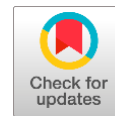


The role of human beings as Caliphs in preserving nature



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Abstract Islam is a comprehensive religion that encompasses all aspects of society's life, including social, economic, political, cultural, and environmental dimensions. The environment is regarded as a manifestation of God's greatness, containing pearls of wisdom bestowed upon human beings to make them realize that everything is under the control of God (Allah SWT). However, the balance of nature can be disrupted by excessive exploitation caused by human activities. This is evident in various contemporary environmental issues, particularly in terms of biodiversity and climate. As Caliphs on Earth, human beings bear the responsibility of actively safeguarding the environment. Furthermore, Islam emphasizes the implementation of responsible development and adherence to the principles of sustainability. Therefore, this study focuses on the role of human beings as Caliphs on Earth, highlighting their responsibility in conserving and preserving the environment. The study examines two main aspects, namely education and politics, that can contribute to effective environmental preservation. The research methodology employed in this study is a library survey.

Keywords: environment, human beings, caliph, faith and nature

1. Introduction

Under the control and direction of Allah SWT, the entire universe, from the smallest to the largest, whether perceivable by human beings or not, fall. Muslims believe in the existence of the invisible (ghaib) world, which encompasses angels, devils, the hereafter, heaven, hell, and demons (jinn). Likewise, the visible aspects of nature, such as water, plants, and animals, are creations of Allah SWT that exist around human beings. These elements of nature, like all other creations, have their designated place and role, perfectly crafted by Allah SWT. Furthermore, the equilibrium of nature is maintained through various processes, such as the creation of gases in the air, the occurrence of photosynthesis, and the existence of human beings, animals, plants, and the celestial bodies beyond the earth's atmosphere.

The term "environment," as defined by Miller (2002), encompasses all external factors and conditions that impact living organisms, including air, water, light, animals, humans, the sun, and others. According to Idris al-Marbawi's dictionary (1998, p.40), nature is defined as "الله سوي ما," which translates to "anything other than Allah SWT." From an Islamic perspective, it can be concluded that nature encompasses all creatures created by Allah SWT, both visible and invisible. These creatures can be categorized into four groups: firstly, those that can be seen with the naked eye, such as stones, wood, and water. Secondly, those that cannot be seen with the naked eye but can be observed using manufactured devices like microscopes, such as atoms and bacteria. The third category includes beings that can be physically felt but not seen, such as wind, air, and electric current. Lastly, there are creatures whose existence can be felt instinctively but cannot be perceived by any of the senses or human-made tools, such as angels, devils, and demons (jinn).

To fulfill the role of responsible caliphs and actively preserve the environment, individuals can take various actions. Examples include reducing plastic waste, conserving water, and planting trees. Through making small yet significant changes in our daily lives, we can collectively have a positive impact on the environment and fulfill our duty as caliphs.

Overall, it is evident that human beings have a crucial role in preserving the environment, and Islam emphasizes this responsibility. By adopting sustainable and accountable actions, we can fulfill our duty as caliphs and safeguard the environment for future generations.

2. Literature Review

The role of human beings as caliphs in preserving nature is emphasized in the Book of Allah SWT (al-Quran). Human beings hold a special position among Allah SWT's creations on Earth due to their endowed intellect ('aql) compared to other creatures. They have been chosen as representatives to take care of God's creation. This is stated in surah al-Isra, verse 70,



which states: "Indeed, We have dignified the children of Adam, carried them on land and sea, granted them good and lawful provisions, and privileged them far above many of Our creatures" (translated by Dr Mustafa Khattab).

As caliphs on this Earth, human beings have an obligation to act in accordance with the decree of Allah SWT. They must realize that while they are the best of Allah SWT's creation, they can also become the lowest and dirtiest if they are unfaithful to Allah SWT and His Messenger. This is evident in surah at-Tin, verses 4 to 6, which state: "We have certainly created man in the best of stature; then We return him to the lowest of the low, except for those who believe and do righteous deeds, for they will have a reward uninterrupted" (translated by Saheeh International).

Furthermore, a human being with a strong belief in tauhidiyyah (the oneness of Allah SWT) will face no challenges in fulfilling their Shariah duties. They should be aware of their responsibility as soon as Allah SWT entrusts them with it and equip themselves with sufficient knowledge to comprehend the concept of the governed environment. Al-Quran mentions in surah al-A'raf, verse 74: "And remember when He made you successors after the 'Aad and settled you in the land, [and] you take for yourselves palaces from its plains and carve from the mountains, homes. Then remember the favors of Allah and do not commit abuse on the earth, spreading corruption" (translated by Saheeh International).

