Environmental ethics

International Baccalaureate · IB Diploma · Environmental Systems and Societies · HL

Scope and prerequisites

This handout covers selected HL topics for the course first assessed in 2026; it is not the whole syllabus.

Prerequisites: read the stated quantities and units, and use arithmetic and the model conditions below.

The examples are original and fictional: they are not real measurements or real student investigations.

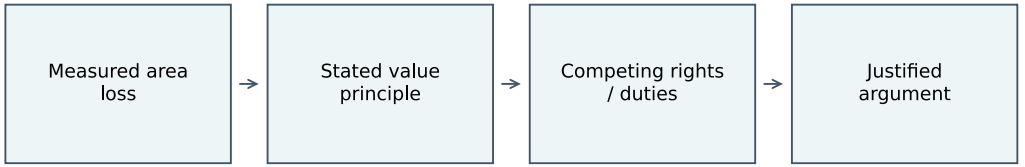
Environmental ethics: make the value judgement explicit

What would explain this observation?

- People may agree on the measured loss of a wetland but disagree on whether a development is acceptable. The disagreement can concern values as well as scientific uncertainty.

Build the model

- Environmental ethics examines reasons for responsibilities toward people, other organisms and ecological systems.
- Anthropocentric reasoning emphasizes human interests; biocentric reasoning recognizes moral standing of living organisms; ecocentric reasoning emphasizes ecological wholes.
- These positions are lenses for analysing arguments, and real individuals can combine them.
- **intrinsic value** : Value considered independent of usefulness to another party.
- **environmental justice** : Fair treatment in environmental burdens, benefits and decision-making.



Measure the change first, then argue from a stated value position

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Choose evidence that can test it

- Separate descriptive claims from normative claims.
- A species count is evidence about the sampled community; deciding that every species has intrinsic value is a value position.
- Compare consequences, rights, duties and fairness across generations.
- A defensible argument states its values, uses accurate evidence and acknowledges competing claims rather than disguising a value choice as a calculation.

In the lab: Use a fictional planning dispute or an attributed historical case. Build an argument table: stakeholder, factual claim, evidence, value principle and possible response. Include affected communities and future generations without pretending to speak for them. Use voluntary anonymous classroom positions; assess the reasoning rather than agreement with a preferred worldview.

Work from known quantities

- Known: a wetland proposal affects 12 hectares of a 60-hectare site, or 20%.
- This quantifies the stated area change.
- An anthropocentric argument might examine flood protection and livelihoods; a biocentric argument might consider affected organisms; an ecocentric argument might consider hydrological connections.
- The 20% figure cannot alone decide which ethical argument is strongest.

Your turn: A project affects 9 hectares within a 45-hectare site. Calculate the percentage of area affected.

■ Check the conclusion and its limits

- Worldview labels are analytical aids, not fixed stereotypes of cultures or people.
- Neither a stakeholder majority nor a numerical index automatically resolves a rights-based or intergenerational objection.

Not true: A percentage of habitat lost alone settles the ethical acceptability of a development. The 20% is a measurement; acceptability is a judgement that also weighs what the habitat means, who is affected and what alternatives exist. Different ethical frameworks can weigh the same 20% differently.

Key:

- Environmental ethics examines reasons for responsibilities toward people, other organisms and ecological systems.
- Separate descriptive claims from normative claims.
- Watch for: worldview labels are analytical aids, not fixed stereotypes of cultures or people.

■ Write from 30 percent of the site

- A proposal affects 15 hectares of a 50-hectare site.
- Find the percentage of area affected. That percentage does not settle whether the proposal is ethically acceptable.