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## Islam and the Environment

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## Islam and the Environment

### Abstract

In lieu of an abstract, below is the essay's first paragraph.

"The world today is under attack by a slow and steady enemy. The Earth's health is getting more complicated as we speak. Over a course of a few years the average temperature of the earth has increased a couple of degrees. This in turn has created a snowball effect. The increase in temperature is causing glaciers to melt, which in turn has led to the ice to break off, stranding polar bears and penguins in the middle of the ocean. With the glaciers melting the sea level is changing interrupting the aquatic life. The ecological cause and effect is increasing, creating more and more problems. Another problem is the displacement of land. Everyday more and more land is being sold and converted into buildings and houses. What was once field is now a mini mall, a rainforest is now a village. Is there a stopping point? Is there a Muslim view on the treatment of the Earth, and a responsibility to the Earth to keep her healthy and thriving or are the perpetuation of humans and the needs of human more important than nature? To understand this complex issue the concept of nature in today's sense needs to be understood along with the concept of nature in Islamic terms. The concept of water and the idea of preservation of water in the world also will be discussed. Lastly, what is our moral responsibility to the Earth and her inhabitants?"

# Islam and the Environment

The world today is under attack by a slow and steady enemy. The Earth's health is getting more complicated as we speak. Over a course of a few years the average temperature of the earth has increased a couple of degrees. This in turn has created a snowball effect. The increase in temperature is causing glaciers to melt, which in turn has led to the ice to break off, stranding polar bears and penguins in the middle of the ocean. With the glaciers melting the sea level is changing interrupting the aquatic life. The ecological cause and effect is increasing, creating more and more problems.

Another problem is the displacement of land. Everyday more and more land is being sold and converted into buildings and houses. What was once field is now a mini mall, a rainforest is now a village. Is there a stopping point? Is there a Muslim view on the treatment of the Earth, and a responsibility to the Earth to keep her healthy and thriving or are the perpetuation of humans and the needs of human more important than nature? To understand this complex issue the concept of nature in today's sense needs to be understood along with the concept of nature in Islamic terms. The concept of water and the idea of preservation of water in the world also will be discussed. Lastly, what is our moral responsibility to the Earth and her inhabitants?

Nature is a complex subject with many different meanings to different people. The modern view of nature is one that illustrates nature as a "machine" (Özdemir 5).

This view, nature is seen having no value or no real purpose in life. It is seen more as a commodity than an entity. Nature does not gain any value until it is converted into an object or thing that is useful in modern day life. İbrahim Özdemir gives an example in his article, he says “a tree, for example, has no intrinsic value of its own being as such” and “a tree gains its value through human invention, such as when it becomes a chair, a table, or whatever” (5). According to this idea nothing has value until it can be utilized by a human. The thoughts and actions of people may not intentionally try to undermine nature, but all too often as a human race we forget that there are things, creatures, and so forth that are just as important as the human race. For the most part, human actions reflect betterment for the person or society and not the earth.

One of the first revelations the Prophet Muhammad received was the command to “read.” According to the story, Muhammad did not know how to read and he explained this to Gabriel. Gabriel repeated the command to Muhammad another time. And the third time the angel Gabriel said was ‘Read in the name of your Lord and Sustainer who created (Qur’an 96:1)’ (Özdemir 7). Muhammad could not read but he could read the heavens and the earth. He could read what God had done by looking at the world around him. God is the creator of everything and the Qur’an teaches that God is the ruler of everything. When God decides to create something He creates it. God is the commander of the universe. He created the world in six days and has dominion over everything in it. God created man and nature and therefore the two have a relationship with one another. İbrahim Özdemir explains that “thanks to a growing ecological awakening, we can understand clearly that humans are not separate from or above nature, but rather are a part of the web of life” (4). Nature does not rely solely on humans and humans do not rely

solely on nature, they are interconnected. Both entities thrive from each other and will continue to thrive because of one another. Rahman writes, “Nature’s magnitude and utility for man, as well as the stability and regularity of natural phenomena, are stressed. If you sow seeds and nurture the saplings, you can expect to reap the harvest; otherwise not” (66). Man has the ability to utilize nature for his/her daily life, but man must have the respect and utmost care for nature. Ultimately nature is under God’s control, but man has the ability to utilize God’s creation, if it is under God’s will. Treat God’s creation well, you will reap the benefits from God.

The problem resides in the human idea that humans have dominion and ownership of the Earth, the land, and the seas. Land is sold everyday, new building complexes stand where there used to be wild flower fields, rivers run dry after excessive use. The natural resources that are on this earth are used as a person’s property. The problem arises that people forget God, while the earth and universe work in their favor. But when natural disaster strikes, it is God that people turn to, now realizing that God is truly nature, and that nature is ruled under God.

