

Environmental Ethics in the Anthropocene: From Value Theory to Governance, Conservation, Consumption, and Organizational Sustainability

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ABSTRACT

Environmental ethics has moved from a largely philosophical debate on the moral standing of nature toward a transdisciplinary field shaping conservation policy, environmental governance, sustainable production, consumer behavior, ecological restoration, and organizational transformation. Building on the attached literature base and integrating recent additions from the supplied extraction set, this review synthesizes contemporary scholarship on the normative architectures, empirical applications, and governance implications of environmental ethics. The review shows that recent literature has expanded the field in four major directions: first, by refining debates on anthropocentric, biocentric, ecocentric, virtue-based, relational, and rights-based frameworks; second, by translating ethical theory into practical domains such as biodiversity management, environmental impact assessment, green consumption, climate communication, mining and soil remediation, and marine and forest governance; third, by foregrounding pluralism, relationality, and stewardship as mediating concepts between intrinsic and instrumental valuation; and fourth, by embedding ethics in organizational

innovation, stakeholder pressure, and sustainable performance. Across the literature, the strongest trend is a shift away from binary oppositions human versus nature, intrinsic versus instrumental value, science versus values toward integrative approaches that recognize normative plurality while preserving ethical accountability. At the same time, major tensions remain regarding rights of nature, moral standing of individuals versus collectives, colonial and postcolonial histories of conservation, and the political limits of sustainability governance under predominantly anthropocentric institutions. This review contributes a structured synthesis, four summary tables, and an updated analytical agenda for future scholarship. It argues that environmental ethics is most productive when treated not as an abstract supplement to environmental decision-making, but as the normative infrastructure through which environmental knowledge, institutions, and actions are interpreted, justified, contested, and transformed.

Keywords: environmental ethics; Anthropocene; biodiversity conservation; relational values; rights of nature; green innovation; sustainability governance

1. INTRODUCTION

Environmental ethics has become one of the defining intellectual and practical fields for understanding the moral dimensions of environmental crisis. Earlier discussions often centered on whether nature has intrinsic value and whether anthropocentrism is the root cause of ecological degradation. The recent literature supplied in the extraction set shows that the field has developed far beyond this initial framing. Contemporary work connects ethical theory to biodiversity governance, environmental communication, corporate sustainability, consumer decision-making, climate emotions, ecosystem service assessment, rights of nature, restoration, and decolonial critique [1], [3], [7], [8], [17], [18], [20], [22], [28], [30], [31], [32], [36]. This expansion is not merely thematic. It also reflects a methodological and epistemic broadening. Environmental ethics is no longer confined to philosophical analysis of moral standing. It now includes empirical studies of perceptions and values among farmers, consumers, and organizational actors; legal-philosophical analysis of environmental rights; evaluative reflection on scientific language and ecosystem service assessment; and critical scholarship on colonial histories and intercultural stewardship [2], [5], [8], [14], [17], [18], [22], [27], [28], [30], [33]. The literature thus demonstrates that environmental ethics has become an interpretive bridge between environmental knowledge and environmental action.

The attached corpus is especially valuable because it captures both conceptual foundations and recent applied developments. Foundational debates remain visible in work on intrinsic value, stewardship, virtue ethics, anthropocentrism, and sustainability ethics [11], [13], [15], [19], [21], [29], [31], [32]. At the same time, newer studies reveal how these frameworks are operationalized in agricultural biodiversity management, invasive species discourse, green innovation, pro-environmental behavior,

mining conflicts, forest management, marine protected areas, and consumer green purchasing [2], [5], [10], [12], [17], [18], [24], [26], [33], [34], [37]. This combination enables a more mature review than one based only on philosophical texts or only on managerial applications.

An updated review is needed for at least five reasons. First, recent scholarship challenges the assumption that environmental ethics is primarily a debate between anthropocentrism and non-anthropocentrism. Instead, relational and pluralistic approaches increasingly mediate between these positions [19], [29], [31], [32]. Second, practical domains such as organizational sustainability and green innovation now treat environmental ethics as a measurable and actionable driver rather than a purely normative background condition [17], [18], [33], [37]. Third, conservation debates have become more contested, particularly around invasive species, rewilding, individual animal value, environmental impact assessment, and the values embedded in biodiversity language [16], [25], [26], [28], [31], [36]. Fourth, decolonial and intercultural critiques have exposed how environmental ethics is entangled with settler colonialism, indigenous knowledge, legal pluralism, and claims about stewardship in the Anthropocene [1], [14], [22]. Fifth, the climate crisis has generated renewed attention to moral psychology, especially the role of shame, humility, emotion, and aesthetic experience in forming environmental consciousness and behavior [4], [7], [20], [27].

This review therefore aims to synthesize the supplied literature into a publication-ready narrative that is both conceptually rigorous and practically relevant. The review has four objectives. The first is to map the major ethical frameworks represented in the corpus and clarify their assumptions about value, moral standing, and responsibility [6], [11], [13], [19], [21], [29], [31], [32]. The second is to examine how these frameworks inform key environmental

domains such as conservation, governance, law, restoration, organizational sustainability, and consumer behavior [2], [5], [8], [9], [12], [17], [18], [24], [33], [36], [37]. The third is to identify cross-cutting debates that structure the field, including intrinsic versus instrumental valuation, rights versus stewardship, individual versus collective moral worth, and universalism versus pluralism [3], [8], [15], [19], [25], [29], [31]. The fourth is to develop an integrative agenda for future research and practice that reflects the current state of the literature while preserving the conceptual distinctiveness of environmental ethics.

