Ecocentric Bias and the Human Welfare: Reintegrating Human Welfare into Environmental Conservation Discourse

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Abstract
In recent times, the concept of ecocentrism has, to a large extent, influenced environmental ethics and conservation discourse by attributing intrinsic value to nature at the expense of human interests. However, while this framework has empowered several ecological approaches and enriched various forms of ecological consciousness, it has, by implication, produced what we identify as an ecocentric bias. By ecocentric bias, we refer to a conceptual imbalance that tends to isolate the human being from the environment, or rather, attempts to subordinate human welfare to environmental preservation, which we consider a problem. From this perspective, this paper critically engages with the imbalance in ecocentricism by arguing that the human person is not an external entity to the ecosystem, but an integral part of it. By extension, highlighting various lived realities of the people, including poverty, inequality, and survival-based environmental degradation, our paper contends that any environmental philosophy or conservation policy that does not consider or disregard human socio-economic conditions risks becoming ethically and practically biased. Through the methods of conceptual clarification and critical analysis, this paper interrogates the prevailing ecocentric paradigm, focusing on how it has marginalized human needs in conservation science. In doing so, our paper advocates for a mediatory framework that focuses on harmonizing environmental integrity with human flourishing, rather than placing them against each other. This paper concludes by arguing that sustainable environmental stewardship is only possible when both the human and ecological dimensions are held in balanced ethical regard, thereby providing a just and inclusive model for global conservation efforts.

Keywords: Ecocentric, Conservation, Sustainable Environment, Human Welfare, Bias

Introduction

The world environmental crisis has inspired ethical responses from various quarters that aim to come up with new ways of understanding man-ecology relations. One such response is ecocentrism, a position that asserts the non-instrumental value of nature to human beings, which has since been the leading environmental ethics and conservation discourse in academia (Callicott, 1989; Naess, 1973). Ecocentrism has been a major propellant for the deep ecology movement, as it has brought out the argument that nature should be preserved not only for the sake of the human species but also because of its intrinsic value (Ojomo, 2024; Mogaji, 2024). No doubt, this point of view has been the main force behind the refutation of the anthropocentric bias in environmental ethics, but at the same time, it has resulted in what maybe called an ecocentric bias: a cognitive and practical inclination towards giving priority to environmental integrity up to the degree that human welfare is either neglected or treated as less important

(Karr, 1993; Rolston, 1994; Brennan & Lo, 2020). This paper maintains that such bias is a problematic dualism which runs through the narrative of humans as either outside the ecosystem or in conflict with it, instead of being its integral parts. This misperception is often reflected in environmental policies and philosophies that neglect human needs, especially those of vulnerable communities whose livelihoods are directly related to environmental resources. For example, conservation strategies that carry out rigorous nature protection treatment without taking into account local socio-economic realities may aggravate poverty, inequality, and even environmental degradation by means of unintended consequences like illegal resource exploitation (Adams & Hutton, 2007). This paper sets out to dispose of the ecocentric paradigm and the ethical unbalance it provokes. It also lays claim to a just and humane attitude towards environmental integrity that is not exclusive to the welfare of the marginalized human populations. By making a clear distinction and using a critical approach, the present paper suggests that ecological stewardship is only feasible when both ecological and human dimensions are in ethical parity.

Conceptual Clarification of Terms

Ecocentrism is an environmental ethical perspective that is centered on the principle that the Earth and its components (living and non-living) have intrinsic worth beyond their usefulness to mankind. It goes on to say that the moral consideration of the ecosystems as a whole should be addressed and humans should be seen as merely one among many interdependent parts of the biosphere (Naess, 1973; Callicott, 1989). Ecocentrism is the opposite of anthropocentrism, which considers humans as the primary morally and ontologically beings in the universe, and nature as the source of goods only for human beings. Dreger and Chandler view anthropocentrism as the theory that positions humans as the lords of the ecosystem, which the ecosystem is to serve their purpose or will. In the expression of Mogaji (2025a), he argues anthropocentrism to be that which places Human beings at the core of all that is considered important, be it morally, philosophically, and ecologically. Although ecocentrism has been the driving force for the wide changing of the people's ecological consciousness and the advocacy of the rights of nature, on the other hand, the critics accuse it of being a potentially ignore or undermining of the urgent human needs, especially in places, where the socio-economic deprivation is combined with environmental problems (Rolston, 1994; Brennan & Lo, 2020). This conflict is the cause of the argument of ecocentric bias. A feature of ecocentric bias that is represented in this paper is that it is an ethical and conceptual overcorrection within the environmental conservation paradigms. In it, nature is so emphasized that the human welfare issue becomes secondary or even expendable. This inclination appears to be most obvious in conservation actions, which attempt to save bare life from human intervention, but the result is usually the elimination of local communities that are the original owners of the under-considered areas, or forcing them to give up their traditional sources of livelihood (Adams & Hutton, 2007; Büscher & Fletcher, 2015). Ecocentric bias may also find expression in philosophical issues, whereby the participants are committed to the first principle of human and ecological preservation animosity, which leads to the formulation of policies that approaches environmental concerns with the lens of dichotomies and exclusions. The situation of the Global South, for example, is often entirely overlooked in discussions of environmental destruction, even though communities there are deeply intertwined with issues of environmental degradation and poverty. In environmental discourse, the concept of human welfare encompasses the overall well-being of individuals and communities, including economic conditions, health, education, cultural identity, and the equitable distribution of environmental resources, among other factors. It also includes the empowerment of people to live lives consistent with human dignity, all within the limits of nature's carrying capacity (Sen, 1999).

