Environmental ethics

HL lens c · HL only

The last turtles

> Science says what is; ethics asks what we ought to do.

- WCS reported a female's death at Suzhou in April 2019.
- Last known is a dated state of knowledge, not proof no undiscovered animals exist.
- Conservation choices need evidence, values and uncertainty.

Facts and values

Descriptive

What is the case; testable.

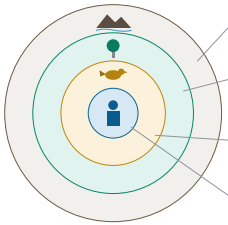
12 of 60 hectares drained (20 %).

Normative

What ought to be; values.

The wetland should be protected.

Scopes of moral concern



ecocentric
species, communities and ecological wholes

biocentric
all living organisms count for their own sake

sentientist
beings that can experience suffering and wellbeing

anthropocentric
human interests count directly, including future people

wider rings compare whose interests count directly
not a ranking, a ladder or a historical sequence
positions can overlap

> Compare the scope of an argument; categories can overlap.

Natural origin is not a complete moral argument

Appeal to nature

Natural does not by itself mean good or safe; human-made does not mean harmful.

A stated value for wildness differs from claiming every natural process is beneficial.

Stewardship and context

Caretaking obligations can follow from religious or secular premises.

The modern field expanded in the 1960s/1970s; environmental and social-justice histories can connect.

Value in itself

Instrumental value

Useful as a means to human ends.

Timber, flood control.

Intrinsic value

Valuable in itself.

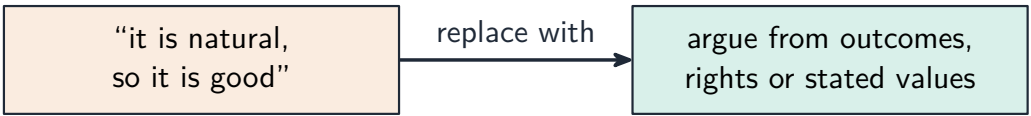
A species, a wild river.

Leopold's land ethic

> A thing is right when it tends to preserve the integrity, stability and beauty of the biotic community.

- Consider ecological wholes and the evidence for a proposed intervention.
- Welfare reasons can consider rats and birds; humane alternatives still matter.

Natural is not the same as good



State the premise behind stewardship

Three ethical theories

Theory	What makes an action right
Consequentialism	The best total outcome
Deontology	Duties and rights; justify conflicts and priorities
Virtue ethics	What a good person would do

Harmony with nature

> In 2018 China wrote "**ecological civilisation**" into its constitution.

- Daoism, **the Way follows nature**; Confucian **unity of heaven and humanity**.
- Mencius warned against fishing with fine nets.

One reservoir, three theories

1. **Given.** Invented reservoir forecast: water/power for 2 million people; 400 displaced; 12 of 60 ha wetland lost (20%), including a frog's last known breeding site.
2. **Consequentialist.** Assess severity, probability, duration, distribution and alternatives; do not count people alone.
3. **Deontological.** Identify rights and conflicting duties; justify how they constrain the decision.
4. **Virtue and ecocentric.** Seek alternatives; keep the wetland whole

Decision

Several conclusions can be reasoned; a relocation promise is not proof of viable habitat replacement.

exercises.lol exercises.com.cn

Consequences need more than a head count

Compare outcomes

Severity, duration, probability, distribution and alternatives matter.

Two million small gains do not automatically outweigh severe harm to 400 people.

Compare with constraints

Rights and duties can constrain choices; theories differ over conflicts.

Virtue and care focus on character, relationships and vulnerable interests.

Traditions: specific ideas, varied interpretations

Resources for reasoning

Daoist, Confucian and **Indigenous** traditions can inform environmental arguments.

Name a specific idea and explain its historical context.

Limits of generalisation

Do not assign one policy to an entire culture.

Ancient naturalness and modern environmental policy are not identical concepts.

From a proposed mitigation to evidence

Intention

Frog relocation or captive breeding is a proposed action.

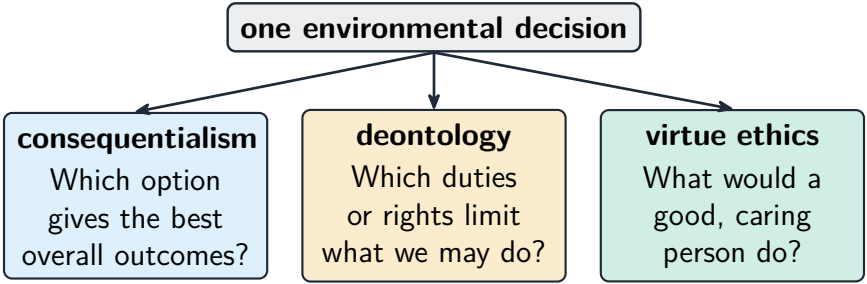
A compensation promise is not completed restoration.