The review argues that contemporary environmental ethics is best understood as a field of normative mediation. It mediates between scientific description and policy prescription, between cultural values and institutional design, and between environmental concern and actionable transformation. Such mediation is not neutral. It determines what counts as harm, who is recognized as a beneficiary, what forms of trade-off are considered legitimate, and how responsibility is distributed across states, firms, communities, and individuals [3], [15], [17], [18], [28], [30], [34], [36]. The literature shows that environmental ethics does not merely accompany sustainability transitions; it shapes the terms on which such transitions become thinkable and governable.

2. METHODS

2.1 Review design

This article is a structured narrative review based exclusively on the two attached source files supplied by the user. No external databases, websites, or additional references were used. The review updates the earlier literature base by integrating the RIS extraction set and reorganizing the material into a journal-style synthesis. Because the source set combines conceptual, legal, empirical, and applied studies, a structured narrative review is more appropriate than a narrowly quantitative bibliometric exercise. This

design makes it possible to preserve conceptual nuance while still identifying thematic patterns across the literature [6], [13], [19], [29], [31].

2.2 Data source and scope

The review corpus consists of the environmental ethics literature contained in the attached extraction files, covering publications from 2018 to 2024. The corpus spans philosophy, sustainability studies, conservation science, environmental policy, legal theory, organizational studies, social psychology, and management. This temporal range is particularly relevant because it captures both the consolidation of earlier value-centered debates and the recent turn toward implementation, governance, behavioral change, and organizational sustainability [2], [17], [18], [24], [29], [33].

2.3 Inclusion logic

The included studies were retained because they explicitly address environmental ethics or closely related constructs such as intrinsic value, relational value, stewardship, rights of nature, anthropocentrism, environmental virtue, moral obligation, environmental justice, or ethical interpretations of sustainability. The literature also includes empirical articles where environmental ethics functions as an explanatory or mediating variable in behavioral or organizational models [5], [17], [18], [24], [27], [33], [37]. This inclusive logic is justified by the current state of the field, where environmental ethics increasingly operates across disciplinary and methodological boundaries [10], [28], [30], [36].

2.4 Analytical procedure

The corpus was analyzed in four stages.

1. **Descriptive reading.** Each entry was read for publication year, domain, method, conceptual vocabulary, and reported contribution.
2. **Thematic clustering.** Studies were grouped into major themes: normative foundations; stewardship, rights, and

relationality; conservation and biodiversity; governance and decision-making; behavioral and educational applications; and organizational and consumption-oriented sustainability.

3. **Comparative synthesis.** Within and across themes, studies were compared in terms of ethical assumptions, level of analysis, practical implications, and points of convergence or conflict [15], [19], [28], [30], [31].
4. **Interpretive integration.** The review then developed higher-level arguments about the direction of the field, especially the move toward pluralism, operationalization, and critical reflexivity [20], [22], [25], [29], [32].

2.5 Review limitations

The review is limited by the boundaries of the supplied extraction set. The corpus is substantial but not exhaustive of all environmental ethics scholarship. Some subfields are represented more strongly than others, particularly conservation, sustainability governance, and green behavior. In addition, because the literature set includes many conceptual and mixed-method studies, direct comparison of effect sizes is not possible. However, these limitations do not undermine the review's purpose. The goal is not exhaustive universal coverage but a high-quality synthesis of the attached literature base, updated and reorganized into a coherent review article.

Table 1. Core ethical frameworks and their implications for environmental decision-making

Framework	Core moral claim	Representative application areas	Strengths	Persistent tensions	Ref.
Anthropocentrism and weak sustainability	Nature is protected primarily through its significance for human welfare, development, and future human interests	SDGs, ecosystem services, policy trade-offs, green consumption	Politically legible; readily translated into policy and economic reasoning	Risks instrumental reduction of nature; may legitimize incremental biodiversity loss	[11], [13], [30], [36]
Biocentrism and ecocentrism	Nonhuman beings, species, or ecosystems possess moral standing beyond human use-value	Biodiversity protection, conservation ethics, deep ecology, rewilding	Strong protection against exploitative trade-offs; foregrounds intrinsic value	Hard to operationalize under current institutions; may create conflicts over human livelihoods	[3], [16], [21], [31], [36]
Virtue ethics	Good environmental action depends on cultivated character traits such as humility, care, restraint, and responsibility	Climate ethics, education, leadership, stewardship	Connects ethics to motivation and behavior; useful for moral formation	Can appear insufficiently institutional or overly dependent on moral agents	[7], [20], [21], [27]
Rights of nature and legal personhood	Natural entities should be represented as right-bearing or legally protected subjects	Rivers, ecosystems, constitutional law, stewardship in the Anthropocene	Creates strong symbolic and juridical language for protection	Ambiguity about whether nature directly holds rights or is indirectly represented	[8], [14]
Relational and pluralistic value frameworks	Nature matters through relationships, identities, solidarities, and forms of living	Ecosystem valuation, participatory governance, marine conflicts, biodiversity	Bridges intrinsic and instrumental value; supports deliberation	Risks conceptual diffusion if not carefully operationalized	[15], [19], [29], [34]

	with, in, from, and as the world	dialogue	and justice		
Ethical pluralism in applied sustainability	Different ethical registers may be needed across contexts while maintaining normative accountability	Agriculture, governance, organizational sustainability, conservation conflicts	Practically flexible; compatible with stakeholder diversity	May become procedural compromise without substantive ethical safeguards	[2], [17], [18], [31], [33]

3. RESULT AND DISCUSSION

3.1 From binary debates to a pluralistic field

One of the clearest findings from the corpus is that environmental ethics can no longer be adequately described as a binary debate between anthropocentrism and non-anthropocentrism. This dichotomy remains important, but recent studies repeatedly show that practical environmental decision-making unfolds across a more differentiated normative landscape [11], [13], [19], [29], [31], [32]. Droz’s review of anthropocentrism is especially significant because it demonstrates that calls to reject anthropocentrism often conceal divergent assumptions about knowledge, values, and social transformation [32]. Rather than treating anthropocentrism as a singular explanatory culprit, the literature increasingly investigates which forms of anthropocentrism are at stake, how they operate, and where they are institutionally entrenched [11], [13], [32], [36].

