Spiritual Ecology: Rediscovering Islamic Stewardship of Nature

By Alena Demirovic

Bio

Alena Demirovic is a PhD candidate at the University of Vermont's Rubenstein School of Environment and Natural Resources, her research focuses on Islamic ecological ethics and the role of spiritual traditions in addressing environmental and social challenges. Born in Bosnia, raised in Canada, and now residing in Vermont, she holds a bachelor's degree from Champlain College and a master's degree from Boston University School of Theology. With her extensive experience in cross-cultural education and interfaith dialogue, Alena brings a fresh and engaging perspective to sustainability, resilience, and ethical leadership issues.

Abstract

Over fourteen centuries ago, in the Cave of Hira, Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) received the first revelation, embracing a Divine call to guide humankind and protect all creation.¹ The ongoing environmental crises stemming from global warming, widespread deforestation, pollution, and resource depletion highlight a critical disconnect between environmental degradation and our spiritual values.² As these challenges escalate, there is a pressing need to revisit spiritual perspectives that foster a deep respect for Nature and promote responsible behavior among individuals. Recognizing Islam as a religion that advocates moderation, this paper will examine how its teachings can serve as a comprehensive ethical and theological framework highlighting the sacredness of Nature and the crucial role humanity plays as its steward. Additionally, it will convey a personal connection as a Muslim who feels a profound bond with Nature, intertwining personal beliefs, environmental concerns, and the urgent need for environmentally focused activism within the faith, underscoring the emotional dimensions of the environmental crisis. As such, the essay critiques the current neglect of environmental ethics among Muslim leaders and advocates for a renewed awareness of ecological issues among Islamic communities. Aimed at a broad audience, including Muslim communities, interfaith groups, scholars, and policymakers, it hopes to inspire and foster dialogue about how religious frameworks, particularly Islamic teachings, can play a vital role in advancing ecological change. It is a call to action, emphasizing that we possess the tools and the potential to effect meaningful change in response to environmental crises.

Keywords: Islam, environment, nature, spirituality, interfaith dialogue.

Introduction

More than fourteen centuries ago, in the stillness of the desert cave of Hira, Prophet Muhammed, peace be upon him, received his first whisper of revelation. In that sacred moment, he embraced a Divine calling to guide humanity and honor and protect the Earth, sky, and all other living things within it.³ The urgency of the global community's environmental crises, ranging from food waste and water insecurity to deforestation and plastic-chocked seas and oceans, echoes a painful truth

¹ (Qur'an, Chapter 96, Verses 1-19)

² (Robinson 2025)

³ (Qur'an, Chapter 96, Verses 1-19)

that we have forgotten how to honor Nature.⁴ What was once sacred has been reduced to resources, and the consequences are now rising like a tide. These warnings call for action and a return to reverence, responsibility, and the quiet wisdom of living in harmony with the world that sustains us. In a world losing balance, the example of Prophet Muhammad's care for Nature is a poignant reminder. ⁵ Our faith traditions, often left on the margins of modern discourse, hold rich and powerful wisdom, inviting us to see the Earth not as a possession but as a trust and to discover a more sacred way of living with it. For many Muslims, including myself, this sacred tapestry of beliefs, woven from the threads of Qur'anic teachings and the Prophetic tradition, unveils a vision of Nature not to be exploited and taken for granted but as a living sign of the Divine, calling for our respect, protection, and care.

This article embarks on a transformative journey through the heart of Islamic teachings, where accountability, unity, and the conscious rejection of waste offer a deeply grounded ethical and theological framework for environmental responsibility. At its core are the principles of the Oneness of God, Stewardship, Trust, and Wastefulness, each calling Muslims to live in balance with Nature, uphold the sanctity of all living things, and, within this Divine framework, care for an environment transcendence obligation. Ultimately, it will become an act of worship, an expression of spiritual devotion, and a humbled acknowledgment of the sacred trust bestowed upon humanity by God Almighty.

Weaving together scholarly insight and personal reflection, this article seeks to explore Islam's sacred call to protect Nature and honor its gifts. Rooted in the author's own journey as a Muslim deeply connected with Nature, it offers a bridge between theology and lived experience, an attempt to show how the ethical heart of Islam can guide and inspire the urgent work of environmental activism today. Furthermore, it critiques the lack of attention given by many current Muslim leaders to ecological concerns, which could, if otherwise, help influence climate change perceptions and mitigation activities, advocating instead for a revival of eco-consciousness within Muslim communities.⁶

By drawing on classical Islamic sources, the works of modern scholars like Seyyed Hossein Nasr⁷, interfaith intellectuals such as Howard Thurman⁸ and Karen Armstrong⁹, and integrating the author's reflections, which will add a personal level to the academic discourse, this article situates Islamic environmental ethics within the urgent context of global ecological challenges. This approach beckons a call for faith-based environmental stewardship as a sacred imperative for Muslims and a profound contribution to the broader movement for environmental justice and the healing of our wounded world.

