John Passmore on Man’s Responsibility to the Environment: Implications for Environmental Sustainability in the Niger Delta

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Abstract
This study examined John Passmore’s idea of man’s responsibility to the environment and its implications for environmental sustainability in the Niger Delta. Passmore’s views are primarily summarised under two themes namely: the traditional dispositions towards the environment and environmental problems that it creates. Passmore in his work is of the view that humans are despotic in their relations to the environment and need to adopt the attitude of environmental stewardship to the environment to ensure its sustainability. The problem this work addressed is about man’s attitude towards the environment, which appears to be excessively anthropocentric. The aim of this study is to interrogate the anthropocentric environmental moral responsibility of John Passmore for environmental crisis in the Niger Delta region of Nigeria. The objective of this study amongst others is to; identify the problems which unethical human conduct poses to the health of the environment. The study employed the method of textual analysis. The findings of this study reveal that it is man’s greed and despotic attitude to the environment that is primarily destroying the environment. Based on this, the work proposes a non-anthropocentric ethics as the way out. The work also proposes environmental education with regards to people’s relations to the natural environment. This study concedes to Passmore’s concept of man’s responsibility to the environment, but disagrees with his emphasis on anthropocentrism. Our position in this work is ecocentrism because it views the entire ecosystem as our object of moral concerns. In order to achieve environmental sustainability in the Niger Delta, this work recommends that human relations to the environment should factor the well-being of all entities or beings in the natural environment.
Keywords: Anthropocentrism, non-anthropocentrism, environmental responsibility, ecocentrism.

Introduction
This work is an academic response to the rising environmental issues in the Niger Delta. It is a philosophical reflection on our environmental problems and its underlying causes. The wealth of the Niger Delta region in natural crude oil and gas makes it the hub of Nigerian oil economic activities. The natural resources have attracted the presence of multiple multi-national oil companies that are exploring and producing the crude oil for the Nigerian Government. Apart from the enormous natural resources, the Niger Delta region is unfortunately reputable for massive environmental pollution due to greedy attitude towards the environment. The undeserving and unfortunate incidents of environmental pollution due to oil exploration activities in the region have adversely affected not only the traditional sources of livelihood, but the entire ecosystem. The Consequences of environmental pollution abounds. It occasions damaging of aquatic lives, loss of biodiversity, polluted agricultural land and air, life generally in the region is marred by economic insecurity (poverty) and environmental insecurity (sicknesses). It is mind troubling that our rapidly increasing population is mounting pressure on our natural resources. One cannot understand the act of destroying the natural environment, when the future is uncertain. Oil exploration activities in the Niger Delta do not affect only humans, but the entire natural environment. Human lives and the natural environment are endangered by environmental pollutions in the Niger Delta. The issue is ethically relevant to the extent that human activities in the environment targeting certain ends are negatively impacting on the natural environment.

John Passmore’s work, Man’s Responsibility for Nature was found useful in this direction. Passmore’s work echoes the moral nexus in man-nature relationship. His views have certain implications for environmental crisis and environmental sustainability in the Niger Delta. The problem this work addresses is that of man’s attitude towards the environment, which appears to be excessively anthropocentric. Passmore’s views, though very useful in terms of drawing the attention of humans to their moral responsibility to the natural environment, is however not totally satisfactory. His solutions are equally problematic because it is basically human centred instead of being environment centred. Human-centred ethics is often conceived by environmental philosophers as a very narrow conception of the domain of morality. The resultant effect is that human centred ethics overlooks the danger posed by unethical human-conduct to both living and non-living things in the ecosystem and forecloses the possibility of its sustainability. The aim of this work is to interrogate the anthropocentric moral responsibility of John Passmore and its implications for
environmental sustainability. The Objectives of this paper are to identify the problems which unethical human conduct poses to the environment, evaluate the problems associated with Passmore’s views and other anthropocentric theories of the environment, proffer an ethical solution to environmental problems in the Niger Delta, with some aspect of Passmore’s views, especially his notion of moral responsibility to the environment, examine the possible implications of the adoption of environment friendly value systems in the Niger Delta. This paper makes use of textual analysis. John Passmore’s idea of *Man’s Responsibility for Nature* is considered as primary source. Other secondary sources are drawn from journals, text books and relevant internet materials.

This paper is significant at two levels namely the theoretical and practical dimensions. Theoretically, it challenges the foundation of Passmore’s anthropocentrism as a sustainable environmental theory. At the practical level, this paper recommends a broad based ecocentric ethics as a sustainable environmental model. This paper can also serve as a tool for policy makers in Nigeria by helping them in fashioning out sustainable environmental policies in the Niger Delta. This paper is limited to John Passmore’s ideas of environmental moral responsibility as articulated in his book *Man’s Responsibility for Nature*. For research convenience, this paper covers only the environmental crisis in the Niger Delta region of Nigeria.

