UNIT 1 HISTORY AND DEVELOPMENT OF ENVIRONMENTAL ANTHROPOLOGY

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Learning Objectives

By the end of this unit, you will be able to:

• gain understanding of the ecological relationships between humans and the environment;
• learn the aims and scope of ecological and environmental anthropology;
• know the key authors and theoretical perspectives in environmental anthropology;
• be familiar with the emergence and development of environmental anthropology; and
• discover how ecological and environmental anthropology is shaping new ways of thinking about current local, national and global environmental problems.

1.1 INTRODUCTION

Since its inception, the discipline of Anthropology has broadly dealt with “environmental” questions, including human perceptions of the natural world and the relationship between “Nature” and “Culture,” as well as the ways human populations use culture as an adaptive strategy to cope up with their habitats and ecosystems. Late in the 19th century and early in the 20th studies of humans and their environment moved from the “environmental determinism” of the anthropogeographers, to the “environmental possibilism” of the ethnographers, and to the “cultural ecology” of Julian Steward (for detail see block 2, unit 1). More recently, “Environmental Anthropology” has grown as a specialisation within Anthropology, focusing broadly on the study of environmental issues, problems, and solutions from an anthropological perspective. Assuming that the
Ecology is the study of the interaction between living things and their environment. Human ecology is the study of the relationships and interactions among humans, their biology, their cultures, and their physical environments. Before going to know the meaning, definition and scope of Environmental Anthropology, it is important to first understand what Ecological Anthropology is historically and philosophically speaking, the roots of Western notions of the interrelations between man and environment are very old. Since the 1950s Anthropology has developed approaches to human-environment interactions and developed the concept Ecological Anthropology. Ecological Anthropology is the study of how people interact with their social and biophysical environments. Mostly we try to understand why people behave or think the way that they do. It represents the link between the sciences of ecology and human culture. The core ideas – human adaptation, ecosystems, and environmental change – are similar to those of traditional ecology, but the anthropological notion of culture is added as an additional level of complexity.

1.2 DEVELOPMENT OF ECOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVE IN ANTHROPOLOGY

Interest in the study between people and the environment around them has a long history in anthropology. Since the beginnings of the discipline in the 19th century, scholars have been concerned with the ways in which societies interact with their environment and utilise natural resources, as with the ways in which natural processes are conceptualised and classified (Rival, 1998). Much of this interest centered on the study of subsistence patterns by which populations adapted to particular biophysical conditions. Precisely for this, according to E. F. Moran (1996) environmental research in Anthropology has been a part of the discipline from its very beginning. It is often referred to as the ecological approach in Anthropology. Ecological or environmental approach in Anthropology includes topics as diverse as Primate Ecology, Human Ecology, Ethno-ecology, Historical Ecology, Political Ecology, Ecofeminism, Environmentalism, Environmental Justice, Evolutionary ecology, Traditional Ecological Knowledge (TEK), Conservation, Environmental Risk, Liberation Ecology, and a number of other areas, many of them interdisciplinary in scope and methodology.

1.2.1 Defining Ecological Anthropology

Ecological Anthropology is broadly concerned with people’s perceptions of and interactions with their physical and biological surroundings, and the various linkages between biological, cultural, and linguistic diversity. In Ecological Anthropology topics to be explored from simple to complex and general to specific which include subsistence strategies, the ecology of ethnic foodways, human alteration of the environment, traditional knowledge of wild plants, ethnobiological classification, natural resource sustainability, intellectual property rights among indigenous peoples, the Anthropology of tourism, environmental racism, and conservation policies in both simple and complex societies. It can involve skills like analyzing tape recordings of conversations to find out what
environmental themes are important to people, following people and recording their behaviour, or archeology. Ecological anthropology tries to explore the multilevel ways in which humans adjust to their surrounding by both biological and socio-cultural processes.

Salzman and Attwood (1996) defined Ecological Anthropology is a subfield of anthropology that deals with complex relationships between humans and their environment, or between nature and culture, over time and space. It investigates the ways that a population shapes its environment and may be shaped by it, and the subsequent manners in which these relations form the population’s social, economic, and political life. In a general sense Seymour-Smith (1986) describe show Ecological Anthropology attempts to provide a materialist explanation of human society and culture as products of adaptation to given environmental conditions. According to Ellen (1982) Ecological Anthropology applies a systems approach to the study of the interrelationship between culture and environment. At the heart of contemporary ecological anthropology is an at the heart of contemporary ecological anthropology is an “understanding that proceeds from a notion of the mutualism of person and environment” (Ingold, 1992) and the reciprocity between nature and culture (Harvey, 1996). As such, ecological anthropology is itself closely related to human behavioural ecology and environmental anthropology (Stacy McGrath).

**Activity**

What is the difference between Ecology and Ecological Anthropology?