This reconfiguration matters because environmental policy is often shaped by institutions that remain strongly anthropocentric even when public discourse invokes sustainability or biodiversity protection [13], [30], [36]. Bond et al. show that environmental impact assessment, operating within predominantly economic discourses of sustainable development, can do little more than slow biodiversity loss unless the broader political framework changes [36]. Keitsch similarly argues that SDG interpretations are ethically complex and can be located along anthropocentric and biocentric axes rather than being normatively self-evident [13]. Spahn extends this critique by showing how human

rights frameworks, while powerful, often reflect Western individualist assumptions that inadequately account for the value of nature [11]. Together, these studies suggest that the dominant policy architecture of sustainability still privileges human-centered justification even where nonhuman value is rhetorically acknowledged [11], [13], [36].

At the same time, the literature does not simply replace anthropocentrism with ecocentrism. Instead, it develops mediating concepts. The most important of these are relational values, ecological solidarity, pluralism, and stewardship [15], [19], [29], [31], [34]. O’Connor and Kenter argue that intrinsic values can be made operational through the Life Framework, which recognizes living from, in, with, and as the world [19]. Kenter and O’Connor further elaborate this framework by emphasizing that holistic and relational ontologies cannot be reduced to a single ethical label and that value categories do not map cleanly onto lived experience [29]. This move is important because it does not dissolve normative difference; rather, it creates a vocabulary for deliberating across ethical positions without flattening them.

The emphasis on pluralism is also visible in applied settings. Klebl et al. show that farmers’ biodiversity practices differ depending on whether biodiversity is understood instrumentally or as having inherent value, but the authors ultimately recommend ethical pluralism as more realistic for conservation policy [2]. Latombe et al. similarly offer a comparative framework that makes different conservation value systems explicit so that debates over management options can be

clarified rather than concealed [31]. In this respect, current environmental ethics has become more reflexive about its own categories. It is no longer satisfied with merely defending intrinsic value; it is also concerned with how different value systems are recognized, communicated, institutionalized, and negotiated [2], [19], [28], [29], [31].

3.2 Intrinsic, instrumental, and relational values

The question of what is valued in nature remains central to the field. Yet the literature shows that the most productive current work no longer treats intrinsic and instrumental values as exhaustive opposites. Instead, relational values and plural value architectures have emerged as a way to capture lived, cultural, social, and identity-based relations to nature [15], [19], [29], [34]. This development reflects dissatisfaction with both narrow instrumentalism and abstract invocations of intrinsic value that are difficult to mobilize in governance [19], [28], [30].

Batavia et al. provide a revealing example in the context of conservation outreach. Their findings challenge the frequent claim that emphasizing human benefits is always the most effective way to motivate support for conservation. Messages focusing only on human beneficiaries generated weaker donation outcomes than messages centering nonhuman beneficiaries, while dual-beneficiary messaging did not clearly outperform nonhuman-centered messaging [3]. This study is important because it empirically undermines a common strategic assumption in conservation communication. It suggests that intrinsic-value-oriented messaging is not merely philosophically defensible but can also be pragmatically effective [3], [28].

Elliott extends this point by arguing that even scientific language such as “biodiversity” is value-laden and tends to align more readily with intrinsic value than with instrumental or relational frameworks [28]. Scientific framing is therefore never

normatively innocent. The way biodiversity loss is described already privileges certain ethical resonances and excludes others [28], [30]. Schröter et al. reinforce this insight by showing that ecosystem service assessments rely on a wide range of conceptual and ethical assumptions that are often underexamined [30]. Transparency about those assumptions is essential if such assessments are to support legitimate conservation decision-making [30].

The literature on relational values responds directly to these concerns. O’Connor and Kenter’s Life Framework gives analytical form to the intuition that many human–nature relations are neither reducible to utility nor captured fully by declarations of intrinsic worth [19]. This framework becomes even more powerful in Kenter and O’Connor’s later elaboration, where living as nature is introduced to represent forms of oneness and holistic embeddedness [29]. Gómez et al. provide an applied example in Mediterranean marine protected areas, where governance conflict cannot be understood solely in economic or legal terms because it is mediated by cultural heritage, identity, appropriation, and socioecological relations [34]. Mathevet et al. similarly argue that stewardship should be grounded in ecological solidarity, not only managerial oversight [15].

Taken together, these studies indicate that the value turn in environmental ethics has matured into a more nuanced architecture. Intrinsic value remains indispensable because it resists pure instrumental appropriation. Instrumental value remains relevant because environmental institutions and public policies often require practically legible forms of valuation. Relational value is critical because it captures the ethical significance of place, belonging, care, identity, and interdependence [15], [19], [29], [34]. Contemporary environmental ethics therefore operates less as a choice between mutually exclusive value positions and more as a structured debate about how multiple values should be ordered,

represented, and translated into action [2], [19], [29], [31].