Environmental ethics in its practical term concerns the application of ethical principles in dealing with environmental issues and problems as a means of promoting quality environment. This need arises in response to environmental threats to the communities of life and the entire ecological systems which is precipitated largely by inconsiderable activities of humans (Ezedike, 2020). The anthropocentric environmental ethics refers to the belief that humans are more valuable than other non-human environment such as land, plants, and animals. While the non-anthropocentric environmental ethics hold that moral values should be granted to both human and non-human natural things such as animals, plants and other environmental forms like landscapes.

This paper adopted two theories, the sustainability theory and non-anthropocentric theory. **Sustainability Theory:** The word sustainability was popularised by the Bruthland Commissions report *Our Common Future* in 1987. It was given a universal definition “development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their needs” (Brundthland, 1987).

**Non-anthropocentrism:** This theory maintains that non-human members of the natural world are intrinsically valuable in themselves and not because of their economic worth. It
does not embody a single theoretical perspective, but a cluster of ethical theories. Non-anthropocentrism guides human activities for more environment friendly values and environmental sustainability. Biocentrism and ecocentrism are strands of non-anthropocentrism, but this paper proposes an ecocentric ethics. Based on the forgoing, it is necessary to broaden our knowledge of ecocentrism.

Eco-centrism (/ˌɛkəʊˈsɛntrɪzəm/; from Greek: οἶκος, "house" and κεντρόν, "center") is a term used by environmental philosophers and ecologists to mean a nature-centered approach, as opposed to human-centered (i.e. anthropocentric), system of values. Eco-centrism is a point of view that places intrinsic value on all living organisms and their natural environment, regardless of their perceived usefulness or importance to human beings. This theory stresses on nature-centeredness due to its complexities and significance. It emphasizes the harmonious interactions of biotic and non-biotic phenomena in nature. According to Stan Rowe, 1994:

The ecocentric argument is grounded in the belief that, compared to the undoubted importance of the human part, the whole ecosphere is even more significant and consequential: more inclusive, more complex, more integrated, more creative, more beautiful, more mysterious, and older than time. The "environment" that anthropocentrism misperceives as materials designed to be used exclusively by humans, to serve the needs of humanity, is in the profoundest sense humanity’s source and support: its ingenious, inventive life-giving matrix. Ecocentrism goes beyond biocentrism with its fixation on organisms, for in the ecocentric view people are inseparable from the inorganic/organic nature that encapsulates them. They are particles and waves, body and spirit, in the context of Earth's ambient energy (pp.106-107).

The eco-centric theory emphasizes more on nature-centred system of values as opposed to human-centred. In the perspective of environmental ethics, an eco-centric view is one that holds that earth’s ecology and ecosystems such as its atmosphere, water, land, and all life forms have intrinsic value; meaning they should be protected and valued even if they cannot be used by humans as resources. In ethical terms, eco-centrism expands the moral community from being just about humans, but consideration of other natural resources. This means that the world is not only concerned with humanity, but extends respect, regard and care to all life, and indeed to both terrestrial and aquatic ecosystems. The ecocentrist would argue that because an action or activity is harmful to the environment, it is immoral. For instance, strip mining for example, harms the environment but can make
natural resources available to human populations that need them. Therefore, environmental policies are generally eco-centric in nature. Eco-centric environmental philosophy influences the perception of nature and its protection and, therefore, has an effect on the nature-related attitude. Eco-centrism can also be defined as a philosophy or perspective that places intrinsic value on all living organisms and their natural environment, regardless of their perceived usefulness or importance to human beings. This theory stresses on nature-centeredness due to its complexities and significance. It emphasizes on harmonious interactions of biotic and non-biotic phenomena in nature.

**Environmental Problems in the Niger Delta Region of Nigeria.**

**Climate Change:** Climate Change: Some manifestation of the climate change crisis triggered by gas flaring and oil spills include, the disappearance of wildlife, fishes in rivers, creeks and fresh waters of the Delta, excessive heat, shrinking vegetation, especially of economic trees like palm trees, oranges, mangoes, pears, plantain and banana.

**Black Soot:** Since 2016, the black substance has enveloped the cities and causing discomfort to residents in the Niger Delta. The problem is most pronounced in settlements near creeks because these are where illegal refinery activities are carried out. The soot is a result of individuals and companies illegally refining crude oil (much of which is allegedly stolen from pipelines that run near waterways).