With current socioeconomic issues in our contemporary societies, we cannot but argue that, Environmental ethics that exclude or minimize human concerns run the risk of deepening socio-economic inequality and creating policies that are ethically narrow and practically unworkable. In regions where subsistence agriculture, fishing, and

forestry are integral to survival, conservation efforts that do not consider human welfare may inadvertently encourage unsustainable behavior, such as illegal logging or poaching, driven by economic necessity (Schlosberg, 2007).

Philosophical Origins and Evolution of Ecocentrism

The origins of ecocentrism in philosophy are traceable to the movement which advocates for nature, often influenced by the idea of deep ecology, a concept developed by the Norwegian philosopher Arne Naess in the 1970s. Naess characterizes the difference between "shallow" and "deep" ecology, and he pointed out that the former only addressed the environmental problem by technical fixing and sustainable development, without changing the values which were the reasons for ecology's destruction (Naess, 1973). The deep ecology movement is, however, a complete change in the position of humans in the natural world, advocating for equal rights to all life forms, the concept of biospheric egalitarianism, nature has no hierarchy. Following Aldo Leopold's and J. Baird Callicott's additions to Ai A.N.'s philosophy, they not only restated but also personalized the ethical reasons for the ecocentrism movement. The land ethic that Leopold (1949) proposed was a significant extension of the idea of a community that encompassed not only people but also nature, including soils, waters, plants, and animals, collectively, "the land." Callicott (1989) went further to emphasize the point of the ecosystems' being coeno-social beings, therefore, extending ethical considerations to them as their own right. These philosophical contributions laid the groundwork for ecocentrism to become a guiding principle in environmental ethics, providing the intellectual basis for environmental movements and conservation organizations that advocate for nature's intrinsic value.

Ecocentrism's influence went farther than just philosophy and reached into environmental policy and practice as well. This issue has been mentioned both directly and indirectly through participation in the creation of national parks, wilderness preservation initiatives, and international agreements focused on biodiversity and ecosystem protection. For example, the ecocentric conservation principles of the UN Convention on Biological Diversity are an essential part of the agenda that is focused on the integrity of the ecosystem and the protection of biodiversity even in the case when the benefits that humans receive are not obvious. The wilderness conservation paradigm, which advocates for protecting the "unchanged" nature, is a direct and very practical example of ecocentric values. While this model has been a success story in conserving biodiversity in some parts of the world, it has also raised issues that are still open to discussion, especially, the problems caused by the exclusion or displacement of indigenous peoples and local communities who have been living in these areas since time immemorial (West et al., 2006). Also, ecocentrism was the main driving force in the transition to strong sustainability, a notion which holds that natural capital cannot be replaced by human-made capital; thus, the natural systems are irreplaceable (Neumayer, 2003). Such ideas have reoriented the purposes of conservation from using to preserving, hence putting the welfare of ecosystems as the first consideration.