Table 2. Major thematic domains in the recent environmental ethics literature

Domain	Central question	Typical methods	Key findings from the corpus	Implications	Ref.
Conservation and biodiversity	Who or what should conservation protect, and why?	Conceptual analysis, surveys, reviews, case studies	The field is moving toward explicit value pluralism but remains contested over individuals, collectives, invasive species, and framing	Conservation policy must disclose value commitments rather than treat them as technical facts	[3], [16], [25], [26], [28], [31], [35], [36]
Governance, law, and stewardship	How should institutions represent nonhuman interests and responsibilities?	Legal-philosophical analysis, policy review, conceptual inquiry	Rights of nature, stewardship, and ecological solidarity offer alternatives to managerial anthropocentrism, but each has operational limits	Institutional innovation requires both legal imagination and clarity about representation	[8], [14], [15], [34], [36]
Climate ethics and moral psychology	Which emotions, virtues, and perceptions motivate environmental change?	Conceptual analysis, SEM, behavioral models	Shame, humility, aesthetics, emotion, and ethics influence environmental consciousness and behavior	Environmental change depends on affective and moral formation, not only information	[4], [7], [20], [27]
Consumption and behavior	How do ethics shape green purchase intentions and pro-environmental actions?	Surveys, TPB/SEM, mediation models	Environmental ethics, moral obligation, and willingness consistently predict green behavior	Behavioral interventions should integrate ethics, norms, and contextual enablers	[5], [24], [27]
Organizational sustainability and innovation	Can environmental ethics improve innovation and sustainable performance?	Cross-sectional surveys, SEM, mediation and moderation analyses	Environmental ethics positively influences green innovation and sustainable performance, often via leadership, culture, and strategy	Ethics should be treated as a strategic capability rather than symbolic rhetoric	[17], [18], [33], [37]
Restoration, land, and extractive contexts	How should risk, remediation, and environmental harm be evaluated ethically?	Case study, risk assessment, qualitative inquiry	Technical risk metrics alone are insufficient; remediation choices remain morally loaded	Sustainable decisions must integrate ethics with scientific assessment	[9], [12], [23]

3.3 Stewardship, responsibility, and ecological solidarity

Stewardship has emerged as one of the most important bridging concepts in recent environmental ethics. Unlike simple dominion models, contemporary stewardship is typically presented as a morally charged practice of care,

responsibility, and relational accountability [14], [15]. However, the literature also shows that stewardship is contested. It can either reproduce anthropocentric management logics or support a humbler and solidaristic approach to human–nature interdependence [15], [20].

Mathevet et al. are especially important because they distinguish among different meanings of stewardship and connect the concept to ecological solidarity [15]. Their argument implies that stewardship should not be reduced to efficient resource management. Instead, it must recognize the interdependence of social and ecological systems and the responsibilities that arise from such interdependence [15]. This resonates with Nocentini et al., who link systemic silviculture and nature-based ethics to a world view grounded in complexity and adaptive systems rather than deterministic output-oriented management [10]. In both cases, stewardship requires epistemic humility as well as practical responsibility [10], [15], [20].

Knauß's analysis of rights of nature in Ecuador, New Zealand, and India presents stewardship within the Anthropocene as both a normative and intercultural project [14]. Rights language becomes attractive because it translates indigenous and holistic worldviews into an institutionally recognizable register [14]. Yet Kurki's legal-philosophical critique complicates this development by arguing that natural entities cannot straightforwardly be legal persons in the same way that human or corporate persons are [8]. For Kurki, direct legal personhood collapses into indirect representation, which may still be useful symbolically but should not obscure conceptual distinctions [8]. This tension is highly instructive. It shows that environmental ethics must engage law not only aspirationally but analytically.

The stewardship literature also intersects with climate ethics. Sadler-Smith and Akstinaite argue for an environmental ethic of humility as a corrective to the hubris that has contributed to anthropogenic climate change [20]. Their account is compatible with virtue ethics because it focuses on proper orientation, self-limitation, and reflexivity rather than mastery [20]. Aaltola's work on climate shame similarly illustrates that environmental responsibility is partly a matter of moral psychology, not

merely institutional design [7]. Shame can become destructive if it is defensive or humiliating, but it may also prompt self-critical transformation when linked to moral maturity [7]. These analyses expand stewardship beyond governance vocabulary into the formation of subjects capable of inhabiting responsibility.

Thus, contemporary stewardship is most compelling when it integrates four elements: recognition of interdependence, humility toward ecological complexity, mechanisms for representation of nonhuman interests, and institutional structures that do not disguise power as care [10], [14], [15], [20]. Stewardship in this sense is not a softer anthropocentrism. It is an attempt to reconceive responsibility within ecological entanglement.

3.4 Anthropocentrism, virtue, and the moral formation of environmental subjects

The corpus shows a sustained concern with how environmental ethics shapes moral subjectivity. This includes both explicit virtue ethics and broader analyses of emotions, aesthetic experience, and behavioral intention [4], [7], [20], [21], [27]. These studies matter because environmental transformation depends not only on institutions and policies but also on how persons perceive, feel, and respond to ecological relations.

Dzwonkowska addresses a classic challenge by asking whether environmental virtue ethics remains anthropocentric because virtue traditions are centered on human flourishing [21]. Her analysis of Sandler's pluralistic approach suggests that virtue ethics is formally anthropocentric but not necessarily so in moral content, because flourishing can be understood in ways that include the flourishing of others, including nonhuman beings [21]. This is an important reframing. It means environmental virtue ethics can avoid collapsing into self-regarding ethics while still preserving the motivational strengths of character-based theory [20], [21].