### 1.2.2 Environmental Determinism Vs. Cultural Determinism

There have been several attempts to structure and organize the area of man-environment relations in anthropology over roughly hundred from now. In the era before the turn of the century, when anthropology was evolving as a distinct discipline, anthropologists and geographers were concerned about the man-environment relationships. Development of basic concepts in ecological anthropology was not as a smooth accumulation of information and insights, but as a series of stages. Every stage was a reaction to the previous one rather than merely an addition to it. “The first stage, is characterised by the work of Julian Steward and Leslie White, the second is termed neo-functionalism and neo-evolutionism, and the third one is called processual ecological anthropology. The attempts to address the similarities and differences of Steward and White mark the second stage of Ecological Anthropology. Boldly oversimplifying, one could argue that there are two main trends in this second stage: the neo-evolutionists, who claimed that Steward and White were both correct, and the neofunctionalists, who argued that they were both wrong” (see Orlove, 1980).

During the late 19th and early the 20th centuries a number of comprehensive treatment of environmental thinking in Anthropology and the environment vs culture controversy have been compiled by socio-cultural anthropologists who have found that an ecological approach is fruitful both in research and teaching. The framework of these theoretical perspectives reviews has been provided by some contrasting major schools of thoughts or conceptual approaches, viz, environmental determinism, environmental possibilism, functionalism, culture-area approaches, cultural ecology, racism, evolutionism, historicism and current approaches in ecological Anthropology including actor-based model, eco-system based model, ethno-ecology and systems-ecology model etc.
The above conceptual and theoretical perspectives you will learn in detail in the block 2, unit 1, 2, and 3. In this unit, I will briefly discuss development stages of basic theoretical Concepts in Ecological Anthropology and history of development of an environmental perspective in Anthropology.

The concept of cultural evolution and the series of ideas on the relationship between culture and environment were developed in early Greek view. This idea was widely accepted throughout the nineteenth century. In the twentieth century ecological anthropology has proposed, or drawn on, several useful and innovative theories. Smith, along with Thomas Malthus (1977), developed the ideas of competition in nature and in human affairs that later fed into contemporary ecological theories.

Ecological Anthropology was named as such during the 1960s, but it has many ancestors, including Daryll Forde, Alfred Kroeber, and, especially, Julian Steward. Columbia University can be identified as the birthplace of Ecological Anthropology. Early studies of humans and their environment moved from the “environmental determinism” of the anthropogeographers, to the “Environmental Possibilism” of the ethnographers, and to the “cultural ecology” of Julian Steward (Michael A. Little, 2007). The first major theory regarding the interaction between culture and environment, one that has been in circulation since the time of classical Greece, is Environmental Determinism (ED), or Environmentalism. In this concept the idea basically states that environment mechanically “dictates” how a culture adapts (for detail see block 2, unit 1). For example, the Polynesians must fish and live in grass huts because they live on tropical islands.

The general orientation of explanations of man-environment interrelations in the United States shifted towards what came to be called “possibilism”/environmental possibilism (EP) in the late 1920s and the 1930s. In possibilism, the environment is seen as a limiting or enabling factor rather than a determining factor. Possibilism is really an interactive process between culture and the environment. Daryll Forde, Boas, Wissler and Kroeber are the believers of this thought (for detail see block 2, unit 1). The common features of the above themes ED and EP are that they conceptualised the interaction between the human and their environment as mainly unidirectional, rather than systematic. They emphasised stages rather than the process.

During the 1920s-30s the time was ripe for a reassessment of the prevalent views on the relation between man, culture, and environment; as well as the evolution of cultures. The inadequacy in explaining cultural diversity, however, remained an issue and in a search for a more precise understanding of the effect of the environment on cultures Steward (1955) developed a methodology called Cultural Ecology. Due to contact with noted geographer Carl Sauer, Steward’s work in cultural ecology led him to examine the effect of environment on culture. In the 1950s-60s significant progress came from the development of what came to be known as “Cultural Ecology,” engaged with the analysis of cultural adaptation to natural environments. He conducted pioneering field research on the interaction of a particular human society and its natural environment in the Western United States working with Shoshone, Paiute, and other Native Americans. He moved cultural ecology a step forward by rejecting the “fruitless assumption that culture comes from culture” (Steward, 1955). Steward searched for the adaptive responses of various cultures to similar environments (Orlove, 1980). He examined the
available resources and distribution in relation to the technology, economic arrangements, social organisation and demography of a certain place. As a result, he identified a ‘culture core’ consisting of the elements of a culture influenced by the environment, i.e. the features most closely related to subsistence activities and economic arrangements. Yet, cultural ecology could neither provide a model for explaining the origin and persistence of cultural features, nor for determining the extent of environmental influence in the evolution of specific cultures (Netting 1977; Orlove, 1980).

