

# Environment Degradation

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## POINTS TO DEVELOP

Human beings take too much from nature.

For a long time, the pace of exploitation was reasonable.

Industrial revolution increased beyond reasonable limits man's use of natural resources.

Effects of man's activities in the fields of agriculture, mining, industry, search for material prosperity.

If humans do not mend their ways, they will destroy life on this planet.

Blest the infant Babe Nursed in his Mother's arms, who sinks to sleep  
Rocked on his Mother's breast, who with his soul Drinks in the feelings of his Mother's eye!  
For him, in one dear Presence, there exists A virtue which irradiates and exalts  
Objects through widest intercourse of sense.

—Wordsworth

We may be as rapturous as Wordsworth about nature as mother of human beings; we know nature can be "red in tooth and claw" as well.

But we cannot deny that humans owe much to the bounties of nature. But humans have tended to take more and more from nature, robbing and looting nature's offerings, with callous lack of concern about the losses they inflict. In the process they do not just harm the environment; they harm humankind. Humans are, indeed, the worst culprits in the degradation of the environment. Down the ages, humans have been in incessant pursuit of greater physical comforts and material prosperity. In this pursuit, they have steadily improved the technologies and other means necessary for higher production of wealth and for the availability of devices that could give more physical and mental pleasures. In the process, many social, political and cultural convulsions have happened. A great many wars have taken place, many human lives, lost, and there have been instances of civilisations being wiped out. Nevertheless, human beings' relation with the environment remained almost unchanged for a long time; their interaction with nature remained harmonious based on the principle of mutual give-and-take.

The situation began to change rapidly with the advent of the Industrial Revolution in the West in the eighteenth century, when human appetite for pelf and

prosperity began to grow rapidly. Humans began to loot nature and pollute the environment without a thought for the consequences.

The Industrial Revolution led to a drastic escalation in air pollution. Coal was used in the emerging modern industries and factories on a very large scale. Later, it also came to be used in generating electricity. As-a result, in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, many cities of Europe and the US were covered with black shrouds of smoke. Industrial centres like Pittsburgh and Pennsylvania developed an atmosphere so inky that automobile drivers were sometimes forced to use their headlights at midday. With the passage of time, the pace of industrialisation increased, with a corresponding increase in air pollution. Later, toxic wastes of the factories began to be dumped on land and in the waters of rivers and seas. Thus, land and water began to lose their quality.

When the Western countries started fighting against the pollution caused by the industries after the 1930s, people in other parts of the world had already joined the race of industrialisation and blindly embraced all the concomitant ills. Consequently, today human activities have made the entire world's environment grossly polluted. Despite certain successes in controlling smoke, the pollution of air, water and land by other products of coal combustion (above all, Sulphur dioxide) and by nitrous oxides, hydrocarbons, and carbon monoxide continues to worsen in most countries.

Industrialisation is not baneful per se. It is the method, technologies, impatience, intolerance and greed humans applied in this process that have caused havoc.

A corollary to the Industrial Revolution was the craving of human beings for urbanisation. People began to throng to the industrial centres, towns and cities in large numbers without any regard to the capacity and limitations of a place in providing adequately the basic civic amenities to the inhabitants. As a consequence, large slum areas, filth and squalor grew. It became hard to maintain the sewage system as well as healthy sanitation. The crisis continues with greater intensity in the Third World countries.

Industrialisation and urbanisation also put pressure on the agricultural lands, the shortage of which began to be more acutely felt with faster and uncontrolled population growth. Remarkable progress made in the medical sciences has brought about a decline in the death rate. But no similar decline was attempted by the people in the birth rate. Two thousand years ago humans scarcely numbered 250 million; it was only in the early 1800s that the figure reached one billion. A second billion was added in another 100 years, a third in 30 years, a fourth in 15 years, and a fifth in just 13 years. What a pace of population growth!

To feed the ever-increasing numbers, agricultural production was increased. Technological inputs certainly produced quick results. But the chemical fertilizers and pesticides have taken a big toll of the soil. They have also brought in their wake new pesticide-resistant pests which devour farm crops. The harmful chemicals get into the ecological cycle and lead to large-scale damage to plants, animals and ultimately even to humans. Recently, a study found that the milk and cereals consumed by Indians contain a high degree of toxic material-all due to indiscriminate use of pesticides. Large scale agricultural production also encouraged huge irrigation projects with concomitant loss of forest land. Canal irrigation has laid waste large tracts of land due to unchecked seepage leading to salinity and alkalinity of soil.

The scarcity of agricultural lands became an excuse for humans to clear the dense forests which in fact served to mitigate the harm and injuries caused by industrialisation and urbanisation. Trees are mercilessly felled to meet the industrial needs of various kinds as well as the needs of the vast urban population. With deforestation comes the growing menace of soil erosion, drought and other natural calamities. This act of deforesting the land is also ominous to the existence of many species of flora and fauna, even as the extinction of many marine species is feared due to the poisoning of rivers and seas by man-made wastes. The adverse impact on biodiversity may destabilise the ecological balance whose ill-effects are quite intelligible.

The growing lust for luxuries and industrial products has recently further aggravated the crisis. The chloro-Fluro carbons (CFCs) released into the atmosphere because of the ever-growing use of refrigeration and cooling devices are depleting the ozone layer which protects the species on earth from being exposed to the harmful ultra-violet rays. Such devastation of nature could easily rebound on humans.

If we analyse the nature of environment degradation, we can only come to the conclusion that human culpability is, indeed, immense. To feed, clothe and shelter themselves, humans brazenly rob nature. The growing population almost renders it impossible to compensate the losses suffered by the environment or allow it the time required to recover. The urge to gain greater and greater material prosperity has not only degraded natural resources but has certain other dangerous portents. The damage caused during the Gulf War to the seas and marine life shows the extent to which humans can go, without compunction, to achieve self-aggrandisement. The search for energy and defense superiority has led humans to exploit the power of the atom. But they have shown a callous disregard for the accompanying dangers of radiation and tackling nuclear wastes.

Unless human beings mend their ways, and fast, they will create another Venus or Mars of the Earth.