# Open Research Online

The Open University's repository of research publications
and other research outputs

## Introduction to environmental responsibility

## Book Section

How to cite:

Reynolds, Martin (2009). Introduction to environmental responsibility. In: Reynolds, Martin; Blackmore, Chris and Smith, Mark J. eds. The Environmental Responsibility Reader. London: Zed Books and The Open University, pp. 1–6.

For guidance on citations see FAQs.

Version: Accepted Manuscript

Link(s) to article on publisher's website:
http://www.zedbooks.co.uk/book.asp?bookdetail=4295

oro.open.ac.uk

## Introduction to environmental responsibility
Martin Reynolds

> If you don't raise your voice, then your environmentalism means
> nothing; it's mere tokenism or opportunism […] We have a special
> responsibility to the ecosystem of this planet. In making sure that
> other species survive we will be ensuring the survival of our own.
> (Wangari Maathai, 2004 Nobel Peace Prize winner)

> Responsibility is a cultural concept […] how are we to regulate our
> responsiveness so as to preserve the stability of the manifold systems
> on which we depend, and how are we to make a collective world in
> which we individually can live? (Sir Geoffrey Vickers, 1979)

Alarm bells regarding the effects of our decisions and actions on the
environment have been ringing loud and long. Why we need to take
responsibility for these effects, and who takes responsibility for what
and how, are issues that are as hard to pin down as they were in the
days of Sir Geoffrey Vickers, though the world has changed a lot since
those times. While complex interrelationships among factors affecting
change appear to be increasingly acknowledged, there is a wide range of
perspectives to take into account. Wangari Maathai is a Kenyan environmentalist
and winner of the 2004 Nobel Peace Prize for her contribution to
sustainable development, democracy and peace. She was commended for
taking a holistic approach that embraces democracy and human rights,
in particular women's rights. The relationship between environmental
responsibility and economic, social and political stability and justice was
again acknowledged in December 2007, when the Nobel Peace Prize was
awarded jointly to the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC)
and the former vice-president of America, Al Gore, for his documentary
film An Inconvenient Truth. The award citation credited both parties 'for
their efforts to build up and disseminate greater knowledge about manmade
climate change, and to lay the foundations for the measures that
are needed to counteract such change'.

While the extent of human-induced climate change may remain
debatable, its increasing influence is not. In 2007 the United Nations'
emergency relief coordinator was reported in a UK-based newspaper as
saying: 'A record number of floods, droughts and storms around the

world this year amount to a climate change "mega disaster"' (Guardian, 5 October 2007, p. 20). He further noted a pattern of increase in climatic disturbances which could not be divorced from global warming through greenhouse gas emissions. The report suggested that in South Asia alone more than sixty million people were made homeless. Later in the same year concern was increasingly surfacing about a global food crisis. Amid fears of socio-ecological collapse, it is necessary to understand in more detail why these events are occurring and what can be done, by whom, to improve this situation. Exploring where responsibility lies, who needs to take responsibility and what type of action is required is an important part of developing this understanding.

Locating where responsibility lies can in itself invoke a range of responses. Feeling overwhelmed, despairing or remote is not uncommon if trying to engage with such crises, particularly when it is not clear what might help. The causes of a food crisis, for example, are multiple and interconnected. Clearly, severe weather-induced events such as drought and flooding constitute one set of factors. The demise of insect pollinating agents through disease and pollution may exacerbate the biophysical situation. Other factors include the increase in oil prices affecting food production and distribution costs, a reduced supply of cereal crops as US and European farmers in particular have been encouraged to switch production from cereal to biofuel agriculture, and growing demand arising from increased economic prosperity in countries such as China and India. The dangers of ecological deterioration are clearly linked with the actual and potential effects of political destabilization.

Climate change, food and energy supply, waste disposal, loss of biodiversity, species extinction, access to clean water, airport expansions,land degradation, pollution, etc., are now recurring issues on the agenda of global as well as many national and local agencies of governance. Given the interdependencies between these agenda items, it is of littlewonder that those who might take responsibility experience a state of helplessness or dissociation which can sometimes translate into apathy. To add to this state of murkiness, while there appears to be no shortage of advice on what is 'good' for the environment and 'best practice' associated with environmental responsibility, the advice is distributed over many disciplines and professional traditions, sometimes presented in inaccessible language, and moreover often conflicting. So how might this collection of readings help? Who should be interested in an anthology about environmental responsibility? And why?