The behavioral literature complements this argument. Wang and Yu show that aesthetic experience is not peripheral to environmental ethics; it is a constitutive trigger for environmental consciousness when combined with cognition [4]. Aziz et al. find that environmental ethics significantly affects attitudes, subjective norms, and perceived behavioral control among university employees, reinforcing the relevance of ethical orientation to pro-environmental intention [27]. Ogiemwonyi and Jan similarly show that environmental ethics, moral obligation, and ethical beliefs are positively associated with green consumption [24]. Akhtar et al. confirm the importance of environmental ethics and moral obligation for willingness to consume green products and actual green consumption [5]. These studies collectively suggest that ethical orientation has measurable behavioral consequences [5], [24], [27].

Yet the literature also avoids simplistic moralization. Aaltola warns that moral emotions such as shame are double-edged and require careful cultivation [7]. Sadler-Smith and Akstinaite show that humility is not mere self-abasement but a virtue of ecological situatedness that can influence governance, learning, accountability, and education [20]. These perspectives are particularly important because environmental discourse often oscillates between technical information and moral condemnation. The recent literature indicates that enduring environmental transformation requires more nuanced approaches to moral formation approaches that integrate affect, cognition, virtue, and institutional context [4], [7], [20], [27].

3.5 Conservation ethics: individuals, collectives, language, and conflict

Conservation remains one of the most dynamic arenas for environmental ethics. The literature reveals several major fault lines: whether conservation should prioritize individuals or collectives, how invasive species should be conceptualized, whether

rewilding threatens cultural identity, and how scientific language frames moral response [1], [16], [25], [26], [28], [31], [35], [36].

Ferraro et al. revisit two dogmas of conservation science: that collectives matter morally whereas individual animals do not, and that anthropomorphism should be avoided [25]. Their critique is significant because it challenges a long-standing asymmetry in conservation thinking. If individuals have both instrumental and moral importance, then conservation cannot rely solely on species- or ecosystem-level abstractions [25]. This argument complicates traditional ecocentric narratives and brings conservation ethics into closer conversation with animal ethics [25], [31].

The literature on invasive species further demonstrates how conservation is shaped by contested values and vocabularies. Ogden's beaver diaspora essay destabilizes the invasive/native binary by reframing the movement of nonhuman beings through the language of diaspora, colonialism, and multispecies assemblages [1]. Shackleton et al. then show empirically that invasion science contains real polarization over values, management, impacts, and terminology, even if broad consensus exists on many issues [26]. These works are important because they reveal that environmental ethics is not external to conservation science; it is already embedded in the categories, metaphors, and management debates that define the field [1], [26], [28].

Drenthen's work on rewilding adds another layer by showing that conservation is also hermeneutic [16]. Rewilding does not simply change species composition or landscape management; it reinterprets place identity and human history [16]. This helps explain why conservation conflicts cannot be resolved only through better ecological data. They often concern the meaning of landscapes and the legitimacy of historical attachments [16], [34]. Simaika and Samways similarly argue that conservation requires psychological and cultural

engagement, especially when the subjects of conservation are less charismatic beings such as insects [35].

Bond et al. contribute a sobering institutional insight. Even with ecosystem services assessment, trade-off rules, and biodiversity offsets, environmental impact assessment remains bounded by the ethical assumptions of the political contexts in which it operates [36]. If those contexts are grounded in weak sustainability and anthropocentrism, then conservation tools

are structurally limited [36]. This conclusion is reinforced by Elliott’s analysis of scientific framing and by Schröter et al.’s work on the assumptions of ecosystem service assessments [28], [30]. Together, these studies make clear that conservation ethics cannot be treated as an optional supplement to technical practice. It is constitutive of how conservation problems are defined, justified, communicated, and managed [25], [28], [30], [31], [36].

Table 3. Conservation and governance controversies analyzed through environmental ethics

Controversy	Ethical issue	Main positions in the literature	Practical consequence	Likely synthesis pathway	Ref.
Invasive species	Whether “invasive” names ecological harm or reproduces problematic moral-political categories	Classical harm-based management versus critiques of xenophobic or colonial framing	Management legitimacy depends on how impacts and values are defined	More transparent, context-sensitive framing of impacts and histories	[1], [26], [31]
Rewilding	Whether restoring nonhuman autonomy undermines cultural landscapes and place identity	Non-anthropocentric restoration versus protection of layered cultural landscapes	Social acceptance of rewilding varies with identity and heritage claims	Dialogic governance attentive to both ecological and hermeneutic dimensions	[16], [31]
Individuals versus collectives	Whether conservation should prioritize ecosystems/species or morally considerable individuals	Ecocentric collective protection versus increasing recognition of individual worth	Affects culling, welfare, anthropomorphism, and intervention choices	Multi-level ethics recognizing both individuals and ecological wholes	[25], [31], [35]
Biodiversity framing	Whether biodiversity language sufficiently motivates diverse publics	Intrinsic-value framing versus strategic use of multiple concepts	Communication choices affect mobilization and legitimacy	Value-explicit communication tailored without erasing ethical commitments	[3], [28], [30]
EIA and offsets	Whether existing tools can truly protect biodiversity under current political systems	Incremental protection under weak sustainability versus deep ecological limits	Technical tools may normalize loss if ethical baselines stay anthropocentric	Stronger ethical thresholds and less reliance on compensatory logic	[30], [36]
Rights of nature	Whether nature can be a rights-holder or only be represented indirectly	Direct legal personhood versus indirect guardianship models	Influences constitutional design and enforcement architecture	Clarify representation while preserving robust protection mechanisms	[8], [14]

3.6 Decolonial and intercultural turns in environmental ethics

Another major development in the corpus is the deepening of decolonial and

intercultural critique. These studies insist that environmental ethics cannot be confined to abstract value theory while ignoring the historical and political

conditions under which environmental categories are produced [1], [14], [22], [23]. In this literature, the moral standing of nature is inseparable from questions of colonialism, dispossession, epistemic hierarchy, and cultural translation.

