

Environmental Degradation and Climate Change in Pakistan: An Islamic Eco Theological Perspective

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Received on: 10-02-2022

Accepted on: 12-03-2022

Abstract

Environmental degradation and climate change have emerged as existential threats to Pakistan, manifesting through extreme weather events, declining water availability, deforestation, air pollution, and agricultural instability. These ecological challenges jeopardize not only public health and food security but also the socio-economic foundations of vulnerable communities. While scientific analyses and policy frameworks have sought to address the symptoms of ecological collapse, they often overlook deeper moral and spiritual dimensions. This study argues that environmental degradation is not only a technical or economic failure but also a profound ethical and theological crisis. This article explores the Islamic eco-theological paradigm as an essential and underutilized lens for confronting Pakistan's environmental crisis. Drawing upon Qur'anic cosmology, which envisions the universe as a sign (*āyah*) of divine harmony and balance (*mīzān*), the study underscores humanity's divinely mandated role as stewards (*khalīfah*) of the Earth. The environmental ethics of the Prophet Muhammad ﷺ—ranging from water conservation to animal welfare—are examined as models of sustainable living embedded in compassion, moderation, and accountability. Furthermore, the paper investigates how Islamic legal principles (*fiqh al-bi'ah*) and ethical constructs such as ecological justice (*ʿadl al-bi'ah*) can inform policy, reorient educational curricula, and mobilize religious institutions and civil society toward sustainable reform. It calls for a paradigm shift where Islamic teachings are no longer sidelined but actively integrated into environmental governance, communal activism, and individual behavior. Only by restoring the spiritual relationship between humans and the environment can a genuinely transformative response to ecological crisis be realized in Pakistan.

Keywords: Islamic Environmental Ethics, Climate Change in Pakistan, Khilāfah, Ecological Justice (*ʿAdl al-Bi'ah*), Qur'anic Cosmology

Introduction

Pakistan is among the most climate-vulnerable nations in the world, consistently ranking high on global climate risk indices. The country is experiencing an intensification of environmental disasters—ranging from catastrophic floods, prolonged droughts, and glacial melt to shifting monsoon patterns and extreme heat waves. These climate-induced events are compounded by anthropogenic factors such as rapid urbanization, deforestation, unchecked industrial emissions, water mismanagement, and ecologically harmful agricultural practices. The 2022 floods, for instance, served as a grim inflection point: displacing over 33 million

people, devastating critical infrastructure, and submerging vast agricultural lands, they exposed the inadequacy of existing environmental governance and the fragility of socio-economic systems under ecological stress.

Despite the gravity of the crisis, national responses remain predominantly technocratic, reactive, and policy-cantered—focused on infrastructure resilience, mitigation strategies, and economic adaptation. While these approaches are necessary, they are insufficient. They often neglect the deeper ethical, spiritual, and behavioural dimensions of ecological degradation. The prevailing disconnection between humans and the natural world—a worldview increasingly driven by consumerism and resource exploitation—reflects not only a material but a moral crisis. Addressing this crisis requires more than scientific solutions; it necessitates a reconfiguration of human values and our relationship with the Earth.

This study aims to explore the Islamic eco-theological response to environmental degradation, with a particular focus on the Pakistani context. It posits that Islamic teachings—rooted in the Qur'an, Prophetic tradition, and classical jurisprudence—offer a spiritually anchored and ethically robust paradigm for environmental responsibility. By foregrounding concepts such as *khilāfah* (stewardship), *mīzān* (cosmic balance), *ʿadl* (justice), and *amānah* (trust), this article constructs a moral and theological framework that not only affirms the sanctity of nature but also challenges exploitative human behaviour.

The study investigates how these principles can be operationalized in environmental discourse, education, and policy, thus offering an alternative to purely secular or technocratic models of sustainability. It calls for an integration of Islamic ethics into public consciousness, institutional structures, and civil society efforts, ultimately fostering a holistic transformation toward ecological justice and sustainability in Pakistan.