As a reaction, in the 1960s and 1970s new schools of thought were formed based on cultural determinism, i.e. the idea that culture influences the environment. One of those schools, ethno-ecology, describes the conceptual models that people have of their environment (see details in the block 2, unit 3). Researchers like Brent Berlin, Harold Conklin, Charles Frake, and others pioneered the development of ethno-ecology. It distinguished, for example, ‘folk nature’ or the perceptions that people have on nature, from ‘real nature’ on which these perceptions are based. The approach used classifications and shared its methods and underlying premises with cognitive Anthropology. In the end, however, neither environmental nor cultural determinism formed a satisfactory basis to describe human-environment relationships. Alternatively, instead of shaping or being shaped by environmental factors, human beings were understood to interact with their environments in mutually constructive ways (Milton, 1996).

1.2.3 The Ecosystem Approach, Human Ecology and Processual Human Ecology

Other approaches followed Cultural Ecology that expanded the scope of environmental research in Anthropology. In the 1960s and 1970s, the field became influenced by new concepts developed by anthropologists who largely structured their data based on ecological models. Roy A. Rappaport, and Andrew P. Vayda (1968), developed an ecosystem approach that treated human populations as one of a number of interacting species and physical components and transformed Cultural Ecology into Ecological Anthropology. While Steward tied culture with the environment, a new approach, called the “new ecology,” tied culture with the emerging science of systems ecology (e.g., Vayda and Rappaport, 1968). The ecosystem approach, brought into play by anthropologists like Rappaport (1968) and Vayda (1969), conceptualised human populations as participants in ecosystems. It was a first attempt to reconcile ecological sciences with functionalism in Anthropology. Research focused, amongst others, on the material outcomes of economic activities and the efficiency of subsistence systems. Yet, the approach was limited with its focus on ‘units’ and ‘populations’ rather than cultures and its preference for small-scale (Island) societies (Rappaport, 1969). They suggested that instead of studying how cultures are adapted to the environment, attention should be focused on the relationship of specific human population to specific ecosystem. In their view, human beings constitute simply another population among the many populations of plants and animals species that interact with each other with the non-living components (climate, soil, water etc) of their local ecosystem. Thus, the ecosystem rather that culture, constitutes the fundamental unit of analysis in their conceptual framework for human ecology. The analytic unit shifted from “culture” to the ecological population, which was seen as using culture as a means (the primary means) of adaptation to environments. It was argued that human cultures were not unique but formed
only one of the population units interacting “to form food webs, biotic communities, and ecosystems” (Vayda and Rappaport, 1968). A broader focus was presented by Human Ecology which was concerned with the ways human populations interact with their environment. Yet, even though it acknowledged the importance of knowledge, information, and people’s understanding of the world (Ellen, 1982), the ecosystem approach excluded the unobservable components of culture.

In the mid 1970s, in contrast to Cultural Ecology, neo-evolutionism and neofunctionalism, another approach emerged: Processual Ecological Anthropology. The use of the term “process” refers to the importance of diachronic studies in Ecological Anthropology and to the need to examine mechanisms of change. However, the term “Processual Ecological Anthropology” signifying current developments in the field does appear to be new. It focused on the processual relationship between the local population and their immediate environment conditioned by the intervention of external political, legal, and economic factors. Important research trends were, amongst others, the relation between demographic variables and production systems, the response of populations to environmental stress, and the formation and consolidation of adaptive strategies (Orlove, 1980). Processual Ecological Anthropology examined shifts and changes in individual and group activities and focused on the mechanisms by which behaviour and external constraints influenced each other. It stimulated the importance of decision-making models in Ecological Anthropology.

Two additional theoretical and methodological frameworks were developed mainly in the 1980s and 1990s to try to render Ecological Anthropology more scientific. The Neomaterialist, Marvin Harris, developed the approach of Cultural Materialism. It is a practical, rather straightforward, functionalist approach to Anthropology with a focus on the specific hows and whys of culture. Marvin Harris vigorously pursued explicitly and systemically the development of cultural materialism as a research strategy to reveal and explain the ecological rationale underlying various aspects of culture. He divided the cultural system into three components infrastructure, structure, and superstructure. Harris argued that the infrastructure is most basic and most influential because it functions as the ultimate adaptive mechanism for the very survival and maintenance of individuals and society as a whole (see details in the block 2, unit 2).

Human behavioural or evolutionary ecology is the second innovative framework pioneered by Eric Alden Smith and Bruce Winterhalder. It shifts attention to individuals as the locus of adaptation with an emphasis on decision making in the use of natural resources ranked according to their relative costs and benefits (optimal foraging theory). This connects human ecology more directly with natural selection and other evolutionary theories. Both of these special frameworks, cultural materialism and human behavioural ecology, have been criticized as simplistic and reductionistic. Nevertheless, both have proven to have some validity and utility in advancing the anthropological understanding of human-environment interactions.