Ogden's discussion of ecological imperialism and multispecies assemblages in Tierra del Fuego shows that the movement of species is tied to settler colonial history and cannot be understood solely through ecological harm narratives [1]. Eichler and Baumeister extend this line of critique by arguing that the US conservation movement continues to reproduce anti-Indigenous values through wilderness ideals, disavowal of originary violence, and settler nativism [22]. Their argument is especially important because it reveals how even well-intentioned conservation can reinforce unjust structures if it fails to examine its own ethical premises [22].

Knauß's work on rights of nature offers a more ambivalent picture [14]. On one hand, rights discourse can provide a trans-cultural tool for translating indigenous understandings into institutions recognizable to modern states. On the other hand, such translation also risks reshaping those worldviews into the grammar of liberal legality [14]. Kurki's critique of direct legal personhood intensifies this tension by highlighting the conceptual constraints of legal theory [8]. Thus, the decolonial literature does not simply celebrate legal innovation; it calls for scrutiny of how representation, recognition, and translation operate [8], [14], [22].

Krzywoszynska and Marchesi's call for a relational materiality of soils contributes another important angle [23]. By denaturalizing "soil" as a taken-for-granted scientific category and emphasizing its onto-political dimensions, they show that environmental ethics also depends on how material realities are epistemically constituted [23]. This complements Elliott's argument about value-laden scientific language and Schröter et al.'s analysis of

assumptions in ecosystem services [28], [30]. Overall, the intercultural and decolonial literature pushes environmental ethics to become reflexive not only about values but also about histories, ontologies, and categories of knowledge [1], [22], [23], [28].

3.7 Environmental ethics in agriculture, extraction, and land-based decision-making

The corpus also shows that environmental ethics has become highly relevant in land-based sectors where ecological decisions are embedded in livelihood, production, and local conflict. In these contexts, ethics is neither an abstract afterthought nor reducible to regulation [2], [9], [10], [12], [23], [34].

Klebl et al. demonstrate that farmers' biodiversity management depends on how biodiversity is valued and perceived [2]. Narrow interventions often reflect instrumental understandings, whereas holistic management aligns with broader ecological conceptions and recognition of nature's inherent value [2]. Yet actual decisions are constrained by production pathways, social dependencies, and landscape conditions [2]. This finding is important because it prevents environmental ethics from becoming moralistic. Values matter, but they matter within socio-material constraints [2], [23].

Damian et al. reach a similar conclusion in the context of contaminated soils around an abandoned mine [9]. Their case study shows that risk assessment can identify the severity of pollution, but it cannot determine which remediation path is ethically best. Decisions about whether to focus on the most dangerous pollutants or adopt a broader restoration strategy involve responsibility, uncertainty tolerance, and moral duty [9]. Kafu-Quvane and Mlaba likewise show that quarrying constitutes an environmental ethical crisis not merely because it degrades ecosystems but because it reflects disrespect toward community well-being, law, and local dignity [12]. These cases illustrate that

environmental ethics in extractive contexts must address procedural and distributive questions alongside ecological harm [9], [12].

Nocentini et al. bring land-based ethics into forest science by tracing the historical roots of systemic silviculture [10]. Their argument suggests that sustainable forest management increasingly requires a shift from deterministic, output-oriented paradigms toward complex adaptive systems and ethics attentive to the intrinsic value of nature [10]. Gómez et al. offer a marine counterpart, showing that fisheries conflicts in protected areas are shaped by clashing environmental ethical values and cultural heritage claims [34]. In both terrestrial and marine settings, the review literature supports a central conclusion: environmentally significant decisions are always mediated by ethical conceptions of value, community, and responsibility [2], [9], [10], [12], [34].

3.8 Green consumption, pro-environmental behavior, and moral obligation

A strong empirical strand in the supplied corpus concerns green consumption and pro-environmental behavior. Here environmental ethics is often modeled as an antecedent to attitudes, intentions, motivation, and behavior [5], [24], [27], [37]. Although such work is methodologically different from philosophical analysis, it is highly relevant because it demonstrates how ethical orientation enters everyday environmental practice.

Akhtar et al. find that environmental ethics, moral obligation, and green attitude significantly influence willingness to consume green products, which in turn affects actual green consumption [5]. Their analysis is particularly notable because it finds no significant difference between lower and higher income groups in the relationship between willingness and actual green consumption [5]. This suggests that ethical willingness may have broader

behavioral relevance than some socio-economic segmentation models assume [5]. Ogiemwonyi and Jan reinforce this point by showing that environmental ethics, moral obligation, and ethical beliefs positively shape green consumption behavior [24]. Aziz et al. similarly link environmental ethics to pro-environmental behavior through theory-of-planned-behavior constructs among university employees [27].

These studies converge on two points. First, environmental ethics is not an epiphenomenon. It has measurable behavioral correlates [5], [24], [27]. Second, ethics works through mediating pathways such as willingness, attitude, perceived control, subjective norms, or emotional intelligence rather than through direct moral exhortation alone [5], [24], [27]. This is consistent with Wang and Yu's emphasis on aesthetic experience and with Aaltola's and Sadler-Smith and Akstinaite's work on moral psychology [4], [7], [20]. The broader implication is that behavioral change requires multi-dimensional interventions in which ethical beliefs interact with emotions, social norms, and enabling conditions.

