

## Is the ecological crisis THE human rights concern of the century?

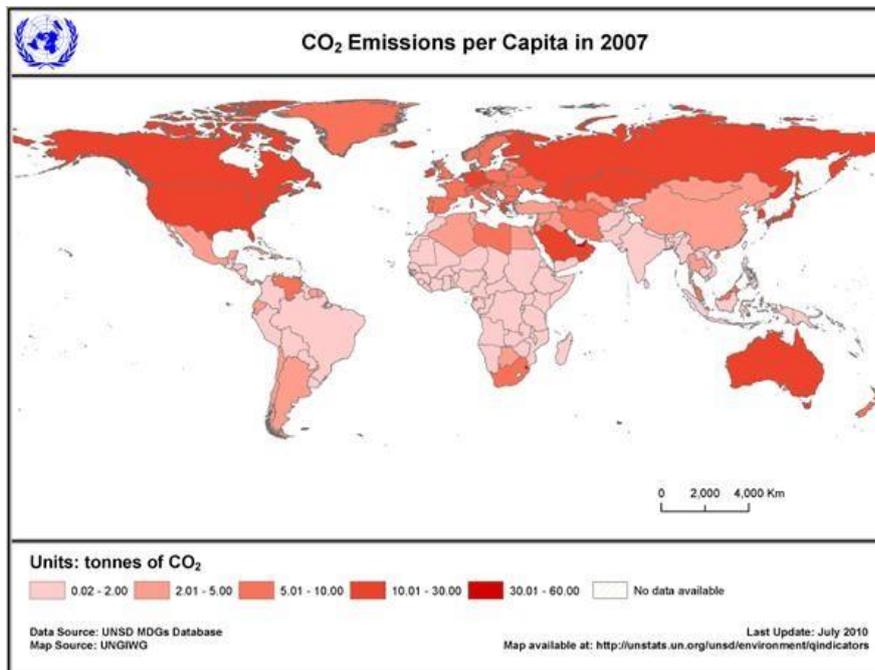
In Virginia, June 1776, a Bill of Rights derived from John Locke's initial drafting was written. The first clause stated "that all men are by nature equally free and independent, and have certain inherent rights, of which, when they enter into a state of society, they cannot, by any compact, deprive or divest their posterity: namely, the enjoyment of life and liberty, with the means of acquiring and possessing property and pursuing and obtaining happiness" (Cranston, 1964). Since, various attempts have been made to fully and thoroughly describe human rights, a tough job seeing as there has never been full agreement on the topic. The most widely accepted and influential human rights document arose out of the atrocities of Second World War. Created in 1948 the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) expounds in 30 articles a full range of human rights. Though not legally binding in itself, the UDHR has informed and influenced international law and has acted as the foundation for the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, and the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, two binding United Nations human rights covenants, which along with the UDHR take the form of the International Bill of Rights (Henkin, 1981).

Any discrepancy in pure definition aside, human rights are widely accepted to be "inalienable fundamental rights to which a person is inherently entitled simply because she or he is a human being" (Sepúlveda *et al.*, 2004). Therefore, when tackling global issues, decision makers must account for the far-reaching consequences and the implications for global communities and the individuals within them. Bearing this in mind the ecological crisis we are facing – which, for this essay will be defined as when the environment of a species or population changes in such a way that the species' or populations' survival is threatened – and its implications are, of course, a blatant human rights concern. Is it *the* humans rights concern of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, though? Or is there something fundamentally more flawed? This is what will be discussed.

As the term ecological crisis is such a broad one, for clarity this essay will focus on climate change as it embodies many factors such as: global warming, deforestation, resource depletion and overpopulation. To accurately construct a picture of the ecological crisis' impact on human rights it is important to outline the main impacts that various projections will have on our planet. But first, how have we found ourselves facing this ecological crisis to begin with?

In short, we have aimed to become too developed. Our ability as a species to capture and use energy from stored sources, such as fossil fuels, is unique. This power that we have harnessed drives our development. We now drive cars, fly in aeroplanes, heat our homes and import and export food and goods. In the last 150 years, the human population has grown by more than five times (BBC, 2011) and the average human uses more energy than ever. According to World Bank Development Indicators in 2008, the richest 20% of the world population can be accounted for 76.6% of total private consumption; the world's middle 60% consume 21.9% and the world's poorest 20% consume just 1.5% (Global Issues, 2011). The problem is, the middle 60% is rapidly trying to reach the same level of development of the top 20%; and it is their right to. Capitalism, globalisation and the need for an ever expanding economy to sustain our social sphere means that environmental well being is traditionally low on the agenda. As a result we have emitted such large amounts of greenhouse gases that we have caused hugely accelerated climate change and an ecological crisis. In 2007, the United Nations released data on CO<sub>2</sub> emissions per capita. Many westernised countries, such as the

United States, Canada and Australia emit up to 30 tonnes of CO<sub>2</sub> per capita (Fig 1.); a hugely damaging amount. But why is it that we, as a species, have aimed to develop with such a disregard to our environment?