Theological Foundations in Islam: A Sacred Call to Environmental Stewardship

Islamic teachings gently signal us to live in harmony with Nature, guiding us to see it as a living manifestation of the Divine and not a commodity. This kind of trust calls us to tread lightly upon the Earth, urgently honoring its beauty and protecting its ever-so-fragile balance, a responsibility we cannot afford to ignore. At the heart of this vision lies the core principles of the Oneness of God (Arabic: $Tawh\bar{\imath}d$), Stewardship (Arabic: $Khil\bar{\imath}fah$), Trust (Arabic: $Am\bar{\imath}nah$), Wastefulness (Arabic: $Isr\bar{\imath}f$), and Reverence, each offering a profound reminder that we, humankind, are not

⁴ (Robinson 2025)

⁵ (Dargin 2023)

⁶ (Mohamed 2016)

⁷ (Nasr 1997)

⁸⁽Thurman 1981)

⁹ (Armstrong 2022)

masters of the Earth, but its humbled caretakers. These principles invite us to pause, reflect, and recognize the sanctity of the world around us and our role as guardians of a creation that is a gift and a responsibility.¹⁰

1. The Oneness of God (Tawhīd)

At the heart of Islamic teachings lies the Oneness of God, a truth that reaches far beyond acknowledging God as a Creator. It is a vision of unity binding us, like a sacred thread woven through the blue sky, the fertile soil, the deep blue sea, and every living soul. In this light, the centuries-old trees, the deep green rivers, the strong winds, and the creatures of the Earth are not separate from the Divine. Instead, they are signs of it, each a testament to God's will and wisdom. To embrace the Oneness of God is to see the world as a whole and to know ourselves not as rulers of Nature but as part of its rhythm, called to live with humility, balance, and care.

The Qur'an often speaks of the signs scattered across Creation, inviting our hearts to awaken and our eyes to see the beauty, mystery, and delicate harmony that shape our world. It calls Muslims and believers alike to observe, reflect, and read the Earth and sky as their verses. As the chapter 2, Al-Baqarah (the Cow), verse 164, so vividly reminds us:

"Indeed, in the creation of the heavens and the earth; and the variation of the night and the day; and the ships that run upon the sea with what benefits mankind; and the water God sends down from the sky whereby He revives the earth after its death, scattering all manner of beast therein; and the shifting of the winds; and the clouds subdued between the sky and the earth are surely signs for a people who understand." ¹¹

This verse opens like a slow breath, unfolding the quiet majesty of Creation, where the vast skies above and the turning of the day into night speak a language deeper than words. It draws our gaze to ships cutting across the sea, carrying what sustains us, to the rain falling gracefully, stirring dead Earth into life, to creatures that roam and winds that wonder, and to clouds suspended between Earth and sky, all moving in quiet obedience. These are not just natural wonders but rather signs, the whispers of the Divine, scattered through the world for those willing to see with more than just their eyes. It is a gentle nudge, a reminder, if you will, that sacred is not far. It lives in the patterns of the world, in the rhythm of Nature, in every drop of rain and gust of wind. Creation itself becomes a scripture, drawing our hearts back to the One who shaped it all.

In a world unraveling from ecological destruction and spiritual forgetfulness, the Oneness of God reminds us that Creation is not separate from the Divine but a reflection of it. The Earth is sacred, alive with the signs of God, and we are woven into this fabric with responsibility and care. In his book Man and Nature -The Spiritual Crisis of Modern Men, professor Seyyed Hossein Nasr¹² speaks of the modern crisis as one of the soul, a rapture between man and the sacred. He points out that this forgetfulness lies at the heart of our environmental collapse. The Oneness of God offers a way back, a return to unity, reverence, and harmony with all that lives. To live it is to answer the call for climate justice not just with science but with spirit. It is to repair the sacred trust we have broken and to once again walk gently in the presence of the Divine.

2. Stewardship (Khilāfah)

¹⁰ ("Islam and Climate Justice - GreenFaith" n.d.)