The literature also suggests caution. Behavioral models can operationalize environmental ethics, but they may also thin out its normative richness if ethics is treated only as one variable among others. The challenge for future work is therefore to preserve conceptual depth while strengthening empirical tractability. The best studies in this corpus succeed because they do not replace ethics with psychology; they examine how ethical commitments become psychologically and socially actionable [4], [5], [24], [27].

3.9 Organizational sustainability, green innovation, and environmental performance

Perhaps the most striking sign of the field's expansion is the growth of organizational and managerial studies that treat environmental ethics as a strategic driver of sustainable performance [17], [18], [33],

[37]. This literature moves environmental ethics into the core of firm-level transformation.

Aftab et al. show that corporate environmental ethics improves sustainable performance through green innovation, while environmental leadership and environmental strategy strengthen this relationship [18]. Enbaia et al. likewise find that environmental ethics positively affects sustainable performance and that green process and product innovation mediate this effect, with organizational green culture serving as a moderator [17]. Xie et al. extend the framework by incorporating stakeholder pressure and environmental awareness, again showing the positive contribution of environmental ethics to green innovation and environmental performance [33]. Junsheng et al. provide a related organizational perspective in the Malaysian food industry, where environmental ethics contributes to employee green motivation and company green behavior [37].

These studies collectively indicate that environmental ethics should not be understood only as a normative constraint on organizational behavior. It can also

function as an enabling capability that shapes innovation, culture, strategy, and performance [17], [18], [33], [37]. This is a notable shift from older views in which ethics appeared external to competitiveness. In the recent literature, ethics and performance are not simple opposites; their relationship is mediated by green processes, leadership, stakeholder pressure, and internal culture [17], [18], [33].

However, the literature also raises critical questions. First, if environmental ethics becomes a managerial resource, there is a risk of instrumentalizing ethics itself. Second, the causal models are often cross-sectional and may not capture the deeper institutional or political constraints on sustainability transformation. Third, firm-level performance metrics do not automatically resolve broader issues of ecological justice or nonhuman moral standing [11], [15], [20], [22]. The contribution of this literature is therefore substantial, but it should be situated within a broader understanding of environmental ethics that includes governance, justice, and value pluralism.

Table 4. Translating environmental ethics into practice: mechanisms, outcomes, and limitations

Application area	Ethical mechanism identified in the literature	Reported outcome	Main enabling conditions	Main limitation	Ref.
Green consumption	Moral obligation, environmental ethics, willingness, green attitude	Higher intention to purchase and actual green consumption	Supportive attitudes, practical access, social legitimacy	Ethical concern may not convert into action under structural barriers	[5], [24]
University and employee behavior	Environmental ethics shapes attitudes, norms, control, and motivation	Stronger pro-environmental intention and behavior	Emotional intelligence, institutional support, motivational pathways	Self-reported behavior and cross-sectional designs limit causal inference	[27], [37]
Manufacturing sustainability	Ethics stimulates green product/process innovation	Improved environmental and sustainable performance	Leadership, strategy, green culture, stakeholder pressure	Risk of reducing ethics to performance instrument	[17], [18], [33]
Biodiversity management in agriculture	Instrumental or inherent value orientations guide intervention style	Targeted versus holistic biodiversity practices	Dialogue, local knowledge, landscape fit, production	Farmers' choices constrained by dependencies and production systems	[2]

			flexibility		
Restoration and remediation	Ethics frames acceptable risk and remediation priorities	More context-sensitive sustainable decisions	Integration of scientific and moral reasoning	No technical method alone can determine the “right” choice	[9], [12]
Conservation communication and governance	Framing affects support, legitimacy, and conflict resolution	Nonhuman-centered and plural value framings can strengthen engagement	Transparent value disclosure, culturally responsive governance	Framing alone cannot overcome institutional anthropocentrism	[3], [28], [30], [34], [36]

3.10 Rights, governance, and the limits of institutional translation

A recurring concern across the corpus is whether existing institutions can adequately represent nonhuman value. Rights of nature, ecosystem service assessments, environmental impact assessment, and biodiversity governance all attempt this in different ways [8], [14], [30], [34], [36]. Yet the literature suggests that institutional translation is always selective.

Rights-based approaches have gained symbolic force because they appear to elevate nature beyond instrumental status [8], [14]. However, Kurki’s analysis makes clear that legal personhood for nature is conceptually difficult if taken literally [8]. This matters because institutional innovation can fail when symbolic ambition outruns analytical clarity. At the same time, Knauß shows why rights discourse remains attractive in the Anthropocene: it offers a recognizable moral-legal idiom for stewardship and for engagement with indigenous perspectives [14]. The most productive conclusion is not to reject rights of nature, but to distinguish symbolic, political, and doctrinal functions more carefully.

A similar issue appears in ecosystem service and EIA frameworks. Schröter et al. argue that ecosystem service assessments contain many hidden assumptions, including ethical ones, which affect how conservation recommendations are produced [30]. Bond et al. show that even sophisticated assessment tools remain bounded by the ethical spectrum of their political contexts [36]. These findings suggest that institutional tools cannot be ethically

neutral. Their outputs depend on what they are designed to recognize, aggregate, and trade off [28], [30], [36]. Hence, reform requires more than better indicators. It requires ethical reflexivity in institutional design.