**Figure 1.** Global map showing the CO<sub>2</sub> emissions per capita in 2007 (UN Statistics Division, 2010).

Anthropocentrism: the view that we as humans are the supreme reality and that all the nature around us has value only in its utility to humanity (Semper Reformanda, 1998). This is the mentality that has enabled our unbridled assault on the world to continue to the point where we are now facing an ecological crisis. It is accurate to say that there have been many ecological crises occurring around us since the beginning of time increasing largely in modern times as biodiversity falls at alarming rates, more often than not by the hand of man and his actions. The ecological crisis we will discuss here is merely the one that affects us as humans.

The IPCC 2007 synthesis report makes a number of projections regarding the change in Earth's temperature by the end of the century. Relative to average global temperatures from 1980-1999, the best estimate given for the worst case scenario is a global temperature increase of 4.0°C, which is within a likely range of 2.4-6.4°C. According to the same report, a temperature increase of 3°C or above would see a global decline in crop production. Combine this with an estimated global population of over 9 billion by 2050 (BBC, 2011) and there could be extreme famine. As well as malnutrition, the detrimental health implications of climate change are plentiful: an increase in disease, injuries and deaths due to extreme weather, increased cardio-respiratory illness in urban areas due to heightened concentrations of ground-level ozone in urban areas and an altered distribution of some infectious diseases to name a few (Martens and McMichael, 2002).

Coastal erosion, due to the expected sea level rise poses another big issue. Coastal areas are already subjected to large stresses by human settlement and industry – the very same industries that are resultantly under huge threat, with large-scale job losses expected. Towards the end of the century, millions more people than today are estimated to experience yearly flooding, especially in low-lying areas such as the megadeltas of Africa and Asia (IPCC, 2007). In addition to flooding, it is predicted

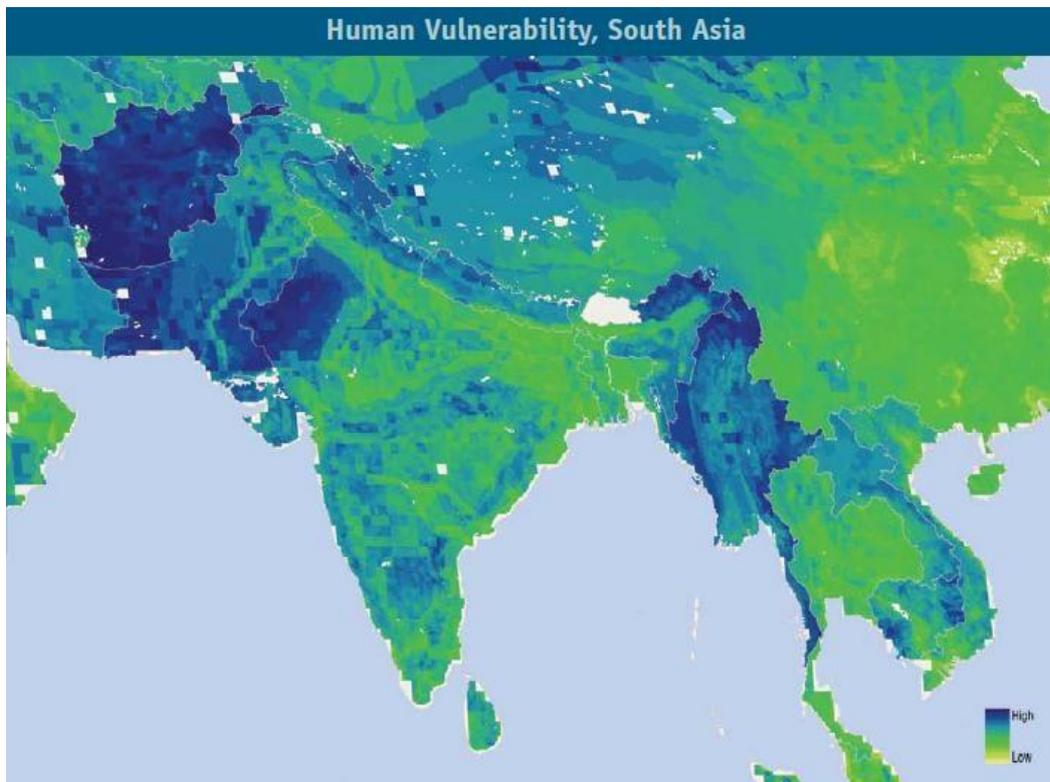
in the next two or three decades there will be widespread changes in the amount of rainfall, shifts in the timing of rainfall and an increase in the number, duration and spatial distribution of droughts, which will contribute to water stress, lower crop yields and wild fire risk. The implications for food and water shortages could be disastrous (UNESCO, 2006) with up to 33% reductions in agricultural yields by 2050 threatening some parts of the world (HM Treasury, 2006). From 1.7 billion in 2000, the number of people in the world impacted by water scarcity is projected to increase to 5 billion by 2025 (World Water Assessment Programme, 2003). It is arguable that long droughts place the greatest pressure on households and livelihoods in terms of displacement (Maplecroft and Care, 2009). Such displacement is usually rural to urban, which creates higher population density in such areas, which in turn harbours its own complications regarding adequate living conditions.

