

ISLAM AND ENVIRONMENTAL PROTECTION: THE AWARENESS OF THE MALAYSIAN MUSLIM COMMUNITY

Thiri Shwesin Aung

Abstract:

Human-induced environmental problems are cascading and increasingly affecting the ecosystem, human health and well-being. Human activities, awareness and habits are of paramount importance in remedying the current state of environment. The shaping of attitude, values, perception, commitment and practice of human beings necessary to preserve and protect the environment is closely associated with their belief, worldview, tradition and culture. Hence, religion plays an influential role in developing new patterns of behavior toward the environment. In the context of Malaysia, it is evident that the condition of the environment in Malaysia is worsening as the country continues to industrialize dramatically. As a country with over 60% Muslims, it is necessary to look at environmental preservation from an Islamic perspective. Therefore, this study aims to determine how knowledge and understanding of Islamic teachings of the environment is important. The subjects were 400 Muslim individuals across Malaysia who were randomly selected from different organizations, universities and companies. A web-based survey was conducted using an online collection method. The data analysis illustrated that Islamic environmental awareness has strong association or significant influence with environmental awareness and environmental protection. It specifies that the more Muslim communities in Malaysia are aware about Islamic environmentalism, the more they are aware of their own environment, and consequently, the more they are willing to protect it. Furthermore, the findings also indicate that environmental awareness is positively related to environmental protection. It

stipulates that the greater the level of environmental awareness, they greater the level of environmental protection.

1. Introduction

The Islamic perspective of the environment builds upon the belief that Allah is the sole Creator and Sustainer of the universe. The whole universe is created with perfect wisdom (*hikmah*) and perfect environmental balance in the natural ecosystem of Allah. Thus, the environment and natural ecosystem is considered as a fundamental part of faith in Islam.¹ It is observed in the following Quranic verses;

“It is He Who created all things, and ordered them in due Proportions”.²

“Verily in the heavens and the earth, are Signs for those who believe. And in the creation of yourselves and the fact that animals are scattered (throughout the earth) are Signs for those of assured Faith. And the alteration of Night and Day, and the fact that God sends down Sustenance from the sky, and revives therewith the earth after its death, and in the change of the winds,-are Signs for those that are wise.”³

Every creation in the universe is a sign of God, and human beings have due responsibility to protect and sustain them.⁴ It is the duty of Muslims as Allah’s stewards and trustees to respect nature and preserve it with the utmost care. Piety in Islam is associated with the appreciation of the natural surrounding environment which is an ultimate creation of Almighty Allah. Natural resources must be distributed fairly and justly, and humans must not disturb the prevailing value system of nature.⁵ Environmental consciousness,

¹ Ibrahim Ozdemir, *An Islamic Approach to the Environment*, (Boston: Beacon Press, 1992).

² *The Qur’an, al-Furqan* 25:2.

³ *The Qur’an, al-Jathiya* 45:3-5.

⁴ Abdu Rahman Mahdi, *The Creation of an Environment Conscience: The Nature of Nature*, (Great Britain: Thames and Hudson, 2006).

⁵ *Ibid.*, 21.

simplicity and mutual loving are vital aspects for the maintenance of environmental balance and are stemmed from three fundamental principles of Islam: *tawhīd* (unity), *khalīfah* (Vicegerency) and *al-akhirah* (Hereafter). The holistic Islamic environmental worldview is also based on five aims of the *sharāh* which are protecting religion, life, mind, offspring and prosperity. Moreover, a paramount guidance of Islam, *al-tawhīd* (*unity of God*) underlines and demands a moral and behavioral attitude of the human being toward God and God's creations.⁶ Thus, human beings are absolutely accountable for sustaining and protecting the environment and natural surroundings.

Although Islam as a religion is rooted with respect and appreciation for the natural environment and ecosystem, Muslim nations are witnessing enormous degradation of the natural ecosystem and environmental predicaments.⁷ The severity of catastrophes occurring in the Muslim world is noticeably high. Environmental degradation and atmospheric pollution are very visible and increasing dramatically in Muslim nations as a consequence of modernization and science and technology development.⁸ A Muslim country with 1.1% of the world Muslim population, Malaysia is also battling against a number of environmental problems like deforestation, inland and marine water pollution, land and coastal erosion, excessive fishing and coral reef eradication in conjunction with air pollution, water pollution and waste disposal issues.⁹ As reported by Global Forest Map, the forests in Malaysia have diminished almost 14.4% of its forest cover in the year 2000 and the country has the world's highest deforestation rate followed by a 50% lower rate in Paraguay. In 2013, Malaysia

⁶ Richard Foltz, Frederick Mathewson Denny and Azizan Haji Baharuddin, "The Basic for a Discipline of Islamic Environmental Law" in *Islam and Ecology: A Bestow Trust*, edited by Othman Abd-Ar-Rahman Liewelly, (New York: Center for the Study of World Religions, Harvard Divinity School, 2003), 421.

