

Lily D'Ambrosio

Chad Steacy

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### Sustainability

In our modern society, there is an increasing trend to lead a “sustainable lifestyle.” A rising number of people are exchanging their plastic water bottles for reusable containers, switching their grocery bags from plastic to cloth, refusing to utilize a straw at a restaurant, etc. It is undeniable that our individual ecological footprint holds an impact on the future of our environment. However, something that is less “trendy,” but arguably more important, are the factors that influence our society and their relationship with the environment. If we want to discontinue the trend of our environmental degradation, we must evaluate elements such as environmental ethics, population growth, market environmentalism, and social construction.

As developed humans, our strongest feature has proved to be both a blessing and a curse: our minds. Along with our highly evolved minds comes our emotions, which have great uniting and dividing factors. Our feelings lead to ethical contemplation, namely contemplation about our effect on the environment. Since our human brains are the most highly evolved among other species on this planet, a pervading mentality has transpired into the anthropocentric belief that as humans, we are superior to other species due to our capability of deductive reasoning. Our capability of deductive reasoning and contemplation has convinced humans that we know what

is the best for our planet. This perspective has pervaded for centuries, beginning with the dominion thesis, the biblical idea that humans should control nature and utilize it to our desire. However, this human-centric mentality has slowly but surely lead to immense environmental destruction. For example, factory farms justify the slaughtering and maltreatment of many animals in the justification that we must sustain our human population. Practices such as factory farms also morphs into the concept of utilitarianism, which is the idea that nature only possesses value if it benefits the human race. However, our world is beginning to witness a change in mindset from a dominance of anthropocentrism into a rising prevalence of biocentrism and ecocentrism, which calls for a need to protect all biotic and abiotic factors. This perspective began to transpire through the works and ideas Aldo Leopold with his proposal of the land ethic. Leopold argues that in the past, ethics have only two factors: human-to-human relations and human-to-society relations. Leopold urges for a moral extension to “the land and to the animals and plants which grow upon it.” (Robbins, Hintz, and Moore 74). Leopold argues that all beings with the capability to feel should be liberated, since human minorities relation to race, class, and gender have been liberated.

Population growth is another essential factor in the relationship between human population and the environment. The world population is growing at approximately eighty-two million people per year ([www.worldometers.com](http://www.worldometers.com)). The English scholar Thomas Malthus proposed that following the technical advancements of the eighteenth-century Industrial Revolution, the human population was on track for exponential growth. In his perspective, there were two factors that checked the population: positive factors such as carrying capacity and disease, and negative factors such as childrearing and delayed marriage. Malthus proposed that if

people failed to adopt moral choices, the world would be defined by famine, war, and ultimate misery. However, history has now demonstrated that Malthus' theory was erroneous. Malthus wrote his essay during the period of the French Revolution, in which the English upper-class controlled his nation. Later, Karl Marx rebutted Malthus' argument, stating that destitution and chaos arose from the capitalistic mannerisms of our society. Marx believed that Malthus deemed the prosperity of the lower class as hopeless, while Marx argued that the capitalist nature of society applied pressure on population growth and was dependent on politics and society, not individual ethical choices. Marx saw that with capitalism, unemployment will always be present at some degree. This is because capitalism promotes the increase of technologies which will render some jobs obsolete, leading to unemployment and the poor conditions that Malthus described was a result of overpopulation. While both of these theories have faults, there is some truth to it. An increasing population puts a higher demand on resources and scarcity, which often contributes to individuals needing to find new ways to create products, often at the hand of environmental degradation.

Our planet's population growth is best characterized by the Demographic Transition Model. In the first high stationary stage, death rates and birth rates are high with a relatively unchanging population. Education and birth control are inaccessible, followed by a lack of proper hygiene and large families. There are currently no countries in this first stage of the Demographic Transition Model, which is a great feat for the human race. In the second early expanding phase, such as in Afghanistan and Yemen ([www.populationeducation.org](http://www.populationeducation.org)), death rates begin to decline while birth rates remain rather unchanged. In this stage, sanitation and healthcare begin to improve. During the third late expanding phase, both birth and death rates

begin to decline. An example of a country in this stage is India ([www.populationeducation.org](http://www.populationeducation.org)), where there is more access to birth control education. In the fourth low stationary stage, such as in China ([www.populationeducation.org](http://www.populationeducation.org)), the death rate supersedes the birth rate, while the population remains relatively stable. In the fifth contracting stage, such as in Germany, there are less births and more deaths and an aging population. It is important to note that throughout this entire, slow progression, the total population is slowly increasing. For example, the population of Afghanistan is 35.53 million, while the population in Germany is 82.79 million. As our world population grows, the scarcity of our resources increases.

Environmental benefit or degradation is heavily dependent on the economic market. We live in a world dominated by capitalism, which means individuals are driven by economic profit. Factories supply products derived from renewable and nonrenewable resources that the consumer demands. For example, oil is a nonrenewable yet essential resource that we utilize for heating, electricity, gas, etc. When the demand of this oil increases, the available oil reserves soon become scarce. This means that individuals need to counteract the scarcity with new methods of producing this oil, such as fracking, deep oil drilling, etc. These practices lead to economic gain at the hands of environmental degradation. Similarly, the capitalist nature of our world incentivizes factory production, which contributes heavily to air pollution: “100 companies are responsible for 70% of greenhouse emissions since 1988” (Riley). Our capitalist society essentially prioritizes economic profit over anything else, which is why, for example, factories will willingly pollute the environment if it will lead to an augmented financial gain. This does not mean that factories have malicious intentions and desire to contaminate the air—they are simply attempting to increase the success of their businesses.

The environment has transformed into a place of various interpretations and purposes based on human social construction. In prehistoric times, there was no such concept of “nature” as we interpret it today- it was simply the land. But now, nature is a concept developed by humans, and the discourse of nature is viewed differently by each individual; some see the environment as a source of aesthetics while others see it as a source to be utilized. The way that the concept of nature has shifted is directly related to differing races and the dominance of whites in our society. Beginning with the period of colonization, society has revolved around whiteness. For example, former president Barack Obama was mixed race: half black, and half white. However, he is more strongly identified with his black heritage, ruled by the laws of exclusivity. These socially constructed ideas of racial superiority began when the Europeans embarked on a journey to America and immediately separated themselves from the natives who inhabited the land, deeming them as savages. The Europeans adopted the idea of Manifest Destiny as they moved westward, continuing the pattern of mistreating and removing natives with the justification that the Europeans were more capable of utilizing the land. This logic later proved to be fallacious, as the Industrial Revolution, vastly headed by whites, contributed to significant environmental pollution and degradation. Many years later, the practice of preservation and ecology began to take form. However, this movement was dominated by whites, resembling the frontier ideology that white individuals are more knowledgeable than black individuals about sustainable cultivation of the land and environmental practices. Although there has been significant process in alleviate racial institutions since the era of American colonization, there is still a pervading dominance of whites over environmental policy.

The dilemma facing environmental factors has largely to do with human feelings. Our individual moral compasses affect our environmental practices, such as through environmental ethics, social construction, market environmentalism, and population. Everything in our society is driven by our emotions and with that, choices. We have to decide if it is right to pollute the environment in the name of economic profit to provide for our families. We have to decide if our increasing population will lead to the harm of our society. We have to decide if it right to continue to allow whites to dominate environmental decisions and practices. We have a choice- it is up to us.