam teaches us to be kind to animals in other ways:

'Abu Hurairah (may God be pleased with him) narrated that the Prophet told his companions about a man who was thirsty and came across a well. After going down the well and quenching his thirst he came out and saw a dog panting and licking mud due to excessive thirst. So, he went down the well again, filled his shoe with water, held it in his mouth, and climbed out of the well to give water to the dog to drink. God accepted that as a good deed from the man and forgave him. The Companions said, "O Messenger of God! Is there a reward for us in serving the animals?" He replied, "There is a reward for serving any living being."'

(Sahih Bukhari)

Conservation areas

The Prophet set up 'haram' and 'hima' (protected areas). Haram areas surrounded water sources, such as wells, to prevent overuse of the groundwater. Hima were areas where animals and plant life were protected. An example of the latter was a hima to the immediate south of Madina: within a four-mile boundary, hunting was forbidden and for twelve miles, it was forbidden to destroy trees and other plant life. Sheikh Yusuf Al Qaradawi has identified conservation as one of the maqasid (higher objectives of Islamic law), linking this to two other maqasid: the preservation of human life and the protection of property.

Planting trees

Planting trees is seen as a deed that can result in continual reward each time a living thing benefits from it. The prophet said:

'If a Muslim either plants a tree or sows seeds, and then a bird, or a person or an animal eats from it, it is regarded as a charitable gift (sadaqah) for him.'

(Bukhari)

Gardens

Gardens have been an important feature of Muslim civilisations for centuries, as they are believed to represent the gardens of Paradise. They incorporate geometrical patterns in their design and usually have a water feature along with various forms of plant life.

Conserving Water

Water is very important to Muslims, with it being mentioned in the Quran approximately sixty times.

'And We have made of water everything living.' (Quran, Surah Al Anbiyaa, 21:30)

Water is pure and purifying (Quran, Surah Al Furqan, 25:48).

According to Islamic law (shariah), water should not be wasted, including when making Wudu. Sa`d ibn Abi Waqas, whilst making wudu, was told off for wasting water by the Prophet (Ahmad).

Moderation in living

We should not be excessive in our lifestyle:

'O Children of Adam! Beautify every place of worship and eat and drink (what you want), but do not be wasteful. Indeed, God does not love those who are wasteful.'

(Quran, Surah Al-Araf, 7:31)

Said Nursi's commentary on this verse was that not being wasteful was a sign of gratitude, which will result in God giving us more blessings.

Green Mosques

One of the annual Beacon Mosque awards (UK) is for the 'Best Green Initiative'. This covers either educational eco-initiative or eco-friendly adaptations to mosque buildings, such as installing solar panels or rainwater harvesting. For example, the 2019 winner was Cambridge Central Mosque. This mosque was built according to Islamic environmental principles such as not having waste. Therefore, most of the lighting is through large skylights that is natural light which is supplemented by photovoltaic cells on the roof to produce renewable solar energy and low energy lightbulbs. The mosque also harvests rainwater for irrigating its garden and flushing its toilets. Moreover, the mosque also encourages its congregation to use more green transport by providing ample space for bikes. Finally, in front of the mosque is a garden inspired by the Quranic descriptions of the gardens of Paradise. In the centre there is an octagonal stone fountain which is surrounded by oak benches and sections of the garden has surrounding hedges enclosing roses and other flowers. There are also apple trees.

Nature, Mental Health, and Spirituality

As well as being a trust for us to look after, nature can also benefit us spiritually. Arguably the modern disconnect with nature has harmed us both psychologically and spiritually. Spending time in natural environments whether at the seaside, amongst hills or woodlands is very relaxing. MIND (the mental health charity) states that research indicates that spending time in natural environments reduces anxiety, as it has a calming effect, and can also improve the mood of those who suffer from depression. There is even a type of therapy called ecotherapy which involves participating in social activities in natural environments, to address depression. How does this work? Research indicates that walking for 90 minutes in a 'natural environment' reduces rumination more than a similar walk in an 'urban environment' (Bratman, 2015). Rumination is dwelling on a particular issue for a long time. If it relates to negative thoughts, then this can lead to mental health issues.

Spending time within natural environments can also heighten our spirituality, bringing us closer to God. When we see the beauty and the power in nature we are reminded of its Creator. Whether this is watching a sunset beautifying the sky, or a river rapidly flowing through a forest, we can have a sense of awe. Even looking down from an aeroplane at rivers, hills and forests seeming so minute, can remind us of how minute we are compared to our planet, never mind the universe. This is all created by God. Spending time in nature can also remind us of our ultimate goal to go to Paradise and bring us nearer to God, since Paradise is described in the Quran, as mentioned previously, as being like gardens.

What can we do?

Discussion Point: What can we do to save the environment?

There are small things we can do in our own lives to help the environment. By doing so we set a good example to others. Social scientists have discovered that one person making 'a sustainability-orientated decision' influences others to do likewise.

Some examples of what we can do to address the environmental crisis include:

- Reuse and recycle as often as you can.
- Choose riding a bike or walking as a means of transport whenever you can.
- Use fuel efficient cars.
- Use clothes lines instead of a dryer.
- Reduce consumption.
- Eat less meat.
- Try to avoid plastic packaging - instead try to use packaging that can be recycled.
- Buy organic produce.
- Spread awareness.
- Support environmental organisations which campaign and act as pressure groups on governments.
- Encourage our mosques to become more environmentally friendly.

References

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Handout

Problems

- Global warming
- Pollution (water and air)
- Depletion of natural resources and deforestation
- Waste disposal

Causes

- Consumerism
- Exploitation
- Businesses' damaging practices going unchecked by governments

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Islamic Teachings

The Earth has been entrusted to us:

'The world is beautiful and verdant, and truly God, be He exalted, has made you His stewards in it, and He sees how you acquit yourselves.'

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Mercy to Animals:

Abu Hurairah (may God be pleased with him) narrated that the Prophet told his companions about a man who was thirsty and come across a well. After going down the well and quenching his thirst he came out and saw a dog panting and licking mud due to excessive thirst. So, he went down the well again, filled his shoe with water, held it in his mouth, and climbed out of the well to give water to the dog to drink. God accepted that as a good deed from the man and forgave him. The Companions said, "O Messenger of God! Is there a reward for us in serving the animals?" He replied, "There is a reward for serving any living being."

(Sahih Bukhari)

Conservation areas: The Prophet (pbuh) created inviolable zones, known as 'haram' and 'hima', in which resources were to be left untouched.

Planting trees:

'If a Muslim either plants a tree or sows seeds, and then a bird, or a person or an animal eats from it, it is regarded as a charitable gift (sadaqah) for him.'

(Bukhari)

Moderation in living:

'O Children of Adam! Take your adornment at every place of worship and eat and drink (what you want), but do not be wasteful. Indeed, God does not love those who are wasteful.'

(Quran, Surah Al-Araf, 7:31)

What We Can Do

Some of these include:

- Reuse and recycle as often as you can and try to avoid plastic packaging.
- Ride a bike or walking as a means of transport wherever you can/Use fuel efficient cars.
- Use clothes lines instead of a dryer.
- Reduce consumption, eat less meat and buy organic produce.
- Spread awareness.
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