Similar statistics and projections highlighting the ecological crisis could be quoted for a substantial length of time. The human rights implications of the ecological crisis are significant. Merely just these few climate change projections cause blatant breaches in the right to work with protection against unemployment, the right to adequate health, food, clothing, housing, medical care, necessary social services and social protection. It is unclear what other rights could be infringed upon in the future as it is our ability to adapt to the crisis that holds the key. However, in the event of mass displacement and a total breakdown in order, an entire host of articles from the UDHR could be contravened. Disregarding such possibilities, just the projections we are fairly certain of allude to human rights infringement on a staggering scale.

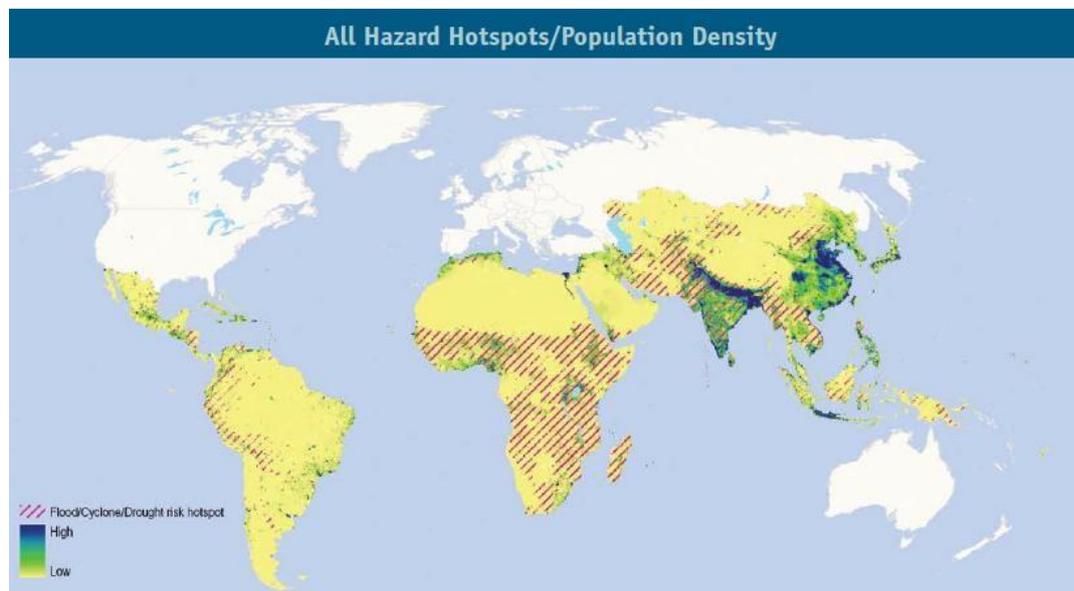
But is it the ecological crisis itself, or our adaptive capacity, to which the level of the threat to human rights can be attributed? How capable are we of staving off the worst of this ecological crisis? Well, it's partly a question of human vulnerability. Poorer people are frequently more exposed to weather hazards, often because they live in less developed, lower-lying countries, but more so that they are simply least equipped to deal with the consequences, both on a personal level and also due to the lack of a supporting institution (UNESCO, 2006). Figure 2 shows the world's hazard hotspots overlaid with population density. It displays clearly that it is the developing world that is most at risk from ecological hazards, and it is these developing nations that have a lower adaptive capacity. Take Burma for an example. It is a hazard hotspot, at high risk from various weather hazards such as flooding, cyclones and drought (Fig 2.). If there were good access to early warnings systems, evacuation contingency plans and backup resources, the impact of an ecological hazard could be severely diminished. However, there are no such things. In 2008 Burma ranked as the second most corrupt country in the world with constantly high levels of widespread human rights violations that occur under one of the most abusive and repressive military regimes in the world (Freedom in the World, 2003; Amnesty International, 1998). Therefore, its human vulnerability is extremely high (Fig 3.).