In the following years, anthropologist who had borrowed analytic concepts from other disciplines used them to critique then-prevailing understandings of human-environment relations, including the view that indigenous landuse systems were
inferior to modern scientific models. Numerous research experiences by ecological anthropologists demonstrated the intimate associations between local communities and their environments and the extensive knowledge generated through these associations. The insights acquired into such resource use systems contributed to undermining orthodoxy in natural sciences. Of particular importance was that they showed that these systems were not always destructive for the environment. This was critical for the late-modern move away from a dichotomised conception of nature and culture (Dove, 2001).

Previous research had been largely synchronic, examining a particular society as if it were isolated, traditional, static, and timeless, and also as if the society had no lasting cumulative impact on its environment and the latter was static as well. Ecological anthropology diversified further in 1990s by adding research variously focused on historical, political, or spiritual aspects of human ecology and adaptation. William Balee, John Bennett, and Carole Crumley, among others, developed a diachronic approach to examining the interactions between the sociocultural and environmental systems over extended periods of time as they transformed one another within a regional landscape. Since the 1990s substantial diversification of approaches within ecological anthropology involves a growing emphasis on applied rather than basic research, although certainly the two are often interdependent. However, with the worsening ecocrisis and other factors, increasingly research has concentrated on identifying and solving practical environmental questions, problems, and issues. This is the arena of environmental anthropology per se. Researchers in this arena still pursue various approaches within Ecological Anthropology to investigate matters of survival, adaptation, and change with an emphasis on culture, communities, and fieldwork.

**Activity**

Explain how analytic unit shifted from culture to the ecological population?

### 1.3 DEVELOPMENT OF ENVIRONMENTALISM PERSPECTIVE IN ANTHROPOLOGY

Anthropology traditionally has strong links to the study of the environment through its focus on human interaction in environmental context. This basic connection is depicted by Milton, who says: ‘If one accepts the anthropological cliche´ that culture is the mechanism through which human beings interact with (or, more controversially, adapt to) their environment (Ingold, 1992), then the whole field of cultural anthropology can be characterised as human ecology’.

Since the 1980s, anthropological research on environmental issues has been part of a broad public sphere that has witnessed a sharp increase in environmental concerns and activism throughout the world. That has, in turn, been accompanied by significant interrelational changes between humans and their environment, resulting from the use of new communication and biological technologies. Given the breadth and complexity of environmental issues, academic disciplinary boundaries are easily crossed and new sites of transdisciplinary research have emerged that combine natural and social-scientific approaches in unique ways. Anthropology, however, has specific contributions to make to the wider environmental research field (Paul Little, 1999).
1.3.1 Anthropological Engagement with Environmentalism

In common usage, the term environment is often used as a synonym for Nature (i.e. the biophysical or nonhuman environment), but this usage creates great conceptual confusion because the environment of a particular human group includes both cultural and biophysical elements. By extension, the organism/environment dynamic, which is relational and perspectivist, is often incorrectly fused with the nature/cultured dualism, which is essentialist and substantive. The concept of environment as a research tool allows for the delimitation of a wide range of socio-natural units of analysis that transect the nature/culture division orthogonally (see Paul Little, 1999).

In this context, Paul Little and other anthropologists prefer the term environmentalism to an explicit, active concern with the relationship between human groups and their respective environments. Although “environmentalist” usually refers to political activists, the term can reasonably include persons and groups that are directly involved with understanding and/or mediating this relationship. Thus, anthropologists and other social scientists who are involved in environmental research can be considered as representing the environmental wing of their respective disciplines.

Current environmental research in Anthropology falls into two major areas that have distinct methodologies and objects of study. The first, called Ecological Anthropology, uses ecological methodologies to study the interrelations between human groups and their environment. The second, called Environmental Anthropology involves policy and value orientation, application, analytic unit, scale, and method to study environmentalism as a type of human action.

The sub field Environmental Anthropology holistically understands the importance of cultural perceptions when dealing with environmental issues. There are number of anthropologists who are concerned to engage with the discourse of environmentalism. Initially, let us consider Brosius’ (1999) statement that environmentalism refers broadly to the field of ‘discursive constructions of nature and human agency’. He makes the point that the study of environmentalism should encompass much more than an analysis of the different social movements involved and their various trajectories over time and space. As stated above, he feels that at the crux of environmentalism is the ongoing discourse about human beings and their place within nature. As a postmodernist thinker and an anthropologist, Brosius declares that the relevance of Anthropology in this field of investigation is due to its unique concentration upon the phenomenon of culture. He urges anthropologists to see environmentalism as a ‘rich site of cultural production’ (ibid:277) and stresses that ‘a whole new discursive regime is emerging and giving shape to the relationships between and among natures, nations, movements, individuals, and institutions’ (ibid).