**Acid Rain:** Oil exploration and other anthropogenic sources are responsible for the acid rain in the Niger Delta region of Nigeria. Acid rain has affected plants and aquatic life and humans, as it limits drinkable water, damages properties and the entire ecosystem.

**Oil Spill:** Oil spills have contaminated the Niger Delta regions water, air, and plants with trace metals that have accumulated in crops and harmful, potentially carcinogenic hydrocarbons.

**Gas Flaring:** Much of the natural gas extracted in oil wells in the Niger Delta is immediately flared into the environment at a rate that approximates 70 million /m³ per day. The air pollutants in Nigeria’s Refinery and Petrochemicals pollutant concentrations are highest in the Niger Delta and some of the greenhouse gases (such as methane and carbon dioxide) emitted at flare sites contribute to global warming. The largest proportion of these flare sites are located in the Niger Delta.

**Waste Disposal:** Because of the problem of poor waste management strategies (e.g., lack of recycling habit and lack of equipment) the mangrove forest has become a dumping ground...
for waste. This action has impacted the health of aquatic and terrestrial organisms, and has created a public health disaster for citizens, because of the increase in heavy metal concentration up the food chain.

The Niger Delta region of Nigeria faces severe environmental problems in potential catastrophic proportions with momentary and futuristic fatal consequences to human existence, and the entire communities of life (Ezedike, 2020). Research has proved that there is no adequate scientific or technological solutions that have been proffered to tackle environmental problems perfectly, as most of these hypotheses have been proved abortive (Ikoni, 2010). It is believed that the entire gamut of the environmental problems in the region and beyond is a reflection of profound difficulties with some of the most basic principles of our value systems (Akpan & Leonard, 2018). The complexities involved in environmental issues require our going beyond the scientific and technological approach in tackling environmental issues in the Niger Delta. Thus, one of the reasons for this is that most of the cases of environmental degradation are related to the unfriendly human relations with nature (Obi, 2009). As such, they are not completely in the form to deserve scientific and technological attentions (Strader-Frechette, 1981). This is because the problems are value-based, and in this respect require ethical orientation, attitudinal change, and informed mental programming of the people within the Niger Delta region of Nigeria.

Environmental Sustainability in the Niger Delta Region of Nigeria

The word sustainability was popularised by the Bruthland Commissions report, Our Common Future in 1987. It was given a universal definition “development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their needs”.

Passmore disclosed that for there to be environmental sustainability, there must be two traditions that relate man with nature. The tradition that sees man as a steward, a farm-manager actively responsible as God’s deputy for the case of the world, and the tradition that sees him as co-operating with nature in an attempt to perfect it (Passmore, 1974).

It is sad to note that the untrammelled exploitation of natural resources in the Niger Delta region, the lack of ecological conscience on the part of the citizens, and the financial recklessness of some of those in charge of these resources are rapidly closing options for future generations.
Factors Militating Against the Achievement of Environmental Sustainability

High Rate of Poverty: The level of poverty in the Niger Delta is very high, this discourages the achievement of sustainability as it encourages environmental destructive habits or attitudes. These habits include pipe line vandalism, illegal oil bunkery etc.

Ignorance: The lack of ecological consciousness on the citizens in the Niger Delta is on the high side. Oil companies carry high amount of hazardous chemicals. The citizens allows all sort of environmental polluting waste in order to be compensated, without knowing the future consequences of their action.

Inconsistency in Policies: The change in governance affects environmental policies. A new government may not take the serious measures that were put in place by the former government. This has continued to be an impediment to environmental sustainability.

Corruption: The financial recklessness on the part of those in charge of the environment is a very discouraging factor that has continued to become an impediment to the realisation of environmental sustainability.

Passmore on Traditions
Man as Despot/ Man’s Stewardship and Cooperation with Nature
Passmore sees man as a despot to the environment. He observed that as a result of our agricultural and industrial technology we are rapidly degenerating our habitation; the narrow strip of soil, air and water, the biosphere in which we live and move and have our being.

He observed that despite the numerous scientific solutions, the environmental problems are worsening. Man’s attitude to the environment remains despotic or destructive to the environment.

For him, the solution to our environmental crises cannot be left solely in the hands of scientists. This paved way to employ the moral solution which has so much to do with our attitude.

Passmore’s view of man as a steward dates back to post-Platonic Philosophers. Passmore writes:

What evidence is there in support of such an interpretation of Christian teaching? Very little, I should say. Admittedly, there is a recurrent New
Testament image, as Black points out, in which man is figured as a steward and as, in his stewardship, representing God. Man’s stewardship, however, relates to the church, not to nature; the vineyard functions, in Christian teaching, only as a down-to-earth analogue of man’s relationship with God. In Paul’s words, Christian ministers are ‘stewards of the manifold grace of God’. Calvin, no doubt, made great play with the concept of stewardship. But for him ‘stewardship’ meant the rule of the elect over the reprobate (1974, p.29).