God created nature, and only God is infinite everything else has a definitive life. So nature, the earth, the polar ice caps have a definitive life. This does not mean predestination where God has a set finite life, but rather it will not go on forever because only God goes on forever. According to the Qur’an, “He gave everything its creation, and guided [it]” (20:50). God created a set of rules and guidelines for nature. Nature does not have free will; it is under God’s control. Without this control there would be complete chaos and no order.

Water is the source of life. The human body is comprised of approximately 65% of water. In order for plants to grow or even for animals to survive water is a necessary factor. The Qur'an shares this notion; it explains that water is a necessary tool for life. The Islamic tradition stipulates that it is a Muslim's obligation to conserve water and to take preventive measures to secure existing water sources. Muslims also need to take a preventative measure to keep water sources from getting polluted.

Muhammad believed in not wasting water, and believed that excess usage of water was *makrūh*, not right or "detestable." Muhammad taught to use modest amounts of water when preparing to "enter the Divine Presence of Prayer" (Özdemir 14). There is a *hadīth* that tells of the practice of the preservation of water.

God's Messenger appeared while Sa'ad was performing the ablutions. When he saw that Sa'ad was using a lot of water, he intervened saying: 'What is this? You are wasting water.' Sa'ad replied asking: 'Can there be wastefulness while performing the ablutions?' To which God's Messenger replied: "Yes, even if you perform them on the bank of a rushing river (Özdemir 14).

Muhammad saw Sa'ad's practice as wasteful. The rushing river was made by God. God grants things to people, and He can easily take things away. There are several stories in the Qur'an that deal with greedy and humble people. In surah Al- Kahf there is a story about a wealthy non-believer and a humble believer. The wealthy man was blessed with two vineyards with palm trees and surrounded by corn fields, while the humble man had nothing. The wealthy man did not share and announced that he was more powerful than the humble man because of what he had. The man's vineyards shriveled away due to the arid climate and his poor attitude (al- Ghazālī 312-313). The wealthy man had an excess

of land, he did not share. He was being wasteful. Sa'ad has an excess of water. Just because God has granted you much does not mean that you need to utilize it all in one sitting. Just as God shriveled up the vineyard, he can dry up the river or stream.

Preservation of water is an important ecological issue. No one really owns water or any natural resources. Water is simply there, and from what it seems, there is quite a bit of it. The problem is there are 6.5 billion people vying for this water, along with every animal and plant. Years ago when the United States was being developed, people were developing over swamp land, pushing back the shoreline, and filling in rivers and lakes so land could be built. This led to the extinction of some organisms because their habitats were destroyed and there was no where else to go. Water is being polluted by companies because they use water to cool down machinery and the water is flushed back out into the neighboring river or swamp. Chemicals have been dumped into lakes, rivers and streams, polluting not just the water but also ourselves. Garbage and chemical waste have been buried below ground, and a direct result from that is again contaminated water. All over the United States and the world there are water shortages. Last summer, many communities were put on water alert and were only allowed to use water for certain reasons and during certain times. This was due to low water pressure, there was not the amount of water to keep the water pressure where it should be. There must be a way to regulate and address who can use water and when. Othman Abd-ar-Rahman Llewellyn explains the water law:

Uses of water are prioritized according to the need and the amount of water consumed. High priority is given to the 'right of thirst': access to water for drinking cannot be denied because of a person's life may depend on it (204)

Life is very important. God granted us each life and water is mandatory for life. The next distribution for water is for everyday rituals, washing, cooking, and so forth. These practices are also for protecting life. Cooking gives nourishment, and bathing keeps the total body healthy by keeping disease and dirt away from the body. Water for livestock is next and the final distribution of water goes for irrigation of crops (204). Farmers set up an irrigation system in which the excess of water from one farmer can directly help the next farmer down the river and so forth. The Water law is setup so many people can benefit from the same water. The limitation of water keeps the agriculture in check. There is enough water to yield a healthy crop, and in times of famine there is enough water to keep a viable number of crops. Their theory comes back to the idea of wastefulness. If farmers harvest too many crops, there is a potentiality of too much food and it goes to waste. The system is set to keep the water supply plentiful and useful for as long as possible. There is no need for waste, if the job can be done in an efficient manner.

Water and other natural resources are not private property. Water comes from the earth and from the sky. No one can produce water from thin air. Scientists know the properties of water, two hydrogen molecules attached to an oxygen molecule. But ultimately scientists are not creating water. God had given us the water through creation, rain, and so forth. Water is no one's property. Even if you dig a hole in the ground or make a canal from the earth, the water is not your personal property. Llewellyn explains this by saying,

The water itself remains a public resource, because it flows to-and from-the land.  
Only when water is appropriated and separated from its source, as in a vessel or a

cistern, does it become the possessor's private property, which can be sold, gifted, and otherwise, disposed of. (205)

The definition of appropriation is taking without consent or taking for oneself. The water is essence is being stolen. The person has no right to take the water from the ground and sell it. As stated above the Islamic water law gives the outline for who can use the water and how much. It is this mentality, of taking what one wants that has put the earth in a water crisis. The mentality of today is to make as much money as possible and forget who is being hurt and left stranded on the way. Bottled water immediately comes to mind. Someone "owns" Poland Springs, and purifies the water and sends out millions of cases of water a year all over the United States. Someone is making a profit off a natural resource. I do not believe that bottled water is the same water quenching thirst in the Islamic Water Law. If the water was free and accessible to everyone then it would correlate with the law, but exploiting the land for personal gain does not seem to flow with the Islamic view point on the issue.