Similarly, Milton depicts environmentalism as a trans-cultural discourse that, not being rooted in any specific culture, spans the local through to the global and now has become a specific cultural discourse existing within, although not bounded by, other cultural systems. Thus, environmentalism is perceived by her to transcend many traditional geographical and conceptual boundaries such as east/west, north/south, first world/third world and left/right. As Milton describes it, environmentalism incorporates ‘all culturally defined environmental
responsibilities, whether they are innovative or conventional, radical or conservative’. Obviously, these responsibilities vary between cultural settings but, as Milton observes, they originate from the recognition that environmental problems are caused by human interaction with the environment. She feels that the key to a viable future lies in a better understanding of human activity (ibid: 11). Furthermore, in her view environmental discourse does not merely articulate perceptions of the environment, it contributes to their formulation. In this way, the whole spectrum of thought is included in Milton’s analysis because a pro-environmentalist stance is not required for discourse to be considered environmental (ibid: 8). If we also take into account Brosius’ description of environmentalism provided earlier, we see that anthropologists have begun to discern environmentalism as being expressed through a myriad of social and cultural relationships and situations. Milton explains this well when she writes:

“In this framework, social movements and political ideologies become specific cultural forms through which environmental responsibilities might be expressed and communicated. Instead of environmentalism being seen as a category of social movement or ideology, these forms of cultural expression become types of environmentalism”. (ibid: 8).

Many environmental problems that have emerged from the multiplicity of interrelations between humans and their environments have been accompanied by a concomitant surge in environmentalisms, each with their respective environmentalists. The ethnographic analysis of and political involvement in these many environmentalisms on the part of anthropologists and other social scientists have generated, during the past two decades, a field of study in its own right.

In recent past there has been much discussion about the relevance of the discipline of Anthropology to the various emergent discourses on the environment. Kay Milton has made a number of important contributions to this area of anthropological investigation over recent years. In 1993 she edited a work, entitled Environmentalism: The View from Anthropology, which attempted to position anthropology more centrally within the multi-disciplinary study of environmentalism (see Milton, 1993). Eeva Berglund is another anthropologist who wishes to establish Anthropology as a legitimate participant in the study of environmentalism. In her book, Knowing Nature, Knowing Science: An Ethnography of Environmental Activism, she explores the role of what she terms ‘techno-science’ in environmental discourse (see Berglund, 1998).

Brosius in his article in Current Anthropology (1999) provides an overview of the engagement by anthropologists in the field of environmentalism, which includes aspects of the past, present and future. He says the recent trend toward anthropological engagement with environmentalism was not at all inevitable. Rather, it is the result of a series of particular historical contingencies, both practical and theoretical. He addressed this by noting significant differences between ‘the Ecological Anthropology of the 1960s and early 1970s and what some are calling the “Environmental Anthropology” of the present. Drawing its insights primarily from the field of ecology, the former is characterised by a persistent interest in localised adaptations to specific ecosystems and by an abiding scientism: to the extent that cultural or ideational factors enter into analyses of this sort, they are viewed primarily with respect to their adaptive significance.
The latter draws its insights from a range of sources: poststructuralist social and cultural theory, political economy, and recent explorations of transnationalism and globalisation, among others.

Brosius’ (1999: 278) assertion that environmentalism refers broadly to the field of ‘discursive constructions of nature and human agency’. He makes the point that the study of environmentalism should encompass much more than an analysis of the different social movements involved and their various trajectories over time and space. As stated above, he feels that at the crux of environmentalism is the ongoing discourse about human beings and their place within nature. As a postmodernist thinker and an anthropologist, Brosius declares that the relevance of Anthropology in this field of investigation is due to its unique concentration upon the phenomenon of culture. He urges anthropologists to see environmentalism as a ‘rich site of cultural production’ (ibid: 277) and stresses that ‘a whole new discursive regime is emerging and giving shape to the relationships between and among natures, nations, movements, individuals, and institutions’ (ibid).

In assessing what lies behind the rather striking growth in interest in environmentalism among anthropologists, Brosius cites three factors. The first is simply the more general trajectory of growth in environmental scholarship across a wide range of disciplines, a process which accelerated in the late 1980s. Indeed, the past decade has witnessed a remarkable florescence in environmental scholarship and the emergence or growth of a host of new subdisciplines: environmental history, environmental ethics, environmental economics, environmental law, environmental security, and political ecology, to name just a few. To the extent that anthropologists have developed an interest in environmentalism, then, we are participating in a larger, transdisciplinary process. One of the things that makes the current moment so promising is the degree to which scholars from a range of disciplines—geography, political science, history, legal studies, science and technology studies, media studies, and others—are engaged in projects that converge on an interest in environmentalism.

This period with great potential for building rich transdisciplinary intersections, and many anthropologists appear to be doing that. One might go so far as to claim that, in the study of environmentalism at least, the boundaries between disciplines are eroding to a degree not seen before.

