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Environmental Concerns in Global Politics

Environmental issues have become a central part of contemporary world politics, expanding beyond traditional concerns of wars and treaties to include global challenges such as climate change, biodiversity loss, and resource depletion. These issues require coordinated political solutions involving governments and international organisations due to their widespread impact.

Causes of Environmental Degradation

Human activities are the primary cause of environmental degradation, including:

- **Declining Agricultural Land Fertility:** Unsustainable farming practices and overuse of chemical fertilisers have reduced soil quality, threatening food production.
- **Overexploitation of Natural Resources:** Overgrazing, overfishing, and pollution have diminished food production and disrupted ecosystems, exemplified by the Aral Sea crisis.
- **Water Scarcity and Pollution:** Millions lack access to clean water and sanitation, leading to health crises and limiting economic development.

- **Deforestation and Biodiversity Loss:** Rapid forest destruction causes habitat loss, community displacement, and declines in biodiversity.
- **Ozone Depletion:** The thinning ozone layer increases harmful ultraviolet radiation, affecting ecosystems and human health.
- **Coastal Pollution:** Industrial and urban waste pollutes coastal regions, threatening marine life and local economies.

International Agreements and Initiatives

Global awareness has led to key international efforts, including:

- **The Club of Rome and Limits to Growth (1972):** Highlighted the unsustainable nature of economic growth and resource depletion.
- **United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP):** Established post-1972 Stockholm Conference to coordinate global environmental efforts.
- **Earth Summit (1992):** Focused on climate change, biodiversity, and sustainable development, producing agreements like the Framework Convention on Climate Change and Agenda 21.
- **Brundtland Report (1987):** Introduced sustainable development, balancing economic growth with environmental conservation.

The Earth Summit revealed tensions between developed and developing countries regarding environmental responsibilities, with developed nations focusing on emission reductions and developing nations emphasizing economic growth and poverty alleviation.

Exam Question

Q: What are the main causes of environmental degradation, and how have international initiatives addressed these issues?

A: Environmental degradation is caused by unsustainable agriculture, overexploitation of resources, water scarcity, deforestation, ozone depletion, and pollution. International initiatives like the UNEP, Earth Summit, and the Brundtland Report have promoted sustainable development and global cooperation to address these challenges.

The Protection of Global Commons

Global commons are natural resources and areas not owned by any one nation but shared by all, such as the atmosphere, oceans, Antarctica, and outer space. Their protection requires international cooperation and governance.

Challenges and Agreements

Managing global commons is complex due to differing national interests and scientific uncertainties. Important agreements include:

- **1959 Antarctic Treaty:** Limits activities in Antarctica to scientific research and protects its environment.
- **Montreal Protocol (1987):** Aims to reduce substances that deplete the ozone layer.
- **Antarctic Environmental Protocol (1991):** Further protects the Antarctic ecosystem.

The Antarctic region is crucial for climate regulation and biodiversity but faces environmental threats from human activities despite protections.

Common but Differentiated Responsibilities

This principle, established at the 1992 Earth Summit, recognises that developed countries have historically contributed more to environmental degradation and should bear greater responsibility for its remediation, while developing countries should be allowed to pursue sustainable development.

Common Property Resources

These are resources shared within communities, such as forests and water bodies, managed through traditional rights and responsibilities. In India, examples include sacred

groves managed by village communities, which demonstrate sustainable local governance.

Exam Question

Q: What are global commons, and why is their protection important?

A: Global commons are resources like the atmosphere, oceans, Antarctica, and outer space that are shared by all and not owned by any one country. Their protection is important to maintain ecological balance, prevent resource depletion, and ensure sustainable use for future generations. International agreements like the Antarctic Treaty and Montreal Protocol help safeguard these commons.

India's Stand on Environmental Issues and Rights of Indigenous People

India has actively engaged in global environmental efforts while balancing its development needs. It ratified the Kyoto Protocol in 2002 and the Paris Climate Agreement in 2016 but was exempted from emission reduction targets due to its developing country status.