Our intention is that it will help provide insights into (i) what we can and need to take responsibility for; (ii) who might do it and how;

and (iii) why we should focus on environmental responsibility. We offer a working definition of environmental responsibility as involving two complementary actions summed up in terms of (a) caring for an environment comprising the natural world of life and life support in which humans are an integral part, and (b) ensuring guidance and accountability for any harm or wrong done to the environment. The two actions have soft and hard connotations respectively but, like the traditional Chinese philosophical notions of Yin and Yang, are best considered as integral actions. They also imply a particular relational understanding of 'environment' associated with decision-making; an understanding captured in the following description: 'the relationship between people and their environment has many dimensions – physical, biological, social, psychological, emotional, economic, even temporal – in terms of how we are currently affected by past decisions and how our decisions will affect us and other generations in the future' (Open University 2006).

Insights from complexity sciences – and particularly the science of climate change – since the late twentieth century have shown that any human activity can have very many consequences – foreseen and unforeseen, intended and unintended, beneficial and catastrophic. The phenomenon more generally is known as the 'butterfly effect'. The argument from complexity science being that a butterfly's wings flapping in one continent might create tiny changes in atmospheric currents that may trigger other chains of events that lead to large-scale phenomena, such as the creation (or prevention) of a cross-continent tornado. Some forty-five years before Gore and the IPCC picked up their awards, the systemic effects of human activity on our environment were signalled in one of the earliest popular expressions of environmental responsibility in the publication of Silent Spring by Rachel Carson (1962). Carson's book generated controversy over the use of chemical pesticides and fertilizers in agriculture and its effects on wildlife. At the time, Silent Spring was rejected as being too alarmist. But time moves on. Since 2006 concern has been mounting about the demise of honey bee colonies through what is called colony collapse disorder (CCD). One-third of all human food comes from insect-pollinated plants. Honey bees provide over 80 per cent of the cross-pollination involved in agricultural practice. The precise causes of CCD are not known, though we do know that honey bees are a domesticated species, reared for human purpose, and hence quite genetically homogenous and thereby not as resistant to diseases or other external changes to the environment as other insect species. There is also post-mortem evidence of pesticide effects on the honey bees. Whatever the causes, clearly the 'butterfly effect' of human activity has

contemporary resonance. In addressing what constitutes environmental responsibility, then, we suggest the need for focusing on interrelationships and interdependencies of ecological and social factors, and that such attention is required in terms of both nurturing care for an environment and ensuring guidance and accountability for any harm or wrong done to the environment.

Our second question asks who should be interested in an anthology of environmental responsibility. Questions of environmental responsibility are very much entwined with the emergence of economic globalization. It is common to lay responsibility or 'blame' for environmental stress at the feet of the institutional pillars of economic globalization that grew in prominence in the 1990s – the International Monetary Fund, the World Bank and the World Trade Organization. Many individuals and groups have taken a more proactive anti-globalization stance that couples criticism of institutions and associated models of economic globalization with ideas on alternative models enabling citizen responsibility. For example, Walden Bello – a Philippines-born academic and activist – advocates a reversal in the way values are prioritized: '[…] instead of the economy driving society, the market must be […] "re-embedded" in society and governed by the overarching values of community, solidarity, justice and equity' (New Internationalist 400, 2007, p. 11). Bello goes on to call for an alternative deglobalized model of development. Such calls are not just directed to those in positions of power, but suggest that we all have some responsibility in sustaining or transforming models of development that affect the environment.

The third question invites us to step back a little. It asks more generally why bother with environmental responsibility. Reading 4 in this anthology attempts an answer in terms of a need to counter debilitating attitudes of despair, apathy and cynicism often used to justify business as usual. Using the example of the long-standing and controversial Narmada Dam project in India, three recurring and interdependent questions of environmental responsibility are explored: (i) what are the issues?; (ii) how might these issues be attended to and by whom?; and (iii) why are some issues privileged more than others, and some ways of dealing with them prioritized over others? The reading uses these questions as a platform to introduce the relevance of three dimensions of ethics – normative, philosophical and political – and some associated basic concepts used in environmental ethics. The challenge is to mobilize these conceptual tools along with others to support environmental responsibility.