Islamic Cosmology and the Natural World

Islamic cosmology offers a spiritually rich and morally coherent framework for understanding the natural world—not as inert matter or exploitable resource, but as a living tapestry of divine signs (*āyāt*), harmony, and sacred trust.¹

At the heart of this worldview lies the doctrine of *tawḥīd* (Divine Unity), which affirms not only the Oneness of God but also the interdependence and spiritual coherence of all creation. The Qur'anic vision challenges anthropocentric and utilitarian models of nature, calling instead for a theocentric ethics rooted in reverence, humility, and accountability.

Tawḥīd and the Unity of Creation

The principle of *tawḥīd* (Oneness of God) constitutes the metaphysical foundation of Islamic thought. It affirms that all aspects of creation emanate from the same divine source and are bound together in an intricate web of interdependence.²

The Qur'an consistently presents nature as a repository of *āyāt* (divine signs), pointing toward God's wisdom, mercy, and creative power:

*"Indeed, in the creation of the heavens and the earth and the alternation of the night and day are signs for those who reflect."*³

This verse encapsulates the Islamic imperative of contemplation (*tafakkur*) on the natural world. The disruption of ecological balance—whether through pollution, deforestation, or climate exploitation—is, in this theological view, not merely a material offense but a

disruption of divine order. To desecrate nature is to deface the *āyāt* of God and violate the ontological unity established through *tawhīd*.

Nature as Amānah (Trust)

Human beings, according to the Qur'an, are not owners of the earth but vicegerents (*khalā'if*, singular *khalīfah*) entrusted with its care and preservation:

"Indeed, I am placing upon the earth a vicegerent (khalīfah)."4

This vicegerency is not a license for domination but a covenantal responsibility grounded in trust (*amānah*). Creation itself is meticulously fashioned with divine precision:

"He created everything and measured it with exactness."5

"Do not commit corruption on the earth after it has been set in order."6

These verses articulate an ethical vision wherein the Earth is a balanced system (*mīzān*) that must not be disturbed by human greed, negligence, or excess. Environmental degradation, in this sense, is a betrayal of *amānah* and a transgression against the divine mandate of stewardship. The Qur'anic language evokes not only accountability but also intimacy with the natural world—a relationship characterized by awe, responsibility, and restraint.

Through this cosmological and ethical lens, Islamic thought reframes environmental responsibility as both a spiritual imperative and a moral duty—laying the groundwork for an eco-theological response to the contemporary environmental crisis.

Prophetic Environmental Ethics

While the Qur'an lays the theological and cosmological foundations for environmental consciousness, the Sunnah of the Prophet Muhammad ﷺ provides a living embodiment of ecological ethics in action.⁷

His teachings and practices reflect a deep awareness of nature's sanctity and an unwavering commitment to moderation, sustainability, and compassion toward all of creation. The Prophetic model serves as a timeless paradigm for environmental justice, particularly relevant in addressing contemporary ecological crises.

The Sunnah of Sustainability

The Prophet Muhammad ﷺ exemplified a lifestyle rooted in simplicity, conservation, and ecological mindfulness.⁸

His environmental ethics were not abstract ideals but actionable principles woven into everyday life. Central to this practice was the prohibition of waste and excess, even in situations of abundance:

"Do not waste water, even if you perform ablution at a flowing river."9

This emphasis on resource restraint underlines the Islamic principle of *i'tidāl* (moderation), discouraging overconsumption and ecological recklessness. The Prophet ﷺ also extended this ethic to the natural landscape:

- **Prohibition of unnecessary deforestation:** During military expeditions, he forbade the unjust cutting of trees, recognizing their role in environmental stability and ecological balance.
- **Establishment of ḥimā (protected reserves):** He designated sanctuaries for flora and fauna, anticipating the modern concept of conservation zones.
- **Tree-planting as perpetual charity (ṣadaqah jāriyah):** He encouraged planting

trees as acts of lasting benefit:

*"If a Muslim plants a tree or sows a field and a human, bird, or animal eats from it, it is a charity for him."*¹⁰

These practices affirm a Prophetic vision of environmental stewardship grounded in utility, beauty, and divine accountability.