⁷ M. Izzi Dien, *The Environmental Dimension of Islam*, (England: The Lutterworth Press, 2000).

⁸ Akhtaruddin Ahmad, *Islam and the Environmental Crisis*, (London: Ta-Ha Publishers Ltd, 1997).

⁹ Osman Bakar, *Environmental Wisdom for Planet Earth*, (Malaysia: Center for Civilizational Dialogue, University of Malaya, 2007).

encountered a severe water shortage.¹⁰

In fact, the environmental problem is one of the most serious problems today that threatens not only Muslims, but the whole world. Future generations and their right to live in a healthy and balanced environment created by God is threatened. Unquestionably, the role of Muslims and Muslim countries is significantly important in tackling the environmental problems jeopardizing the universe. The clear implications of Islamic teachings concerned with environmental protection and the caring of Mother Nature must not be neglected and hidden behind westernization and economic advancements.¹¹ Given the fact that 60.4% of the country's population practice Islam, Muslims and the Islamic aspect of environmental protection undoubtedly play a tremendous role in preserving the country's ecosystem. Despite its importance, the concept of Islamic environmentalism is seldom mentioned in recent literatures related to environmental problems in Malaysia.¹²

Preserving the healthy environment is significantly affected and influenced by awareness, concern and activities of the general public.¹³ The majority of the root causes of environmental issues are related to human activities, consumption and production patterns and their willingness and perception to take care of Mother Nature.¹⁴ On the other hand, religious belief certainly plays a crucial position in society's attitude, behavior and overall way of life. It influences how human, individually and collectively, see the role of responsibility to protect the natural surroundings.

Therefore, in the case of Malaysia as an Islamic country, Islam has a significant part in remedying the current state of environmental degradations. Understanding the level of public awareness regarding the environment and the Islamic aspect of environment, as well as

¹⁰ Roger LeB. Hooke1 and José F.Martín-Duque, *Land Transformation by Humans: A Review*, (New York: The Geological Society of America, 2012).

¹¹ Seyyed Hossein Nasr, *Man and Nature: The Spiritual Crisis in Modern Man*, (Chicago: ABC International Group, Inc., 1997).

¹² Osman Bakar, 23.

¹³ Thomas Heyd, *Encountering Nature: Toward an Environmental Culture*, (Canada: University of Victoria, 2007).

¹⁴ Pojman, Louis P, *Environmental Ethics: Readings in Theory and Applications*. (USA: Wadsworth, Thomson Learning).

their environmental practice, are important in determining their contributions in safeguarding the nation's ecosystem. Although there are a number of papers on environmental issues in Malaysia, there is no research focus on assessing public concern for the environment from an Islamic perspective. Accordingly, the objective of this paper is to determine the Malaysian Muslim Communities' environmental awareness and practice in light of Islamic environmental principles.

2. Overview

The environmental issue at present is extensively devastating, and it demands urgent attention and remediation.¹⁵ The impact of humans on the natural ecosystem is accelerating as a consequences of industrialization and modernization. Wangari Mathai forcefully argues that environmental degradation have resulted in global warming, depletion of the stratospheric ozone layer, of sea and river pollution, noise and light pollution, acid rain and desertification.¹⁶ the United Nations acknowledged world environmental problems in the conference held in Rio de Janeiro in 1992, and it is culminated in Agenda 21 of the conference.¹⁷ Under these circumstances, it is unquestionable that the activities and behaviors of human beings are going to determine the destiny of the environment and the continuity and endurance of human and other living species. In 1999, the United Nations Environment Program asserted that the managing environmental problems are highly associated with people's lifestyle and industrialization.¹⁸

As Malaysia undergoes radical development and urbanization, it is facing tremendous environmental challenges.¹⁹ Statistical reports show that the state of the environment in Malaysia is relatively stressful and the nation faces environmental issues like

¹⁵ United Nations Environment Programme, *Global Environment Outlook*, (France: United Nations Environment Programme, 2014).

¹⁶ Wangari Maathai, *Replenishing the Earth: Spiritual Values for Healing Ourselves and the World*, (USA: Doubleday Religion, 2010).

¹⁷ United Nation, *United Nations Conference on Environmental Development*, (Rio de Janerio: United Nations Sustainable Development, 1992).

¹⁸ United Nations Environment Program, *Annual Evaluation Report*, (1999).

¹⁹ WWF, *Annual Review 2014*, (Malaysia: WWF, 2014).