The same three questions provide the core storyline for this anthology. This compilation is structured to relate particular questions of environmental responsibility to relevant ethical viewpoints, policy design and action.

The readings in Part One provide an overview of and some background to ethical theories. Readings 1 to 3 focus on the 'what' questions regarding issues of environmental responsibility – the need for changing values and perspectives regarding, and a sense of obligation towards, the environment. These readings focus on the less formal 'caring for' dimension of environmental responsibility. Reading 4 provides a bridge from less formal towards more formalized questions of environmental responsibility. Readings 5 to 7 focus on the more formal dimension. Each of these readings offers an environmental perspective on 'doing what's good' (a consequentialist ethic), 'doing what's right' (through a deontological ethic) and 'being virtuous' (through a virtue-based ethic). All the readings in Part One also touch upon 'why' questions. Readings 1 to 4 suggest reasons why some issues are privileged over others, and readings 5 to 7 suggest reasons why some ways of dealing with issues are prioritized over others.

Parts Two, Three and Four provide readings that focus respectively on questions of what, who and why, but at a different level of engagement. Part 2 focuses first on what matters. What do we profess responsibility for? The readings here explore the notion of engaging with 'nature' using the metaphor of conversation. What are the differences between conversation and debate in terms of framework devices used for constructing nature? Moreover, what are the implications of different framing devices for both aspects of responsibility; (a) caring for and (b) ensuring guidance and accountability? Attention here will be on contemporary initiatives to build on broad-based consequentialist traditions underpinning systems thinking, and environmental pragmatism. The shift is from constructing nature as 'resources' for economic development towards a more mutually dynamic process enabling socio-ecological well-being.

Part Three focuses more on the human world in relation to the environment. Who has responsibility for what and how? The readings examine individual and collective responsibility and the relationship between them; also, different kinds of responsibilities operating at different levels and in different contexts. Attention here will be on (deontological) rights- and contracts-based traditions because of their relevance to the environmental actions and interactions of humans. The early chapters in this part consider autonomy and responsibility and how individual responsibilities and actions accumulate, often in ways that do not address environmental problems as much as they might. Ideas for alternative ways forward are included. Ethical questions of obligations and contracts are then addressed from different perspectives – considering future people and shared commons such as public land, air and water. The role of

corporations and how they relate to other stakeholders in terms of social and environmental responsibility is then debated. Governance and policy issues emerge in the later chapters of this part, including why governance can be a struggle in situations of uncertainty and complexity and biophysical constraints. Several readings focus on multi-level, multi-stakeholder social learning as a complementary way of enabling environmental responsibility to be taken, alongside other mechanisms such as legislation.

The readings in Part Four focus on appropriate political, social and institutional space for reflecting and deliberating on which matters of environmental responsibility are given privilege and who has responsibility and how. What space is required to continually ask questions of purpose (why?) in environmental decision-making? How can we frame multiple, often contesting, values and enable development of individual and collective virtues? How might ethics, policy and action be constrained by as well as be providers of space for enacting environmental responsibility? Attention here will be on central virtues of ecological justice in relation to other virtues (hope, love, wisdom, forgiveness, compassion, courage, obligation, etc.). The readings explore initiatives relating to the politics of new types of citizenship where the framing of ecological citizenship might enable appropriate dialogue between public and private, local and global, future and present, acting and thinking, and rights and responsibilities.

Each of the parts to this collection includes an introductory section giving a brief overview of the edited readings. Each chapter is further introduced by an editorial comment providing some relevant contextual information. A short concluding section in each part reviews the main practical implications for practising environmental responsibility in terms of policy design and action. As with any anthology of this kind, the collection of readings provides a partial representation of a rich and developing landscape of literature. While the sections and individual readings can be dipped into at random, it is hoped that the storyline that brings this collection together enables more purposeful sense-making and engagement with questions of environmental responsibility.

**Reference**
Open University (2006) *T863 Environmental Decision Making: A Systems Approach*, Course Book 1, Milton Keynes: Open University.