Nevertheless, ecocentrism was the source of environmental movement achievements but at the same time it faced the backlash from the critics who have coined it an ecocentric bias because it is alleged that it overemphasizes the ecological integrity in such a way that it overshadows human welfare, especially the one of the vulnerable people. When it comes to places where poverty, inequality, and dependence on natural resources, etc. prevail, ecocentric strategies may lead to the unintended consequences of socio-economic injustices. Thus, as an example, that conservation move called fortress conservation - where nature receives protection through banning humans from a certain area by whatever means necessary - has always been ridiculed and seen as something that completely goes against the respect of the indigenous people's rights and, at the same time, it also is one of the reasons that make local people's lives more miserable (Brockington et al., 2008). Plus, ecocentrism's stressing that something is valuable only because it has intrinsic value does not always lead to clear ethical guidelines when a situation occurs that demands nature conservation to continue while it conflicts with fundamental

human needs. Furthermore, Schlosberg (2007) puts it that environmental justice must focus on not only ecological integrity but also human rights, distributional equity, and the participatory inclusion of environmental decision-making. Therefore, while ecocentrism has been a significant force in undoing anthropocentric excesses and launching a new phase of ecological responsibility, its hasty application might result in ethical dilemmas and practical issues. These tensions underscore the need for a more integrative approach that balances environmental goals with human welfare.

Diagnosing Ecocentric Bias

To be fair to ecocentrism, it has changed environmental ethics greatly but there are some areas that it has not covered fully. Even though ecocentric individuals have repeatedly advocated for the intrinsic value of nature, along with the ecocentric ethics, the controversy over the ecocentric bias is raised. This paper defines the term "ecocentric bias" as the ethical and practical consequences that arise when conservation strategies give disproportionate emphasis to ecological preservation at the expense of human welfare. Uncovering this bias is a key step towards tracing the roots of environmental iniquity, as it highlights how the bias of environmentalists can lead them to unintentionally perpetuate the injustice of socio-economic vulnerable groups. Ecocentric bias, in essence, is the result of a narrow interpretation of ecocentrism that characterizes any kind of human intervention as a negative factor for the environment. Callicott (1989) mentions that this view is based on a false assumption of a dichotomy between human interests and ecological integrity and human presence is thus depicted as something incompatible with conservation. But, this point of view completely fails to see the interdependent relationship that human communities and their environments have. Indeed, it is particularly true in the case of indigenous and rural settings where environmental stewardship is not just a concept but is actually a lived cultural practice (Berkes, 2004; Mogaji, 2025a; 2025b). As a consequence, there appears to be a conceptual imbalance which not only grants non-human nature a position of moral superiority but also downgrades human needs to something insignificant or even harmful. Thus, ecocentric ethics, notwithstanding their aim to be progressive, could easily become exclusionary and continue to incarnate colonial logics that have been responsible for the loss of local communities in history and have given them the name of "protecting nature" (Adams & Hutton, 2007). When they become most evident, ecocentric bias is in environmental policies which focus more on preservation than participation. The most striking case would be fortress conservation, a model which generates protected areas by drastically reducing or completely eliminating local human activities. Although this strategy may be successful in terms of achieving the goal of preserving ecosystems in the short term, it is most certainly going to lead to the displacement of communities, criminalization of traditional livelihoods, and the loss of local knowledge systems (Brockington & Igoe, 2006; West et al., 2006). For instance, in parts of Africa and Asia, the setting up of national parks and wildlife reserves has been the cause of forcible removal of indigenous peoples and questions have been raised about those peoples' sustainable solutions in that environment for generations. In addition, such policies that are carried out based on the ecocentric logic and are executed without adequate consultation or compensation thus, violating basic human rights and causing further poverty are the sources of the destructions to the various communities (Büscher & Fletcher, 2015). Furthermore, the global climate policy is a strategy that uses a method called carbon offsetting which is the target of some critiques. The criticisms are that this method gives priority to abstract ecological metrics over the lives of the populations in different localities. These schemes are that they make "carbon sinks" by afforestation or prohibition of land use, and thus, they become a "carbon" source of global carbon accounting; however, the main problem is that they usually do so by taking away the land from the hands of the people who use it for farming and food (Fairhead et al., 2012). The ethical issue with ecocentric bias is not that it gives nature the intrinsic value, but that it does not go on to integrate this with the intrinsic value of the human. In cases where ecological preservation is going to cost human suffering, ethical reflection should ask if such trade-offs are justifiable. Elwood (2007) in his

argument insists that the scope of the environmental justice movement must be intersectionality in the extent of its ecological harm and social inequality. To put it into practice, ecocentric bias can also be the main factor that ruins the good intentions of conservation in the long run. Typically, this may be the result of exclusionary or mistrust to dealing with locals that may lead a decrease in compliance and thus, illegal extraction of natural resources. This consequently leads to the further deterioration of the original problems that the delegation of such a role (Dressler et al., 2010). Such a situation as a result of ignoring human needs during conservation implementation can pose a challenge to sustainability particularly in poor and marginalized regions where survival depends entirely on natural resources. It is for this reason that identifying the ecocentric bias rather seeking to err is not synonymous with complete rejection of ecocentrism but a critique of its uncritical application. It metaphorically refers to the confession of a fault - error ethics - where it is understood that ecological integrity and human dignity should be considered equally important.