A second factor leading to the present anthropological interest in environmentalism is the simple fact that so many of us have witnessed the emergence (or arrival) of environmental movements at our field sites. According to Brosius, Fisher and Turner, environmental NGOs have become highly visible players in the terrain that we once thought we could claim as our own—the rural/remote community. As this has occurred, we have seen local communities mobilise or adopt elements of transnational environmental discourse in ways we had not witnessed before (see Brosius, 1999).

A third element that has engendered an interest in environmentalism among anthropologists has been a series of recent theoretical trends both within our discipline and beyond. This is a rather complicated scenario, with a considerable degree of overlap between various areas of theoretical and empirical focus. Most notable, perhaps, has been the trend since the mid-1980s toward what Marcus
and Fischer refer to as “the repatriation of anthropology as cultural critique” (1986). Uncomfortable with the way we see otherness essentialised in indigenous rights campaigns, acculturative processes elided in an effort to stress the authenticity of indigenous peoples, and concepts such as “wilderness” deployed in environmentalist campaigns, we have taken it as our task to provide critical commentary (see Brosius, 1999).

The study of social movements with environmental concerns has expanded the notion of environmentalism in Anthropology to include not only explicitly environmentalist nongovernmental organisations (NGOs) in the northern hemisphere, but also a large number of movements in the industrializing nations of poor or marginalised peoples that are struggling with such environmentally based issues as control over and access to natural resources, encroachment on their lands and livelihood, and protests against environmentally destructive development projects. Martinez-Alier developed the concept of the environmentalism of the poor and it has been applied to India by Guha, who mentions situations that have “pitted rich against poor: logging companies against hill villagers, dam builders against forest tribals, multinational corporations deploying trawlers against artisanal fisherfolk rowing country-boats (see Paul Little, 1999).

In the meantime, women’s environmental movements tend to arise when gender is a determining factor in issues involving the division of labor, access to natural resources, and property relations in ways that are disadvantageous to women (Carney, 1996). In efforts to maintain existing rights or to resist new policies that seek to extinguish them, the emergence of women’s resistance movements that are directly related to environmental issues has generated the new fields of feminist political ecology and ecofeminism. The ways in which these insights have been refracted into other concerns is an important part of the Anthropology engagement with environmentalism (see Paul Little, 1999).

According to Miller (1993) the complex domain of environmental rights refers to those cases where the claims and rights of peoples to territories, natural resources, knowledge systems, and even their bodies are being ignored or abused. The rights of “indigenous or tribal peoplesto the lands and natural resources they have historically occupied and continue to use have been a central focus of anthropologists working with these groups. Anthropological research on various environmental rights issues has been ethnographically well documented by anthropologists. Studies of other environmental issues like biodiversity conservation, displacement, ecodevelopment, and planning are explored by anthropologists within the framework of the concept of resident peoples, which defines highly diverse societies in relation to their presence in protected areas that are taken for granted as an existing good. Importance in contributing anthropologists’ interest in environmentalism has been the work of a series of writers interested in critical examinations of contemporary discourses of development. Anthropologists interventions and efforts to understand the phenomenon of globalisation and the forms of articulation between “the local” and globalizing processes of environmentalism have also been of significance in the field of Environmental Anthropology (see Paul Little, 1999).

**Activity**

What is environmentalism according to anthropologists?
1.3.2 Emergence and Development of Environmental Anthropology

Although the discipline of Anthropology has its origin in the study of small-scale societies, anthropologists began to consider human entities and their environments as located in complex social processes. Greater appreciation of the complexity of social and ecological systems developed alongside a growing interest in interpreting the dynamics of ecological systems in terms of the dynamics of larger political systems. Beyond the study of subsistence communities, scholars enlarged their frame of reference to encompass global structures and situated the cultures they studied within the broader international political economy. The changes in Ecological Anthropology reflect a more general shift in anthropological research drawing attention towards the intersection of global, national, regional and local systems. New approaches emerged mainly in the 1990s concerned with the impact of markets, social inequalities, and political conflicts to analyse forms of social and cultural disintegration associated with the incorporation of local communities into a modern world system (Paulson et al., 2005). It became a challenge for anthropology to study local environmental and social changes associated with global trends. Thereby, anthropologists have shown an extensive interest in questions of nationalism and identity, of focusing on the hybrid relationships between local integration and global politics, places-in-between, and on what has come to be termed modernity (Lovell, 1999). While looking at the mutual processes of definition and appropriation that take place between what has been termed local and global settings, conceptual, spatial, and cultural scales expanded in academic discourse.