Justice and Mercy Toward All Beings

The Prophet's ﷺ ethics extended beyond human beings to encompass all living creatures.¹¹

His teachings emphasized the intrinsic worth and moral consider ability of non-human life. He strictly prohibited cruelty to animals, denouncing actions such as overburdening livestock, mutilating animals, and causing needless suffering.

He narrated parables to instill compassion, such as the story of the woman punished for imprisoning a cat until it died, and conversely, the prostitute forgiven for giving water to a thirsty dog. These narratives underscore the theological principle that ethical responsibility in Islam is not anthropocentric, but cosmocentric—embedded in the recognition of *rahmah* (mercy) as a universal imperative:

*"The All-Merciful is merciful to those who show mercy. Show mercy to those on the earth, and the One in the heavens will show mercy to you."*¹²

This holistic ethic reframes ecological responsibility as a matter of justice (*'adl*) and mercy (*rahmah*) toward all beings. It calls for a moral awakening that transcends species boundaries and repositions the human being not as master, but as caretaker within the larger community of creation (*ummam*).

Environmental Degradation in Pakistan: An Overview

Environmental degradation in Pakistan is not a distant or theoretical concern—it is a lived and accelerating crisis, with visible impacts on public health, food security, and socio-economic resilience.¹³

As the ecological footprint expands and natural systems collapse, the country finds itself at the intersection of environmental injustice and developmental instability. This section highlights key indicators of Pakistan's environmental decline and explores its structural and cultural root causes, many of which are exacerbated by the absence of moral and spiritual engagement with ecological ethics.

Key Indicators

The following metrics illustrate the scale and urgency of environmental degradation in Pakistan:

1. **Deforestation:** Forest cover has declined to less than 5%, far below the FAO-recommended threshold of 25% necessary for ecological stability. This deforestation contributes to soil erosion, loss of biodiversity, and diminished carbon absorption capacity.
2. **Air Pollution:** Major urban centers such as Lahore, Karachi, and Peshawar regularly rank among the most polluted cities globally. Airborne particulate matter (PM2.5) far exceeds WHO safe levels, resulting in widespread respiratory illness and reduced life expectancy.
3. **Water Scarcity:** Pakistan is approaching absolute water scarcity, with per capita water availability projected to fall below 500 cubic meters by 2025. Poor water management, agricultural inefficiency, and glacial melt exacerbate this crisis.
4. **Waste Mismanagement:** An estimated 3 million tons of plastic waste are generated

annually, with inadequate infrastructure for recycling or safe disposal. Urban waterways and rural ecosystems are increasingly choked by non-biodegradable pollutants.

5. **Climate Vulnerability:** Pakistan faces a dual threat **from** glacial melt in the north **and** rising sea levels in the south. The 2022 monsoon floods, intensified by climate change, displaced over 33 million people, signaling the fragility of both natural and human systems. These indicators collectively point to a looming environmental catastrophe that demands more than policy responses—it requires a transformation of the underlying ethical, economic, and spiritual paradigms that shape human interaction with nature.

Root Causes

While environmental degradation in Pakistan has physical manifestations, its origins are deeply embedded in social, economic, and cultural structures.¹⁴

The following factors contribute significantly to the nation's ecological decline:

Unregulated Urban Development:

Rapid urban expansion without environmental oversight has led to deforestation, loss of green spaces, air pollution, and the encroachment of natural habitats.¹⁵

Industrial Negligence and Weak Legal Enforcement:

Industries discharge toxic waste into rivers, skies, and soil with impunity. Environmental regulations exist but suffer from under-enforcement, corruption, and lack of political will.¹⁶

Lack of Environmental Education:

Climate literacy remains low at all levels of society. Environmental science is rarely integrated into school or university curricula, and public awareness campaigns remain minimal and ineffective.¹⁷

Disconnection from Religious Environmental Ethics:

The ethical teachings of Islam regarding environmental responsibility are largely absent from public discourse and educational institutions. The ecological wisdom of *tawhīd*, *amānah*, and *mīzān* has been marginalized in favor of consumerist development models.¹⁸

Overconsumption and Consumerism:

Driven by a globalized culture of materialism, unsustainable consumption patterns have taken root, emphasizing convenience over conservation and economic growth over ecological balance.¹⁹

This analysis makes it clear that the environmental crisis in Pakistan is not merely a scientific or political failure—it is also a moral and spiritual failure, stemming from a distorted understanding of humanity's role in creation. A rediscovery of Islamic environmental ethics is thus not only timely but essential.