India's Environmental Initiatives

- National Auto-fuel Policy promoting cleaner fuels.
- Energy Conservation Act (2001) to improve energy efficiency.
- Electricity Act (2003) encouraging renewable energy use.
- One of the largest renewable energy programs globally.

Environmental Movements and Resource Geopolitics

Environmental activism has grown globally, with local and international movements advocating for sustainability and community rights. Resource geopolitics involves competition over strategic resources like oil and water, influencing international relations and potential conflicts, especially over shared freshwater resources.

Rights of Indigenous Peoples

Indigenous peoples maintain distinct cultural and economic practices tied to their ancestral lands. In India, Scheduled Tribes face challenges such as displacement due to development projects despite constitutional protections. International solidarity and organisations like the World Council of Indigenous Peoples advocate for their rights and recognition.

Exam Question

Q: How does India balance its environmental responsibilities with development, and what challenges do indigenous peoples face?

A: India participates in global environmental agreements while prioritising economic growth, supported by exemptions in protocols like Kyoto. It has implemented policies promoting clean energy and conservation. Indigenous peoples face marginalisation and displacement despite legal protections, and their rights are advocated by international organisations.

Solved Examples

Example 1: Explain the principle of common but differentiated responsibilities.

Solution: This principle recognises that while all countries are responsible for protecting the environment, developed countries have a greater obligation due to their historical contribution to environmental degradation. Developing countries are allowed to pursue economic growth with support from developed nations.

Practice Set

Easy

- Define global commons with examples.
- List two causes of environmental degradation.

Moderate

- Explain the significance of the Earth Summit 1992.
- Describe India's position on climate change in international forums.

Challenging

- Discuss the challenges in managing global commons and how international agreements address them.
- Analyse the impact of resource geopolitics on international relations.

Answer Key

Easy:

- Global commons are resources shared by all, such as the atmosphere, oceans, Antarctica, and outer space.
- Causes include deforestation and water pollution.

Moderate:

- The Earth Summit was a major conference that produced key agreements on climate change and sustainable development.
- India advocates for common but differentiated responsibilities, emphasising developed countries' greater role in emission reductions.

Challenging:

- Challenges include differing national interests and scientific uncertainties; agreements like the Antarctic Treaty and Montreal Protocol aim to protect shared resources.
- Resource geopolitics affects alliances and conflicts, especially over oil and water resources.

Quick Reference

- **Global Commons:** Shared resources like atmosphere, oceans, Antarctica.
- **Common but Differentiated Responsibilities:** Developed countries bear greater environmental responsibility.
- **Earth Summit 1992:** Key global environmental conference.
- **Kyoto Protocol:** Sets emission reduction targets for developed countries.
- **Paris Agreement:** Global pact to combat climate change.
- **Resource Geopolitics:** Competition over strategic natural resources.
- **Indigenous Rights:** Protection of ancestral lands and cultural practices.

Glossary

- **Deforestation:** The clearing of forests leading to habitat loss and climate impact.
- **Ozone Layer:** A layer in the atmosphere that protects Earth from harmful UV radiation.
- **Montreal Protocol:** International treaty to protect the ozone layer.
- **UNFCCC:** United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change.
- **Common Property Resources:** Resources managed and used collectively by a community.
- **Scheduled Tribes:** Indigenous communities recognised in the Indian Constitution.

| Year | Event | Significance |
|------|----------------------------------|--|
| 1959 | Antarctic Treaty | Protected Antarctica for scientific research and environmental conservation. |
| 1987 | Montreal Protocol | International agreement to reduce ozone-depleting substances. |
| 1991 | Antarctic Environmental Protocol | Further protection of Antarctic environment. |
| 1992 | Earth Summit | Global conference on environment and development; introduced Agenda 21. |
| 1997 | Kyoto Protocol | Set emission reduction targets for developed countries. |
| 2001 | Energy Conservation Act (India) | Promoted energy efficiency. |
| 2002 | India ratified Kyoto Protocol | Committed to global climate efforts with exemptions. |
| 2003 | Electricity Act (India) | Encouraged renewable energy use. |
| 2005 | G-8 Meeting | Addressed global environmental concerns. |
| 2016 | India ratified Paris Agreement | Committed to global climate change mitigation. |