In 1985 former United Nations Secretary General Boutros Boutros Ghali was quoted to say, "The next war in the Middle East will be fought over water, not politics." Even back in the 1980's the concern for water was great. The increasing population, agricultural boom, and increased standard of living in the Middle East have led to water and food scares. Saudi Arabia has more than tripled in size since 1980. In 1980 the population was 7,012,642 and now, in 2006, 27,019,731\* people ( Mawil Izzi Dien 114)(\*wikipedia). The increase of population was due to revenue brought in from oil sales. However, even with the Saudi economy, water is a precious commodity and is expensive. Saudi Arabia has tried digging holes in the ground to collect water, but that

water is being contaminated from the sulfur in the ground. Also water is trying to be recycled but it is also contaminated or polluted at times. Wars have affected the Saudi budget and resources to help fix the water crisis are put aside till the economy can deal with the present issues. Saudi Arabia is not alone in this struggle; many other Middle Eastern countries are dealing with the same problem. Joyce Starr, from the Global Water Summit Initiative, said “Nations like Israel and Jordan have ten to fifteen years left before their agriculture and ultimately their food security is threatened” (Dien 214). The water is no longer there or is in a diminished capacity. Turkey has had to resort to building a dam, the Ataturk Dam built in the 1980’s. This collects water from the Euphrates River. It, however, was decreasing the output of the river to surrounding areas to the point of half of what it used to output. This plan of attack is utilizing the water and is protecting the areas from wastefulness. Additionally, it is working on conserving the natural resource (Dien 214-216). The Middle East is in dire need for help with the water crisis. The answer is no where to be found unfortunately. This is an example of trial and error and it might be too late if a solution cannot be found.

The world is changing, new problems are arising everyday. Water is the essence of life, everything relies on water and there is not enough of it. In the United States there seems to be the notion that water is so cheap. People water their lawns everyday in the summer, or wash their cars non-stop. However, this over use of water is creating a deficit that will catch up to us. The Middle East should be an example to the United States; they are presently battling a water crisis. There is not enough to go around. Following the Islamic water laws sounds good in theory, but would people actually follow it? Does the agriculture take a back seat to the person? It may in the Middle East, I do not know.

The Qur'an teaches that God has ultimate control over the universe because the universe does not have free will. It is taught that God made the burning bush cool to Moses' touch. Is God trying to teach a lesson through the decrease in usable water? The over consumption of water by people is gluttony and to top it off as a people we do not thank God for such a gift. As a society we are greedy and take things for advantage. I know I have taken water for advantage. I take a shower everyday at school; that is over consumption of water. I am wasting water. I remember being told as a child to take a five minute shower, not only to keep the water bill down but also to conserve water. In seventh grade, my classmate did a science project looking at the amount of water used during a shower versus a bath. On average, the student used half a tub less water when she took a shower versus a bath. As a society we constantly crave more and then suddenly it is all gone. You crave to wash your car every day. Is it necessary or even logical no? But then again, we as humans fail to remember that there are other people in this world other than ourselves. It is our selfish nature that digs us into this environmental hole.

Collectively as a people we need to come together and help fix the ecological problem we face. God is the Creator of the universe, and when He makes something He made it for a purpose. Though the earth's life is finite it does not mean we should try to use up all the resources. God knows when heaven and hell will inhabit the earth, we do not. Until then we need to treat the earth as an equal. That is where we fail. It is sometimes hard to realize and accept that in a way humans and nature are equals. Humans have some dominion on the earth, but also vice versa. Without water and land, where would we be? God provides and God takes away and we need to remember that

God gave us this earth, this water, this sea and sky. It was a gift and we need to treat it as a gift. Wastefulness is no good, and we need to learn to live in our means, extravagance has no purpose when it comes to do with the earth and nature. Islam has a good model, but a model is only a model until you put it into action. In order to preserve and conserve water we need to learn not to be wasteful. We need to know that pollution and excessiveness only wastes water. Water affects so many pieces of our lives. When we build mini malls and another taco bell over in the field ten minutes down the road, it is interrupting a habitat, animals and the wildlife are disrupted. When you build over a natural small river, you are wiping out a source of water. When you dump chemicals and waste into the nearby lake you are polluting not just that small lake, but also the ground which affects the water that comes into our homes. It is our duty to help save the planet and in turn we will be saving ourselves.

**Erin Knoerl**

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