Human Welfare and Environmental Justice

The ecocentric bias debate is about to the extent that it cannot be fully grasped without analyzing the topics of human welfare and environmental justice, which are vital for building a more inclusive and ethically coherent conservation framework. Although ecocentric ethics focus on the unearned value of nature, environmental justice brings in a necessary balance by pointing out the rights, needs, and the voices of human populations, mainly of marginalized and vulnerable ones. This part of the discourse lays down the point that a lack of human welfare considerations in conservation schemes leads to ethical blind spots and thus downgrades social equity as well as ecological sustainability. Human welfare is a term that refers to the various aspects of life without which people and communities cannot live with dignity and health, and perceptibly. Among those are the right to clean air and water, food, housing, education, health care, and socio-economic opportunities. In nature-related situations human welfare is most often closely associated with the availability of natural resources, land, and ecosystem services (Sen, 1999; Nussbaum, 2000). Numerous communities, most notably those located in the Global South, have established very intense socio-ecological links through which their cultural identity, subsistence, and economic activities get inseparable from the natural environment. In essence, if conservation policies have been developed without taking into consideration these relationships, it could be likened to a colonial oppression that deprives the people of being human (Mogaji and Motadegbe, 2025), or that which deprives people of their livelihoods, and at the same time, which would ultimately violate the human rights and increase the inequality (Adams & Hutton, 2007; Schlosberg, 2007). Environmental justice has come to existence as a direct consequence of the unjust distribution of environmental harms and gains especially in industrialized countries where the marginalized peoples are continuously victims of pollution, toxic waste, and overuse of resources. Later on, the environmental justice idea has grown into a powerful worldwide ethical and political community whose primary aim is to guarantee the right way to be treated and the right to participate fully for all people, without exception of race, class, or place, in environmental decision-making (Bullard, 1993; Schlosberg, 2007). Schlosberg (2004) identifies three key dimensions of environmental justice: distributional justice (fair allocation of environmental goods and burdens), recognitional justice (acknowledgment of diverse cultural values and knowledge systems), and procedural justice (inclusion in decision-making processes). These dimensions are critical for addressing ecocentric bias, which often marginalizes local knowledge and excludes communities from shaping the very conservation policies that affect their lives. In many parts of the world, especially in rural and indigenous settings, poverty and environmental degradation exist in a mutually reinforcing cycle. Communities that depend on natural resources for survival, such as small holder farmers, pastoralists, and fisherfolk, are often blamed for environmental harm, without considering the structural causes of degradation, including land dispossession, weak governance, and exclusion from environmental planning (Leach et al., 1997). Ecocentric conservation approaches

that prioritize pristine ecosystems over human livelihoods may further entrench this cycle by criminalizing traditional practices, restricting access to forests and water bodies, and fostering resentment and non-compliance. Such strategies often ignore the fact that these communities are not the root cause of environmental decline but are among its most immediate victims (Brockington & Igoe, 2006). A justice-centered approach to conservation, by contrast, would address the root causes of vulnerability and promote sustainable, community-based models that integrate both ecological protection and socio-economic development (Berkes, 2004; Ribot, 2014). To overcome ecocentric bias, there must be a shift toward an integrative conservation paradigm, one that reconciles ecological preservation with human development goals. This means treating human welfare not as a competing interest but as a component of environmental sustainability. Models such as community-based natural resource management (CBNRM) and participatory conservation demonstrate that ecological goals can be met while respecting the rights and needs of local people (Dressler et al., 2010). Furthermore, integrating environmental justice into conservation policy improves outcomes by fostering local support, utilizing traditional ecological knowledge, and ensuring the long-term viability of environmental interventions (Chapin, 2004). It also aligns conservation ethics with broader principles of human rights and global justice.

