🌲 DP IB Environmental Systems & Societies (ESS): HL

11.1 Introduction to Environmental Ethics

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Definition & Purpose of Environmental Ethics

Basics of Ethics

- Ethics is a part of philosophy that deals with **moral principles**

  - It helps us understand what actions are considered **right** or **wrong**

  - In this way, it provides a framework for evaluating the morality of human **behaviour** and **decision-making**

Influences on ethical codes

- Different cultures, traditions, and individuals have their own **ethical codes**

- These codes are shaped by various influences, including:

  - **Formal ethical systems** (e.g. utilitarianism or deontology) provide structured approaches to ethical decision-making.

  - **Religion** (religious teachings often play a significant role in shaping moral values and ethical norms within communities)

  - **Family values**

  - **Traditions** (cultural traditions passed down through generations that instill certain ethical beliefs and practices)

  - **Books**

  - **Education**

  - **Media** and **technology**

  - **Personal thinking and reflections**

Considerations in ethics

- It is important to think about how these influences shape our ethical codes or systems

  - When facing ethical dilemmas, it's essential to consider the many factors at play and the **complexity** of human values

- Human individuals and societies need to reflect on the **value** that they assign to various aspects of our surroundings, including:

  - The world in general (including the biosphere and everything in it)

  - Ecosystems

- Non-human organisms

- Humans
- Deciding what's morally right or wrong can be challenging when these values **conflict** (i.e. when we value some of these aspects significantly more highly than others)

  - Conflicting values often arise and careful thought is required to determine the most ethical course of action

Ethical dilemma examples

1. Endangered species conservation

- Consider a scenario where implementing a conservation project to protect an endangered species of animal requires restricting human activities in the area

  - Is it ethically correct to prioritise the conservation project?

  - Individuals must weigh the value of preserving biodiversity against the potential economic impacts on local communities

  - This dilemma highlights the tension between environmental conservation and human welfare or development

2. Medical ethics:

- In healthcare, ethical considerations arise in decision-making processes involving patient care, treatment options and resource allocation

  - For example, medical professionals may face ethical dilemmas when determining whether to prioritise limited medical resources for critically ill patients

3. Business ethics:

- Business decisions often involve ethical considerations related to corporate responsibility, fair treatment of employees and environmental sustainability

  - An example could be a company deciding whether to prioritise profit maximisation at the expense of environmental degradation or to adopt sustainable practices despite this being more financially costly

Introduction to Environmental Ethics

- Environmental ethics is a branch of ethical philosophy that deals with the moral principles concerning the **environment** and **our relationship with it**

  - It explores the ethical arguments surrounding environmental issues such as pollution, resource depletion and habitat destruction

- Environmental ethics aims to develop **ethical frameworks** to help societies address these environmental challenges and promote sustainable practices

- Central to environmental ethics is the principle of **sustainability**, which advocates for meeting present needs without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs
- Environmental ethics also emphasises the **interconnectedness** of all life forms and ecosystems

  - It recognises the importance of respecting the intrinsic value of nature beyond its instrumental value to humans

Origins of environmental ethics

- This branch of ethics emerged in the 1960s and 1970s in response to growing concerns about environmental degradation and the need for ethical considerations in environmental decision-making

  - During this period, concerns about pollution, deforestation, and species extinction prompted a re-evaluation of humanity's relationship with the natural world

  - Critics argue that traditional ethical theories, mainly rooted in Western philosophical traditions, are too focused on **human-to-human interactions** and prioritise human interests over the environment, making them **inadequate for addressing environmental concerns**

Critiques of traditional ethics

- Traditional ethical theories, such as utilitarianism and deontology, have been criticised for their anthropocentric bias

  - For example, critics believe that these frameworks fail to account for the intrinsic value of nature and the **moral status** of **non-human beings**

Environmental ethics examples

- **Climate change**:

  - Environmental ethics can help shape our understanding of the ethical responsibilities associated with climate change mitigation and adaptation

  - It raises questions about environmental justice, fairness and the distribution of burdens and benefits associated with climate change

- **Biodiversity conservation**:

  - Considerations of environmental ethics are central to biodiversity conservation efforts

  - Ethical debates revolve around issues such as species preservation, ecosystem protection and the rights of Indigenous communities