A major difficulty in analysing the complexity of human-nature relationship is that no single social theory of environmental phenomena in human experience has been developed, just as there is a lack of methods and basic categories to study them (Arizpe et al., 1996). Finding an appropriate methodology to shed light on amalgamations between nature and culture is the prime challenge in cross-cultural investigation. The understanding of how nature is constructed and resource management is conceived in different cultural settings is not an easy task, for the questions raised and the answers sought lie along the margins of several disciplines. Referring to recent theoretical trends, Brosius writes of a rather complicated scenario that is informed by a considerable degree of overlap between various areas of theoretical and empirical focus (1999). To address both the dynamics of culture and natural resources requires not only transcending disciplinary lines but also that natural and social sciences be brought together. The result, it has been suggested by Nakashima (1998), may be compared to a labyrinth through which one must navigate with caution. This challenge has been taken up by a number of anthropologists with different scopes and research traditions. Out of the multi-layered engagement an environmental anthropology emerged (see Townsend, 2000; Haenn and Wilk, 2006). While the Ecological Anthropology of the 1960s and 1970s was characterised by an interest in localised adaptations to specific ecosystems and by an ethnoscientific gaze, contemporary environmental anthropology is more attentive to issues of power and inequality, the contingency of cultural and historical formations, the significance of regimes of knowledge production, and the acceleration of translocal processes (Brosius, 1999).

The primary approaches within contemporary Ecological Anthropology are cultural ecology, historical ecology, political ecology, and spiritual ecology. Environmental anthropology builds on the above past experience of
anthropologists work. Environmental anthropology blends theory and analysis with political awareness and policy concerns. Accordingly, new subfields have emerged, such as applied ecological anthropology and political ecology (Greenberg and Park, 1994).

As it is threaded through all subfields of the discipline, environmental anthropology combines a multitude of prevailing perspectives and conceptual approaches in multi-sited contexts. Focusing on the interactions of local and global patterns of resource management, a growing body of contributions has appeared examining the dynamic linkages of human societies with their natural environments. The implication of pluralist genres of research involves a wide range of orientations in the emergence of new disciplinary factions. The scale ranges from site-specific studies focused on local economies to perspectives aimed at questions of global scope. At the same time, accounts on environmentalism itself (Argyrou, 2005) and environmental bureaucracies and agencies (Little, 1995) appeared as objects of recent study.

Environmental Anthropology, as you will learn, is a general term that can be applied to many ways of studying humans as integral components of the environment. Environmental Anthropology may be viewed as the study of applied action and/or advocacy research to address practical environmental questions, problems, and concerns. Often, new policy is the outcome of such applied action or research. In most cases, such study centers upon the dynamic interaction between human beings and their ecosystems or natural environments. Although Environmental Anthropology only emerged in the 1980s, it has flourished since the 1990s.

**1.3.3 Definition and Scope of Environmental Anthropology**

Environmental Anthropology is a more recent outgrowth of Ecological Anthropology, which can be characterised as the study of the interrelationship between human groups, cultures, and societies and the ecosystems in which they are embedded in all times and all places across planet earth. Scholars have delineated Environmental Anthropology as becoming more prominent in the 1980s and typically focusing on analysis and application of anthropological knowledge to contemporary environmental issues. Ecological and Environmental anthropology can most productively be viewed as a single interrelated discipline, with Ecological Anthropology focusing more on basic academic research and Environmental Anthropology being more focused on contemporary environmental issues and having more of an applied, practicing, critical, and/or advocacy approach.

According to Peter Brosius (1999) Environmental Anthropology provides a broad disciplinary framework. He describes Environmental Anthropology as investigating discourse, power, knowledge, resistance, development, cultural studies, and political ecology through transdisciplinary work, and he identifies three major current trends: a critique of essentialised images, an emphasis on contestation and consideration of stakeholders, and an interest in globalisation.

Environment anthropology studies the way communities and social groups identify and solve environmental problems by examining culturally diverse perceptions, values and behaviours. Environmental anthropology contributes to policy formulation and planning by improving and facilitating the communication
process among diverse stakeholder groups. Environmental Anthropology helps bridge the gaps between scientists, resource managers and resource users and the public (Society for Applied Anthropology, 2002).

Kottak (1999) describe Environmental Anthropology is a new approach linking global to local systems, blends theoretical and applied research, focuses on political aspects, and recognizes culture as mediating in ecological processes rather than as merely an adaptive tool. In Environmental Anthropology, everything is on a larger scale. The focus is no longer mainly the local ecosystem. The “outsiders” who impinge on local and regional ecosystems become key players in the analysis, as contact with external agents and agencies (for example, migrants, refugees, warriors, tourists, developers) has become commonplace. Concerned with proposing and evaluating policy, Environmental Anthropology attempts not only to understand but also to devise culturally informed and appropriate solutions to such problems and issues as environmental degradation, environmental racism, and the role of the media, NGOs, and various kinds of hazards in triggering ecological awareness, action, and sustainability. Environmental anthropologists focus on new units of analysis—national and international, in addition to the local and regional, as these levels vary and link in time and space. Entering into a dialogue with schools of natural resources and the environment, anthropology’s comparative perspective adds an international dimension to the understanding of issues like environmental justice and ecosystems management, which natural resource specialists have been studying for decades.