As social beings, human beings share the same ecology and biology as other beings, ensuring the continuation of life. They should possess a sense of gratitude and responsibility to preserve Allah SWT's creation in nature. This message is recorded in the Quran, surah an-Naml, verse 31, which states: "Be not haughty with me but come to me in submission [as Muslims]" (translated by Saheeh International).

Moreover, engaging in actions forbidden by Allah SWT that lead to the destruction of well-created creations demonstrates disrespect towards Him, the Supreme. Human beings must realize that everything in the universe solely belongs to Allah SWT and they are not its explicit owners, even though they are given the freedom to use natural resources. They should not misuse these resources beyond their needs and expectations. Allah SWT reminds of this in surah al-A'raf, verse 85, which says: "...and do not defraud people of their property, nor spread corruption in the land after it has been set in order. This is for your own good, if you are 'truly' believers" (translated by Dr Mustafa Khattab).

The Quran emphasizes multiple times the role of human beings as caliphs in general, and specifically as Muslims, in bearing the responsibility as guardians of the environment. Every action will be questioned on the Day of Judgment. However, the current disruptions and imbalances in the ecosystem demonstrate significant environmental damage. For instance, in January 2022, 12 sea turtles were found dead in Terengganu, which is a deeply concerning tragedy. The two main causes identified for this drastic loss were trawlers and the rubbish being thrown into the sea (Norhaspida Yatim 2022). These human misconduct have disrupted the equilibrium in the ecosystem and led to the tragic deaths of these protected and conserved sea creatures.

From another perspective, Islam has long emphasized the significance of plants in preserving the environment and mitigating the effects of climate change. Prophet Muhammad SAW consistently prohibited the destruction of trees during warfare and encouraged the act of planting trees. In a hadith, the Prophet SAW stated that anyone who plants a tree or sows seeds, and then a bird, person, or animal benefits from it, will be rewarded with charitable acts (Bukhari Hadith). Additionally, during times of war, the Prophet SAW explicitly forbade the destruction of trees and plants due to their usefulness as a shelter for troops. However, when these plants and trees are not protected, the consequences can be seen in natural disasters such as floods and landslides, as witnessed in Malaysia in late 2021, where uncontrolled logging and unplanned development were identified as the causes of the tragedy (Syed Mohd Hazique Syed Nor 2022).

Furthermore, the present-day climate change is a clear example of how those responsible have failed in their duty. Industrialization has led to a dramatic destruction of habitats, with forests being cleared for timber and ecosystems being disrupted for the construction of roads, strip mines, and gravel pits. The destruction of these habitats not only affects the local ecosystem but also contributes to the extinction of plants and animals that are unable to migrate and adapt to the new environment.

In recent times, Malaysia has intensified its efforts to protect the highly endangered and nearly extinct Malayan tiger (harimau Malaya). With the current population of this species recorded at less than 150, immediate action is needed to prevent the extinction of this national symbol. The main threats to this species are the loss of habitat and food sources due to changes in land use, as well as poaching and illegal trade (Maisarah Sheikh Rahim 2022). This serves as undeniable evidence of the impact of uncontrolled human activities on the ecosystem.

Human beings have repeatedly disregarded the warnings and reminders about the importance of preserving nature, leading to irresponsible acts. The Quranic verse in Surah ar-Rum, verse 41, states that: "Corruption has appeared throughout the land and sea by [reason of] what the hands of people have earned so He [i.e., Allah] may let them taste part of [the consequence of] what they have done that perhaps they will return [to righteousness]" (translated by Saheeh International).

The death of sea turtles, floods and landslides, and the threat of extinction to the Malayan tiger are all examples of the corruption and consequences resulting from these irresponsible actions.

The combination of the concepts of tauhid (oneness of Allah SWT), khilafah (representation), and trust in the sustainable management of natural resources is supported by the Islamic perspective on environmental conservation (Maidin 2007). Preserving the environment should be understood as a religious obligation, and every individual must take responsibility for it.

Engaging in environmental management and conservation is considered a virtuous act of worship ('ibadat) solely for the sake of Allah SWT, and every effort made in this regard is rewarded by Him. Conversely, actions that go against religious teachings not only harm the environment but also invite divine retribution. The environmental crisis we are facing today is a result of human greed and failure to fulfill their entrusted role as guardians of nature.