Man is meant to be a “steward, a farm manager, actively responsible as God’s deputy for the care of the world, and co-operating with nature in an attempt to perfect it”. Passmore notes that the prevailing attitude of modern developers see potentials solely in terms of what profit can be made.

Passmore writes thus:
This attitude to nature is sometimes formalised as a metaphysics. As such, it may originate with the Stoic Posidonius, writing in the first century BC, that man’s task is ‘to live contemplating the truth and order of all things and doing one’s part in helping to establish that order’. It at least dates back to the Hermetica Asclepius, written somewhere about the second century AD: ‘God willed that the universe should not be complete until man had done his part.’ Man does not complete the universe simply by being in it, as both the Hebrew creation myth and Plato’s Timaeus would seem to suggest: he helps to create it. (1974, p.33).

Passmore’s position was that perfection of nature (leadership) requires mastery of skill that perfects, not to destroy (Passmore, 1974) This perfection skill is that of stewardship and co-operation with the environment.

**Passmore on Environmental Problems**

**Man on Pollution/ Conservation/ Preservation/ Population**

Passmore sees pollution as a process of putting matter in the wrong place in quantities that are too large. Based on this definition, the material pollutant does not matter but the quantity and the place. The reduction in the quantity of the pollutant or minimizing the effect of the pollution is Passmore’s way of solving social problems like pollution. He observed that men pay more on the reduction of pollution than on rational consideration they should have wished to do. He insists that “pollution is something we should like to get rid of in our own immediate interests; our doing so will benefit posterity, no doubt, but
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it will also benefit us, quite directly'. He noted that if government and citizens see themselves as having responsibility over the environment, there would be a total reduction in pollution (Passmore, 1974).

Passmore opined that men ought to concern themselves about the fate of posterity. For him, conservation is a way to help sustain the environment and its resources for posterity. He sees conservation as man’s responsibility for nature. Air, water, lakes, rivers, the sea, are all economic resources and to use them wastefully is to make it impossible for posterity to continue to survive. He opined that American conservationist acts of the late nineteenth century were largely directed against wasteful methods of oil-drilling or coal extraction. Conservation was identified with careful husbandry (Passmore, 1974).

Passmore sees the act of preservation as the way to sustain natural world in its original form. This act does not advocate for re-shaping or re-cycling, but an indefinite protection of certain environment from man’s encroachment. The act prohibits man from harnessing this reserved environment from generation to generation. He discusses whether instrumental or intrinsic value argument is more proper for advocating wilderness preservation and concluded that the intrinsic value argument is difficult to incorporate. In addition, there are many instrumental values that can be attributed to wilderness, and they should be enough for preservation (Passmore, 1974). Passmore noted that the act of conservation and preservation is the responsibility of man. He claims that the developing countries are yet to tie their nut to this tradition because of the loose legal and political systems made of corruption (Passmore, 1974). However, he insist that “an ethics dealing with man’s relation to land and to the plants and animals growing on it, would have to be justified by reference to human interests” (Passmore, 1974).

Passmore believes that population increases the rate of dependence on natural resources. He averred that the rapid increase of people in a place may not cause pollution if the level of production and standard of living rises in almost same proportion as the population. He assumes some methods of population control, which are: infanticide, abortion, use of contraception, sterilization, periodic abstinence, total continence, and legislative enactments. He believes that these measures can help to control or reduce population growth (Passmore, 1974).

One is right to say that an environmental problem can be whatever human activities or consequences of it, which obstructs free development and actualization of inherent potentials in an environment. Passmore writes thus:
So much for the nature of ecological problems. They are features of our society, arising out of dealings with nature, from which we should like to free ourselves, and which we do not regard as inevitable consequences of what is good in that society (Passmore, 1974, p.44).

He goes on to suggest that solving an environmental problem requires satisfactory description of the way of reducing the severity of the accidents. For instance, he says to solve the problem of pollution is to describe the satisfactory way of reducing the total number or volumes of pollutants or diminish their effects.