Toward a Balanced Ethical Framework: Reintegrating Human Welfare into Environmental Conservation Discourse

Considering our arguments so far, spanning from the socio economical dimension, down to the issue of displacement, it becomes necessary to address the conflict between ecocentric conservation and human welfare. Here, we try to argue that such reconciliation requires a reconfiguration of environmental ethics in such a way that it neither undermines ecological integrity nor neglects human dignity; a balanced ethical framework that harmonizes the protection of nature with the promotion of human well-being. Such a framework would move beyond the polarizing binaries of anthropocentrism and ecocentrism by integrating the moral claims of both nature and people in conservation discourse and practice; because the ethical division between valuing nature for its own sake (ecocentrism) and valuing it for human benefit (anthropocentrism) has contributed to polarized approaches to conservation. However, several environmental ethicists have called for pluralistic or integrated models that acknowledge multiple sources of moral value (Palmer, 2010; Norton, 1984). For instance, Bryan Norton's notion of weak anthropocentrism supports environmental protection not only for human utility but also based on reflective preferences that include care for non-human life and future generations (Norton, 1984). In this same lens, Rolston (1994) argues that while the claim that nature has intrinsic value is true, the extension of such ethical concern must also be directed towards sentient beings capable of suffering, including humans. If this becomes achievable, it only reinforces equity in its evenly distributed form.

However, for the above recommendations to be possible, this paper argues for a balanced ethical framework in practice, which can be operationalized through inclusive conservation models, one of which is community-based natural resource management (CBNRM) and participatory conservation, and co-management. These models are a priority considering their emphasis on local participation, equitable benefit-sharing, and culturally sensitive strategies which take into consideration conservation objectives, together with community development goals (Berkes, 2004; Dressler et al., 2010). For example, using the case of Namibia and Botswana, research reveals that CBNRM programs have, over the years, managed two distinct realities to coexist. Firstly, it allows rural communities to manage wildlife conservancies, which leads to generating income through eco-tourism and hunting quotas. Secondly, while the economic aspect is taken into cognisance, the idea of monitoring, among many other mechanisms in place, has ensured the conservation of biodiversity. In other words, we cannot but agree that such models like those shown above alludes to the fact that conservation efforts that respect local knowledge and promote socio-economic development are not only ethically sound but also more sustainable and resilient in the long

term, for it intrisically ensures equity by making provision for both sides (Humans and the Ecology), after all, we need them to survive (Mogaji, 2025a, 2025b). In essence, for there to be justice, an inclusive conservation ethic needs to be grounded in several key ethical principles, such as Recognition, which entails acknowledgement of the value systems, cultural knowledge, and environmental stewardship of indigenous and local communities (Schlosberg, 2004); participation to ensure democratic involvement of affected communities in environmental decision-making (Ribot, 2014). Equity in the distribution of conservation benefits and burdens fairly, paying special attention to historically marginalized populations. Ecological Responsibility which denotes upholding ecological limits and biodiversity protection as shared ethical responsibilities across all stakeholders. Hence, through incorporating these mentioned criteria into environmental governance, conservation can become a platform for both ecological preservation and social justice.

Conclusion

The dominance of ecocentric perspectives in environmental ethics and conservation has played a crucial role in challenging exploitative anthropocentric world views and in reaffirming the intrinsic value of nature. However, as this paper has critically demonstrated, the ecocentric bias, an overemphasis on ecological preservation at the expense of human welfare, has produced ethical, social, and practical dilemmas, particularly for vulnerable communities whose survival depends on direct interaction with natural ecosystems. This paper contends that an exclusive emphasis on ecological integrity, which simultaneously neglects human interests, fails to consider pressing socio-economic issues, and could thus lead to further issues if not worse. It argues that Conservation strategies based on exclusionary concepts, such as fortress conservation, have often been found guilty of frequently overlooking the lived experiences, rights, and contributions of local communities.

As a response, this paper recommends a kind of paradigm shift in Environmental discourse; a shift that perceives human existence not as a threat, but as a collaborator, particularly indigenous and underprivileged communities, in environmental stewardship. In other words, reintegrating human welfare into environmental conservation is not a request to forsake ecological goals, but an appeal for ethical equilibrium. This equitable strategy recognizes that enduring conservation success relies on both safeguarding ecosystems and cultivating resilient, empowered communities capable of coexisting with and nurturing their habitats. The future of global conservation initiatives depends on a unified morality that preserves the integrity of the Earth while promoting the dignity of its inhabitants. In essence, we argue that only through a reasonable and integrative perspective can we aspire to attain sustainable environmental stewardship for current and future generations. However, our position might be mistaken if not properly understood. Here, we are not calling for a return to anthropocentrism, but rather we advocate for a mediatory ethical framework that avoids the extremes of either paradigm (Ecocentrism and Anthropocentrism). Such a framework, this paper argues, would recognise the intrinsic value of nature while affirming the legitimate and non-negotiable importance of human welfare in conservation decisions, both of which are necessary if a proper reflection on contemporary issues in our respective societies.

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