Pakistan is another high-risk nation (Fig 2.) whose government was criticised in 2010 for its disorganised response to the floods (Witte and Khan, 2010); and even in instances where there has been competent, early response with large international involvement, such as with the 2010 Haiti earthquake, human rights issues arise with the relief efforts. The displacement of people is a large issue to contend with in itself – finding the space and resources to safely relocate entire populations with very little warning. In the displacement camps constructed in the aftermath of the Haiti earthquake, reports from Amnesty International described armed men preying on young girls and women with total impunity (Amnesty International, 2011). It seems with even the greatest effort, we cannot escape the human rights issues that arise from such a hazard. Was this a direct result of the earthquake, though? No, it was an issue of overcrowding, overpopulation, which was simply highlighted by a natural event. Natural disasters occur. Can we blame these for violations of human

rights? Or are we to blame for constructing our civilization on such a thin knife edge that we cannot accommodate any extrinsic factors?



**Figure 2.** A map of South Asia showing human vulnerability as a result of natural hazards and social factors (Maplecroft and Care, 2009).



**Figure 3.** World map showing the hazard hotspots – flood/cyclone/drought – overlaid with population density.

It appears that the lesser developed nations' capacity to respond to an ecological crisis - caused by the incessant development of other nations - is a significant issue. Have we, as humans, brought this upon ourselves, then? Consider this: by developing and growing and trying to better humanity have we in fact caused a situation where we cannot sufficiently defend ourselves against the results of our actions whilst still ensuring no violations of our own humanitarian guide lines? It could be said that our striving for human rights has created a catch-22 situation and that only now has the ecological crisis highlighted the fact.

This, then, could be seen as a fundamental flaw in human rights; a problem that we exacerbate with our skewed priorities. Economic growth and development, often to obtain equal rights, is always at the top of the agenda, while the environment still gets little look in and is sometimes completely disregarded (Gallup, 2005). Earth summits such as that in Johannesburg in 2002 show willing, but targets often seem rather optimistic and unrealistic. The USA, one of the most influential nations in the world was completely absent in 2002, a move that displays the United States' lack of environmental commitment almost as clearly as their evasion of mandatory global emissions caps. Even countries that may like to think of themselves as more eco-minded are still lacking in any sort of real conviction. For example, Canada has recently been criticized for "protecting polluters instead of people" (Anon, 2011) as it has pulled out of the Kyoto climate treaty, just one day after agreeing to a future legally binding deal at the Durban Climate Summit in order to protect the "lucrative but highly polluting exploitation of tar sands". Actions such as these shows that we still have our priorities wrong.

Human rights detach us from the world we live in. They have allowed us to place so much importance on the unbridled quest for development such that even now, as we stare down the proverbial barrel, we cannot seem to prioritize combating climate change above economic growth and development.

The ecological crisis is a threat, and the results of it will violate human rights, but it is how we decide to deal with it that is going to make the difference and by studying the evidence so far it doesn't seem like we are well equipped at all, or even like we are trying that hard. Therefore, surely the main threat to human rights is us and our mentality as humans? By striving for a developed world we have taken and taken and overexploited our natural resources and polluted to such an extent that now the world is "fighting back"; and the only reason we want to combat the ecological crisis is for ourselves, a human-centred reason to stop something that is happening as a result of us being too human-centred. And we don't seem overly willing to compromise growth and development even still. The changes that would need to be made, the cultural shifts that would be required, in order to properly tackle the ecological crisis are too large and it would appear that as humans we would rather have our cake and eat it. We still want to develop and consume and live our lives as we do, and sometimes tiny gestures to the environment are made but never with any real fervour. We have a total anthropocentric mentality that makes us disregard everything but our own civilisation and greed. And it is ironic that this is a threat to human rights far larger and far more fundamental than the ecological crisis or war or famine or anything else.

Perhaps we should reconsider human rights as a notion and merge them with a set of rights for the natural world. Human rights and the protection and well-being of the environment reinforce each other negatively and maybe if we looked at a compromise, a set of rights for everything there may

not even be a crisis. The very fact that we have reached for this industrialised fair world has brought us to the point where our human rights are severely compromised.

So, to answer the question, I don't think that the ecological crisis is *the* human rights concern of the century. In their inherent nature, human rights are the biggest threat to themselves. Human rights are an unsustainable ideology that stem from the same mentality that has brought us to a situation where we cannot help but infringe upon them. The ecological crisis is indeed a concern for humanity, but the main concern to human rights? I think not. It is merely magnifying the fundamental flaw in human rights as an anthropocentric notion that cannot cater to itself.

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