According to Abd Rahman et al (2018), the decline in responsible attitudes towards environmental care is due to the lack of appreciation for Islamic values related to environmental management based on the Quran and Sunnah. The current process of modernization has witnessed extreme actions by humans driven solely by profit, causing damage to God's creation (Mohd Noor et al 2012). Therefore, preserving the sustainability of nature remains a significant challenge for human beings. Even in the current year 2022, despite various efforts made for nature preservation, the Global Risks Report 2022 published by the World Economic Forum highlights that three out of the top ten global risks in the next ten years are related to the environment, including climate issues, extreme weather events, and loss of biodiversity. Moreover, half of the listed risks are associated with environmental concerns, including damage to the human environment and loss of natural resources (Astro Awani 2022).

Furthermore, al-Quran, which was revealed to Prophet Muhammad SAW, serves as a complement to Islamic law. Thus, Islam is seen within the global community as the optimal solution for people (ummah) in this world. Efforts should be made by human beings to address and prevent environmental damage by adhering to Islamic teachings, which serve as an impeccable guide in their lives in accordance with Maqasid Syariah (purpose of legislation). The sustainability of the environment can be achieved through the guidance of Islam based on al-Quran. This aligns with the narration by Abdullah bin Abbas in the book Fathu Barri, which states: "Islam is the highest religion, nothing more than that."

Moreover, Okour (2013) elucidated the three main areas that reflect the ethics of sustainable development. Firstly, the equilibrium of the environment can be achieved by appreciating its components. Secondly, the value of environmental management should focus on human beings as the sole representatives responsible for the care of the environment. Thirdly, plans should be implemented to protect the environment.

Respect for the advantages of science and the role of scientists in developing new technologies to protect the environment is also necessary. Green technology is viewed as capable of minimizing the negative impacts of human activities while contributing to Islamic civilization (Norizan et al 2016). Islam has long recognized the significance of trees in safeguarding the environment and mitigating the effects of climate change, as outlined in the rules concerning environmental sustainability.

3. Research Methodology

The research methodology employed in this study follows a library research design, which relies on secondary sources to gather the most relevant information. The data collection process involved consulting various materials, including books, the Quran, hadith, articles, reports, and scholarly research. These sources were accessed both in print and online formats.

4. Results and Discussion

The primary role of human beings is seen as the caliph in the creation of the world. The term "caliph" (khalifah) originates from the word khalafa (خلف), which means to follow or come after, or the more accurate term is 'substitute'. The concept of human beings as caliphs on Earth can be summarized by five main characteristics: 1) representative (khalifah), 2) trust, 3) leadership (qiyadah/siyadah), 4) religious worship (ibadah/ubudiyah), and 5) trial (ibtilla') (Rahman et al 2018). As caliphs, humans have the responsibility to manage, govern, and protect the Earth. However, humans often betray the warning and reminder of the importance of caring for nature by engaging in irresponsible acts. Human beings should manage natural resources in an organized manner as stewards of Allah SWT. The Quran itself warns against excessive waste and exploitation (Abdelzاهر et al 2019).

Furthermore, al-Qaradawi (1995) states that nature is a gift from Allah SWT to all beings (makhluk) that inhabit it. For Muslims, appreciating the environment is enhanced by exploring the various messages entrusted by Allah SWT through the Quran. The Quran describes the significance of nature from an Islamic perspective, as stated in Surah az-Zumar, verse 21:

"Do you not see that Allah sends down rain from the sky and makes it flow as springs [and rivers] in the earth; then He produces thereby crops of varying colors; then they dry and you see them turned yellow; then He makes them [scattered] debris. Indeed, that is a reminder for those of understanding" (translated by Saheeh International).

Thus, the environment is intertwined with one's faith in God, and it is reflected in human behavior by emphasizing morality (akhlak) as the core of the relationship between humans, nature, and God (Haliza 2019). These relationships need to be comprehensively emphasized to maintain and preserve sustainable development. Islam encourages its ummah to utilize the creations of the universe properly and to avoid treating them carelessly, as this could lead to future disasters. However, hidden behind these blessings is a test from Allah SWT to measure the extent of human trust in living in a way that pleases Him and their efforts to maintain a harmonious environment.

Furthermore, it should be known that Allah SWT has appointed human beings as caliphs on this Earth, making them responsible for maintaining a harmonious nature and proactively looking after the environment. The entire Earth has been

created as a place of worship, clean, and holy. Therefore, it is incumbent upon human beings to wisely and thoughtfully preserve the natural resources that Allah SWT has exclusively entrusted to them for use and utilization. The purpose of these natural resources is not for arrogance or pride, but rather for human beings to learn the meaning of gratitude and humility (piety, taqwa).