Theological Reframing: From Ownership to Stewardship

The contemporary ecological crisis is deeply rooted in a worldview that elevates human utility above ecological integrity—a secular anthropocentrism that views the natural world as inert, value-neutral, and subordinated to human consumption.²⁰

In contrast, Islamic eco-theology offers a theocentric and morally charged reframing of humanity's relationship with the environment. Rather than granting absolute dominion, the Qur'anic worldview emphasizes stewardship (*khilāfah*), responsibility, and accountability. This theological recalibration shifts the paradigm from entitlement to entrustment, from

exploitation to reverent care.

Rejecting Anthropocentrism

Modern environmental thought, particularly within capitalist and industrial paradigms, is shaped by anthropocentrism—the belief that human beings are the central and most significant entities in the universe.²¹

This perspective instrumentalists nature, stripping it of intrinsic value and reducing it to a resource for human ends. Islamic theology decisively challenges this framework.

The Qur'an affirms that all elements of creation possess purpose, dignity, and spiritual vitality:

*"Do you not see that to Allah prostrate all those in the heavens and the earth—the sun, the moon, the stars, the mountains, the trees, the animals, and many among humanity?"*²²

*"All that is in the heavens and the earth glorifies Allah..."*²³

These verses de-center the human ego and establish a cosmic hierarchy in which all creatures are engaged in *tasbīh* (glorification) of the Creator. Humans, while honored with reason and agency, are not superior owners but responsible participants in a broader ecological community. The natural world is not mute or passive—it is a sacred entity, alive with remembrance of God.

Khilāfah as Accountability

The Qur'anic concept of *khilāfah* (vicegerency) is often misunderstood as a license for domination. In reality, it denotes a weighty responsibility bestowed upon human beings to care for and ethically manage creation in accordance with divine guidance.²⁴

The role of the *khalīfah* is not to rule nature but to preserve its balance (*mīzān*), recognizing its sanctity and purpose within the divine plan.

This stewardship is not without consequence. The Qur'an warns that human beings will be held accountable for how they exercise their entrusted roles:

*"Then you will surely be asked that Day about every favor (ni'mah)."*²⁵

Water, soil, air, forests, and biodiversity are not possessions to be consumed at will—they are *ni'am* (blessings), each carrying with it a corresponding moral obligation. Pollution, overconsumption, and ecological destruction thus become not just environmental offenses but spiritual breaches of *amānah* (trust). The Day of Judgment, in this paradigm, is not only about worship and belief but also about how humans discharged their role as caretakers of the Earth.

Islamic theology therefore calls for a return to humility before creation and accountability before the Creator. Reframing environmental responsibility through this theological lens offers a compelling moral alternative to exploitative models of development and positions ecological care as an act of worship and faithfulness.

Maqāṣid al-Sharī'ah and Environmental Protection

The Islamic legal tradition (*fiqh*) is guided by overarching objectives known as *Maqāṣid al-Sharī'ah*—the higher aims of Islamic law. These include the preservation of:

1. **Life** (*ḥifẓ al-nafs*)
2. **Intellect and health** (*ḥifẓ al-'aql*)
3. **Progeny** (*ḥifẓ al-nasl*)
4. **Wealth and resources** (*ḥifẓ al-māl*)

5. **Faith** (*hifẓ al-dīn*)

Environmental degradation directly undermines these objectives. Air and water pollution endanger human life and health, while deforestation, soil erosion, and water scarcity compromise the sustainability of future generations and the viability of resources. Food insecurity, climate-induced displacement, and disease outbreaks reflect the systemic failure to uphold the *maqāṣid* in environmental governance.