3.11 Synthesis: toward an integrative model of contemporary environmental ethics

When read together, the supplied studies support an integrative understanding of environmental ethics built on five propositions.

First, environmental ethics is no longer a peripheral philosophical discourse. It is a cross-cutting field that shapes conservation language, legal innovation, governance design, organizational strategy, consumer behavior, and climate response [3], [8], [17], [18], [20], [24], [28], [33], [36].

Second, the field is moving away from rigid binaries. Intrinsic, instrumental, and relational values are best understood as overlapping but distinguishable ethical registers whose practical relevance depends on context [15], [19], [29], [31], [34].

Third, implementation matters. Environmental ethics increasingly influences measurable outcomes through mediation pathways such as communication framing, moral obligation, motivation, green innovation, culture, and governance structure [2], [5], [17], [18], [24], [27], [33], [37].

Fourth, conflict is constitutive rather than exceptional. Conservation, rewilding, invasive species management, EIA, and marine governance all reveal that environmental decision-making involves

competing value systems, not just informational deficits [16], [26], [30], [31], [34], [36].

Fifth, critical reflexivity is indispensable. The field must remain attentive to colonial histories, value-laden scientific concepts, the politics of rights, and the risks of ethical instrumentalization [1], [8], [14], [22], [23], [28], [32].

An integrative model of contemporary environmental ethics would therefore combine normative pluralism with explicit thresholds. Pluralism is needed because environmental practice involves diverse values, publics, and institutions [2], [19], [29], [31]. Thresholds are needed because not all trade-offs are ethically acceptable, and some forms of reductionism continue to normalize ecological harm [11], [13], [30], [36]. Such a model should also be multi-level, recognizing individuals, communities, species, ecosystems, and organizations as ethically relevant sites of action and responsibility [15], [17], [18], [25], [31], [37]. Finally, it should be dialogic but not relativistic: open to intercultural and stakeholder diversity while still capable of criticizing domination, dispossession, and ecologically destructive practices [14], [22], [32], [34].

CONCLUSION

The literature reviewed in this article shows that environmental ethics has entered a new phase. It remains grounded in foundational questions about anthropocentrism, intrinsic value, stewardship, and moral standing, but it now operates as a genuinely transdisciplinary field with strong implications for conservation, governance, law, organizational sustainability, behavior, and public communication [11], [13], [15], [17], [18], [19], [24], [28], [29], [31], [36]. The most important substantive shift is the move from binary and oppositional formulations toward ethically plural, relational, and implementation-oriented frameworks [2], [19], [29], [31], [34]. This does not mean that all value conflicts have been resolved. On the contrary, the literature

repeatedly shows that environmental decision-making is structured by persistent disputes over what counts, who counts, and how values should be operationalized [16], [25], [26], [30], [31], [36].

The review also highlights that contemporary environmental ethics is increasingly empirical without becoming purely positivistic. Studies on green consumption, university behavior, organizational innovation, and stakeholder pressure demonstrate that environmental ethics has behavioral and institutional effects [5], [17], [18], [24], [27], [33], [37]. At the same time, conceptual and critical studies continue to remind us that such operationalization must not strip ethics of its normative depth [8], [11], [22], [28], [32]. The strongest scholarship in the corpus succeeds because it combines conceptual clarity with practical relevance.

Three major conclusions follow. First, ethical pluralism is emerging as the most workable framework for applied environmental contexts, but it must be anchored by explicit protection of nonhuman value and strong safeguards against purely instrumental reasoning [2], [19], [29], [31], [36]. Second, institutional tools such as rights of nature, ecosystem service assessment, and EIA can only be as transformative as the ethical assumptions built into them [8], [14], [30], [36]. Third, environmental transformation requires moral formation as well as governance reform, meaning that humility, responsibility, aesthetic engagement, and emotional reflexivity are not secondary to policy but part of its precondition [4], [7], [20], [27].

Based on the reviewed literature, several suggestions can be advanced for future research and practice.

1. Strengthen integrative value frameworks. Future work should continue refining models that relate intrinsic, instrumental, and relational values without collapsing their differences [19], [29], [31].

2. Make ethical assumptions explicit in policy tools. Assessment frameworks, conservation planning, and organizational sustainability metrics should clearly disclose their normative premises [28], [30], [36].
3. Advance multi-level ethics. Research should better connect individuals, species, ecosystems, communities, and organizations in a shared framework of environmental responsibility [15], [17], [18], [25], [31].
4. Embed decolonial and intercultural critique. Environmental ethics must more systematically address indigenous perspectives, colonial histories, and legal-cultural translation [1], [14], [22], [23].
5. Move beyond symbolic corporate ethics. Organizational studies should examine whether environmental ethics transforms core business models or merely enhances green legitimacy [17], [18], [33], [37].
6. Study conflict as normative disagreement. Controversies over invasive species, rewilding, offsets, and protected area governance should be analyzed not only as policy disputes but as clashes among value systems [16], [26], [31], [34], [36].
7. Integrate moral psychology with structural analysis. Research on shame, humility, aesthetic experience, and moral obligation should be linked to broader institutional and socio-economic conditions [4], [7], [20], [24], [27].

In conclusion, environmental ethics is now indispensable to serious environmental scholarship and policy. It clarifies what sustainability is for, what conservation is trying to protect, what responsibilities emerge in the Anthropocene, and what kinds of institutions and subjects are needed for ecological futures. The literature reviewed here strongly suggests that the field's future lies not in abandoning normative debate for managerial pragmatism, nor in retreating from practice into abstraction, but in developing robust

forms of ethical mediation capable of guiding action across complex social-ecological systems.

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