Environmental Anthropology increasingly contributing research of broader relevance to the local, national, international, and global communities in coping with natural resources, hazards, and other environmental problems and issues. In various ways anthropologists have addressed pivotal environmental issues including the population explosion, natural resource depletion such as soil erosion, unsustainable economic development and consumption levels, habitat destruction like deforestation, biodiversity loss, environmental mismanagement, pollution, hazards, environmental problems, conflict zones, climate change and environmental justice. Environmental anthropology have developed the foundation, maturity, momentum, and achievements to continue to contribute to our understanding and advancement of human ecology and adaptation from the local to the global levels as long as humanity has a future.

Increasing interest in environmentalism in recent years has shaped anthropology’s role in analyzing these efforts. Brosius (1999) believes the goal is not simply to understand human impact on the environment, but also to investigate how the environment is constructed, represented, and contested, recognizing the power of discourse in creating reality, especially in the perpetuation of structures of domination. He discusses the recent growth of environmental NGOs, national agencies, and transnational institutions concerned with the environment as well as the resulting theoretical trends in Anthropology that critique environmental movements, rhetoric, and representations of indigenous people. He also describes eco-politics, community-based conservation, and environmental racism as other current topics of interest in environmental anthropology.

As Thin (1996) writes, Environmental Anthropology enhances the understanding not only of natural resources, human needs and uses of those resources, but also
of the spatial arrangements by which resources are appropriated and managed. Cross-cultural comparison based on evidence from long-term studies of such locally adapted arrangements may promote better global understanding of the conditions under which resource management remains sustainable or else results in deterioration. Multidisciplinary research teams incorporating high tech resources such as geographical information systems, remote sensing, and satellite data imaging etc.

**Activity**

What is environmental anthropology and how did it emerge?

### 1.4 SUMMARY

Anthropology has a long history of exploring many facets of human-environment interaction. Since the beginnings of the discipline in the 19th century and early in the 20th century, scholars have been concerned with the ways in which societies interact with their environment and utilise natural resources, as with the ways in which natural processes are conceptualised and classified. Since, the 1950s and 60s Anthropology has developed approaches to human-environment interactions in Ecological Anthropology. Ecological Anthropology is the study of how people interact with their social and biophysical environments.

Ecological Anthropology was named as such during the 1960s, but it has many ancestors, including Daryll Forde, Alfred Kroeber, and, especially, Julian Steward. Columbia University can be identified as the birthplace of Ecological Anthropology. Early studies of humans and their environment moved from the “Environmental Determinism” of the anthropogeographers, to the “environmental possibilism” of the ethnographers, and to the “Cultural Ecology” of Julian Steward (Michael A. Little, 2009). Steward’s cultural ecology influenced the ecological anthropology of Roy Rappaport and Andrew P. Vayda, but the analytic unit shifted from “culture” to the ecological population, which was seen as using culture as a means (the primary means) of adaptation to environments.

The Ecological Anthropology of the 1960s and 70s was known for its functionalism, and systems theory. The studies in the in Ecological Anthropology pointed out that natives did a reasonable job of managing their resources and preserving their ecosystems but those studies, relying on the norm of cultural relativism, generally aimed at being value-neutral. Anthropologists examined the role of cultural practices and beliefs in enabling human populations to optimize their adaptations to their environments and in maintaining undegraded local and regional ecosystems.

By contrast, the new ecological, or environmental, Anthropology blends theory and analysis with political awareness and policy concerns. Accordingly, new subfields have emerged, such as applied Ecological Anthropology and Political ecology (Greenberg and Park, 1994).

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delineated Environmental Anthropology as becoming more prominent in the 1980s and typically focusing on analysis and application of anthropological knowledge to contemporary environmental issues. Ecological and Environmental Anthropology can most productively be viewed as a single interrelated discipline, with Ecological Anthropology focusing more on basic academic research and Environmental Anthropology being more focused on contemporary environmental issues, problems and having more of an applied, practicing, critical, and/or advocacy approach.

Environmental Anthropology increasingly contributing research of broader relevance to the local, national, international, and global communities in coping with natural resources, hazards, and other environmental problems and issues. In various ways anthropologists have addressed pivotal environmental issues including the population explosion, natural resource depletion such as soil erosion, unsustainable economic development and consumption levels, habitat destruction like deforestation, biodiversity loss, environmental mismanagement, pollution, hazards, environmental problems, conflict zones, and climate change. Environmental Anthropology have developed the foundation, maturity, momentum, and achievements to continue to contribute to our understanding and advancement of human ecology and adaptation from the local to the global levels as long as humanity has a future.

1.5 REFERENCES


**Suggested Reading**


**Sample Questions**

1) Distinguish between Ecological and Environmental anthropology?

2) Describe briefly about theoretical perspectives and current approaches in Ecological Anthropology?

3) Define Environmental Anthropology and its scope?

4) Discuss the aspects of anthropological engagements with environmental discourse?

5) How did environmental anthropology emergence explain?