Critical Appraisal
This paper, is centred on Passmore’s views on man’s responsibility to the environment, with direct reference to the Niger Delta region of Nigeria. He classified his work into two parts. Passmore’s views on traditions as part one, and ecological problems as part two. Passmore submitted that man is acting much as a landlord and master over the environment thereby causing and inflicting harm to the natural environment. He claims that when man acts as despot instead of a steward to the environment, he begins to lack co-operation with the environment, as such the possibility of encountering numerous ecological problems becomes vast. The environmental problems in the Niger Delta are results of anthropogenic impact in the environment and the excessive anthropocentric attitude towards the environment. Passmore dealt with four major ecological problems, which he considers as the responsibility of man. He believes that the environment faces environmental problems because man took decisions that he did not know its implications on himself and the environment, and the implications of these decisions in the future. The Niger Delta region has been polluted by its inhabitants to the point that the environment is no longer healthy for good habitation. The oil exploration and its relative spills has caused so much destruction of the rich environment in the Niger Delta, as the land is no longer good enough for planting, the rivers not good to accommodate fishes and the noise produced by construction companies drive wild animals away and even chemical spray into the air killing some. Passmore sees conservation and preservation as a way to help secure or sustain the environment and its resources for posterity. The philosophy of conservation and preservation is not respected in the Niger Delta region of Nigeria which is shown in the rapid rate of harnessing the environment for economic gains. Passmore believes that population does not cause pollution when population increases in almost same proportion with standard of living. This conclusion has been considered implausible as his ideas may not apply in developing countries. It is observed that as human increases, so the tendency of more dependence on the natural resources. However, it is worthy of note that the problem of population is not our major problem in the Niger Delta, but oil exploitation,
illegal bunkery, oil spills which has affected our aquatic life and the entire environment. Passmore claims that the rate at which man is responsible for these circumstances accounts for a sustainable environment.

This paper has shown that we have moral responsibility towards the environment and not just to exploit it for our selfish ends. Passmore noted that the act of conservation and preservation is the responsibility of man. He claims that the developing countries are yet to tie their nut to this tradition because of the loose legal and political systems made of corruption. He wrote that wilderness can only be valued instrumentally. Also that “an ethics dealing with man’s relation to the plants and animals growing upon it, would have to be justified by human interests” (Passmore, 1974).

Passmore’s views, though very useful in terms of drawing the attention of humans to their moral responsibility to the natural environment, is however, not totally satisfactory. His solutions are problematic because it is basically human centred instead of being environment centred. Human-centred ethics is often conceived by environmental philosophers as a very narrow conception of the domain of morality. Human centred ethics overlooks the danger posed by unethical human-conduct to both living and non-living things in the ecosystem and forecloses the possibility of its sustainability. This study resolved that Passmore’s anthropocentrism in particular and anthropocentrism generally, cannot give us the deserved environmental sustainability, and proposes an ecocentric non-anthropocentrism as a guide for environmental sustainability in the Niger Delta region of Nigeria.

**Conclusion**

This work concludes that there is no moral status for the man-nature relationship in the Niger Delta, as man has been a cruel master and landlord over the environment, using its natural resources as means to an end. The moral status of man-nature relationship is not friendly and cordial, neither does man co-operate with the immediate environment he lives. This is shown in the reckless use of the natural resources in the Niger Delta region of Nigeria. The implications of Passmore’s views for environmental responsibility and sustainability in the Niger Delta region of Nigeria is that the destruction of the environment shall be put to a stop, by taking up the responsibility of a steward and co-operate with the natural environment, being fully responsible to conserve and preserve the environment for the present and future. This work submits that we adopt the non-anthropocentric ecocentric approach to the environment, which will lead us to re-evaluate our values in terms of man-nature relationship and stand out to take responsibility, over our environment as stewards.
in the Niger Delta and the result would be environmental sustenance, which is the hope for the present and future generations.

Recommendations

1. We recommend that government should organise sensitization programmes on different media about the hazards of environmental pollution through oil bunkery, illegal refinery that produces black soot, gas flaring, oil spill etc. It should be emphasized to the public that the immediate and long time effects of environmental pollution is weightier than the immediate economic gains derivable from such unfriendly attitude to the environment.

2. There is need to introduce environmental education at both primary and secondary school levels in order to teach the pupils about the need to imbibe the culture of environmental responsibility.

3. Policy makers should consider the non-anthropocentric approach in issues of the environment.

4. The anthropocentric approach to the environment should be abolished.

Contributions to Knowledge

This work contributes immensely, as it educates men to see themselves as stewards to the environment; ready to care and nurture it, than despots or landlords; ready to exploit and destroy the environment, thereby fostering the well-being of man as the environment becomes friendly which will contribute to the development of environmental friendly value system in the Niger Delta. This work proffers ethical solution, based on environmental pollutions and environmental degradation in the Niger Delta region. This would lead to environmental sustainability and a guide to human activities for safe environmental practices in the Niger Delta region of Nigeria.

References