Preserving the balance of nature is the responsibility of every human being as a caliph. However, as mentioned by Abd Rahman et al (2018), the lack of Islamic values can diminish the sense of responsibility towards the environment, and thus these values must be instilled from childhood. This can be achieved through education. In Malaysia, environmental education is implemented as early as primary school, through various subjects such as Moral Education, Geography, Language, Civic Education, and especially Islamic Education (Haliza Abdul Rahman 2018). The Philosophy of Islamic Education highlights one of its objectives as instilling responsibility for the development of nature towards goodness (Noraziah Mhd Yusop & Latipah Sidek 2010). Starting from primary school, environmental responsibility is nurtured within the children of Malaysia, as demonstrated in the Standard Document for Assessment and Curriculum in Primary School Standard Curriculum (DSKP KSSR) for Year Six Islamic Education, where pupils are taught about attitudes towards the environment (Ministry of Education Malaysia, n.d). This is a preparation to mold them into responsible "little caliphs of the world" who recognize their role as caliphs in preserving nature, even from a young age.

However, environmental education among students should not only involve theoretical aspects but also practical approaches. This can be seen through the efforts of the Department of Environment Malaysia in the Sustainable School - Nature Gift program. In this program, students are taught about their role in building a sustainable school, and they are encouraged to put these teachings into practice in real life, thereby maintaining nature preservation in the school environment (Department of Environment Malaysia 2021). This educational approach in instilling environmental values among children and students aligns with the area suggested by Okour (2013) of creating the equilibrium of the environment by appreciating its components.

Meanwhile, nurturing a sense of responsibility as caliphs for nature preservation among adults can be achieved through politics, where authorities can leverage their power to mobilize communities towards intensive natural preservation actions. According to Haliza Abdul Rahman (2021), political commitment should prioritize environmental issues. Authorities such as Sultans and politicians have the ability to influence people, as their words hold great influence and are accessible to the public through mass media. This can be witnessed in a recent speech by His Highness Sultan Nazrin of Perak, where he fulfilled his role by educating people that preserving nature is everyone's responsibility (Media Baharu 2022).

Moreover, the government in power is actively accelerating actions for nature preservation. The current government has demonstrated its commitment to this responsibility through the National Budget for the year 2022. During the announcement, Minister of Finance, Tengku Datuk Seri Zafrul Abdul Aziz, stated that RM450 million would be allocated for national nature and biodiversity preservation (HM Digital 2021).

Prominent politicians, such as Vice President of UMNO, Datuk Seri Mohamad Hasan, have also emphasized the need for aggressive and radical actions to prepare the country for the challenges posed by climate change (Malaysiakini.com 2022).

The actions taken by these public figures align with the main area suggested by Okour (2013) for sustainable development, which emphasizes the value of environmental management focused on human beings as the sole representatives responsible for looking after the environment. Based on the previous discussions, it can be observed that every individual, whether a child, a secondary school student, a minister, a politician, or a Sultan, can play a role in effectively preserving nature. This is because every human being on this Earth is a caliph of Allah SWT.

6. Conclusions

The universe and the environment that surrounds us offer countless benefits to both the living and the deceased, serving as undeniable evidence of the existence of Allah SWT. It is our utmost responsibility as human beings to worship Allah SWT, seek rewards in this world and the hereafter, and simultaneously uphold the preservation and reverence of our environment. However, despite the unequivocal messages from Allah SWT regarding the paramount importance of environmental conservation, regrettably, many individuals fail to prioritize their relationship with the environment, resulting in its gradual degradation and destruction.

To address this pressing issue, it is incumbent upon each individual to personally assume responsibility by embracing sustainable practices that effectively reduce their carbon footprint. These practices encompass conscientiously conserving energy, minimizing transportation usage, and adopting a plant-based diet that promotes environmental sustainability. Furthermore, supporting environmental organizations, actively engaging in community-driven clean-up initiatives, and fervently advocating for the implementation of environmentally conscious policies can collectively contribute to meaningful change at both local and national levels. Preserving nature transcends being solely a religious obligation; it is an unequivocal moral duty that must be conscientiously fulfilled. By steadfastly safeguarding our environment, we are able to truly embrace our roles as caliphs and positively impact the world we inhabit.

Ethical considerations

Not applicable.

Conflict of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

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