Islamic jurisprudence mandates that any action which disrupts these objectives must be prevented. Hence, environmental preservation becomes not just an ethical virtue but a legal-moral obligation (*farḍ kifāyah*)—a communal duty that, if neglected, implicates society at large in collective sin. Integrating *maqāṣid*-based reasoning into environmental law and policy offers a robust theological framework for sustainable development rooted in divine intention.

Eco-Justice and Intergenerational Responsibility

The Qur'an consistently emphasizes responsibility toward future generations (*dhurriyyah*) and warns against actions that cause harm across time:

*"And that man shall have nothing but what he strives for."*²⁶

This verse, while highlighting personal accountability, also implies a cumulative ethic: today's actions shape tomorrow's realities. Climate change, caused by decades of unchecked carbon emissions, ecological exploitation, and policy inertia, exemplifies transgenerational injustice. The unborn inherit a destabilized climate they did not create.

Islamic ethics promote the principles of *jalb al-maṣāliḥ* (securing benefit) and *dar' al-mafāṣid* (warding off harm), both of which necessitate proactive and preventative action. This anticipatory ethic aligns with sustainability science and reinforces a Qur'anic imperative to preserve *mīzān* (balance) for posterity. Failing to address environmental degradation is not only negligence—it is a breach of *'adālah* (justice) toward future ummahs.

Practical Recommendations: Toward a Green Islamic Ethos in Pakistan

1. Friday sermons (*khutbahs*) should address environmental responsibility, emphasizing waste reduction, climate ethics, and the Prophetic model of ecological mindfulness.
2. Recognized religious bodies and *'ulamā* should issue fatwas against activities that harm the environment (e.g., illegal logging, pollution, industrial dumping).
3. Promote *Ḥadīth*-based campaigns linking environmental acts to *ṣadaqah jāriyah* (ongoing charity).

Integration in Education

1. Introduce eco-Islamic ethics into madāris, public schools, and universities, linking theology with environmental science.
2. Develop youth-led green mosque initiatives: solar-powered mosques, zero-waste programs, rainwater harvesting, and community gardens.
3. Encourage inter-madrasa competitions on environmental awareness and sustainability.

State Policy and Islamic Legislation

1. Revise national environmental policies to incorporate Shari'ah-based accountability, particularly the principles of *amānah*, *ʿadl*, and *mīzān*.
2. Institutionalize corporate social responsibility (CSR) through Islamic ethical benchmarks (e.g., *ḥalāl* supply chains, energy audits).
3. Recognize rivers, forests, and wetlands as *ḥimā* (protected zones), drawing on Islamic historical precedent.

Civil Society Mobilization

1. Promote eco-Sufism that re-establishes spiritual ties with nature through dhikr, contemplation, and stewardship.
2. Launch nationwide campaigns such as "Green Jihād" or "Amānah for the Earth" to reframe environmental activism in Islamic terms.
3. Foster public-private partnerships in clean energy, sustainable agriculture, eco-tourism, and green urban planning.

Conclusion

Environmental degradation in Pakistan represents far more than an ecological or developmental emergency—it signifies a spiritual rupture, a profound failure to honour the divine trust of *khilāfah* and uphold the ethical obligations embedded in Islam's ecological vision. At its core, Islam calls for a reverent, restrained, and responsible relationship with the Earth—a worldview that has been eclipsed by consumerism, exploitation, and theological neglect.

Reviving Islamic eco-theology provides not only a spiritual solution but a culturally embedded and theologically sound framework for ecological regeneration. Through the integration of Islamic principles in public policy, religious education, and civil activism, Pakistan can begin to address its environmental crisis in a way that is both ethically authentic and contextually relevant. To heal the land, we must heal our relationship—with the Creator, with **creation**, and with **ourselves**. Only then can the divine balance (*mīzān*) be restored and the Earth preserved as a sanctuary of sustenance and blessing for all generations to come.

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