Outcome

Assess viability, habitat function, monitoring and rights.

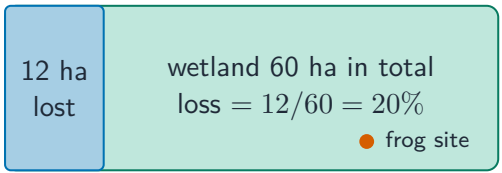
Compare less damaging alternatives and irreversible losses.

Three ethical lenses



The lenses can disagree on the same case

A reservoir dilemma



+ water and power for 2 million people (projected)
– 400 villagers displaced
– last known breeding site

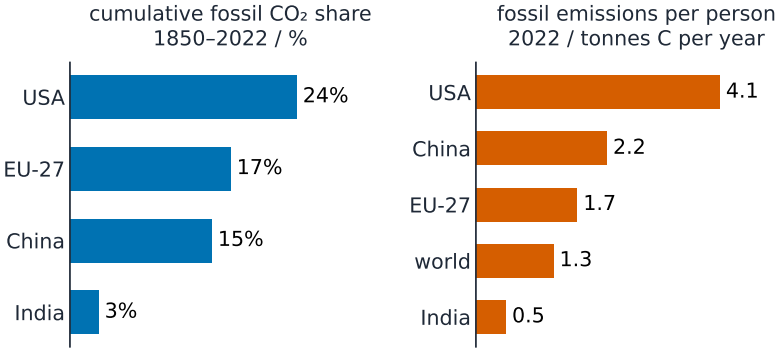
consequences, duties and virtues weigh the same facts differently (invented scenario)

The lenses weigh these facts differently

Environmental justice

Part	Question
Distributive	Who gets benefits and harms?
Procedural	Who takes part in decisions?
Recognition	Are cultures and knowledge respected?

Who is responsible?



Dates and units differ: tonnes of carbon are not tonnes of carbon dioxide.

Sharing the cost

Polluter pays

Biggest past emitters pay.

Period, knowledge, benefits and attribution need justification.

Ability to pay

The richest pay.

If used alone, it need not track historical contribution.

Future generations

> Sustainable development is itself an ethical promise to future generations.

- Present decisions can constrain future people's interests and options.
- Discounting changes present monetary weight, not physical future harm.

Read carbon mass rather than relabelling it

1. **Reported unit** GCB 2023 gives 2.2 tonnes C per person for China in 2022, rounded.
2. **Convert** $2.2 \times 44/12 \approx 8.1$ tonnes CO_2 from that rounded value.
3. **Interpret** Historical shares, per-person rates, gas scope and years differ.

Decision

A numerical ranking alone does not establish a complete moral or legal duty.

Participation, recognition and future people

Whose voice?

A meeting may exist without meaningful influence.

Communities contain disagreement; one spokesperson does not establish unanimity.

What evidence?

Combine distributional data with knowledge, rights and relationships.

Future people lack present participation but can bear long-lived consequences.

Hard choices in conservation

> Facts alone cannot settle conservation choices.

- Compare effectiveness, welfare, rights, alternatives and opportunity costs.
- A 2016 wild-panda status change does not isolate a captive-breeding effect.

Check: which theory?

Your turn

"We must not drive a species to extinction, even if it is profitable." Which theory is this?

A. Consequentialism
B. Deontology
C. Virtue ethics
D. Cost-benefit analysis

Building an ethical argument

End with a justified judgement that states the principle you weigh most.

- Facts first; then stakeholders, including the voiceless.
- Apply two positions; weigh justice; acknowledge the opposing view.

Evaluate a zoo programme

Possible contributions

Assess demonstrated conservation, research or education outcomes.

Wild-population trends and captive counts are different evidence.

Necessary questions

Evaluate welfare, resources, alternatives and habitat links.

No single label or species-status change establishes one programme's causal effect.

Solar modification is not carbon removal

Mechanisms

Altering radiation does not itself remove CO_2 or solve ocean acidification.

Research, trials and deployment are different decisions.

Ethical questions

Compare uncertain benefits, regional effects, termination risk and governance.

Explain participation, distribution, duties and the strongest counterargument.

Exam tips

> Numbers are evidence; they never settle an ethical question alone.

- Separate **descriptive** facts from **normative** judgements.
- Contrast at least two positions or theories.
- Include future generations and other species.

Check yourself

Try these

A project clears 15 of 50 hectares. Find the percentage and explain why it does not decide the question.

Compare polluter pays with ability to pay.

Discuss the ethics of zoos.