¹¹ (Nasr et al. 2015)

¹² (Nasr 1997)

The core of Islamic thought blooms with sacred trust of stewardship of Nature. It is a sacred trust, a calling placed upon humanity by the Divine. In this role, Muslims are not owners of the Earth but caretakers appointed by the Most Merciful to walk gently upon the soil, to protect what grows and flows, and to honor the breath of every living thing. The Earth is not ours to claim, but a gift in our open hands meant to be tended with reverence and passed on with care. The Our'an speaks of this trust with clarity and grace, its verses flowing like a river, reminding the soul of the sacred duty we bear of guarding the land, the sky, and the sea is not an act of charity but of devotion. In every leaf and stone, in every creature that stirs, the signs are clear; we are called to be guardians of the trust, keepers of the balance, servants of a Creation that whispers the name of God. This stewardship role is defined by humility, balance, and care, underlining the ethical principles of Islamic environmental stewardship.

"He it is Who appointed you vicegerents upon the earth..."¹³

This verse reminds us that God has appointed humanity as vicegerents upon the Earth, not as owners but as caretakers. We are entrusted with the sacred duty to nurture and protect Creation, walking in humility and responsibility. Our stewardship is a divine trust calling us to act with wisdom and reverence, safeguarding the Earth and passing it on in wholeness to those who come after.

In her book Sacred Nature, Karen Armstrong¹⁴ reminds us that the modern world has forgotten how to revere. The Earth is no longer seen as sacred but as a resource to be mined and mastered, and this spiritual amnesia lies at the heart of our crisis. She goes on to say that Islamic stewardship urges a return to balance and reverence and is a spiritual posture of humility and care, where tending to the soil, the sky, and the seas becomes an act of worship. Armstrong concludes that stewardship is also a call to climate justice rooted in mercy, guided by sacred trust, and sustained by love for all that lives.

3. Trust (Amānah)

The concept of trust deepens Muslims' sacred duty toward the Earth. In the Qur'an, God reveals that He has entrusted humanity with caring for the Earth, its creatures, and everything it holds. Quran's Chapter 33, beautifully reminds us that this trust is a Divine gift, a responsibility woven with grace and reverence, urging us to protect and preserve what He has entrusted to our care.

"Truly We offered the Trust unto the heavens and the earth and the mountains, but they refused to bear it, and were wary of it—yet man bore it; truly he has proved himself an ignorant wrongdoer."15

This verse is rich with meaning and spiritual depth. It conveys that God offered tremendous responsibility and trust to all His creations, including the heavens, the Earth, and the mountains. Despite their vastness and strength, they declined it out of reverent fear of its weight, but humanity accepted it. This verse can also be interpreted as a warning and a wake-up call. It reminds us of our sacred responsibility, not just to worship God, but to live ethically, care for the world, and be mindful stewards of what has been entrusted to us. It is a call to humility, consciousness, and a

¹⁴ (Armstrong 2022)

¹³ (Qur'an, Chapter 35, Verse 39)

¹⁵ (Quran, Chapter 33, Verse 77)

return to honoring the Divine trust in belief and how we treat each other, Nature, and all of God's creations.

4. Wastefulness (Isrāf)

Another deeply rooted principle in Islamic teaching with powerful ecological meaning is wastefulness. The Qur'an speaks clearly against excess, reminding us that to squander is to betray the gifts of the Divine. We are called to live with balance, consume with care, and honor the blessings bestowed upon us. There is trust in every drop of water, every grain of food, and every breath of air. We are reminded that waste is a physical act and a spiritual forgetfulness. The command is simple yet profound: Do not waste, as God does not love the wasters.

"Truly the wasteful are the brethren of satan, and Satan is ungrateful to his Lord." ¹⁶

This verse speaks a lot about today's ecological crisis. Wastefulness, once seen in acts as noble, has become a defining mark of contemporary times. In a world overflowing with excess, where we discard food while many go hungry, and where we drain resources for convenience rather than necessity, the spiritual principle of Wastefulness (Isrāf) rings louder than ever. The Qur'an warns us that God does not love wastefulness, and today, this wastefulness extends far beyond charity; it seeps into our habits, industries, and relationship with Nature itself. We consume without pause, forgetting the sacred balance entrusted to us to uphold. Those who waste walk in the footsteps of deceivers, not in form but in spirit, ignoring the Divine trust placed in our hands. To waste is to forget the Source, and to live mindfully is to remember Him. In moderation, there is mercy, and in restraint, we recover our reverence. If we are to heal our planet, we must begin within our hearts, returning to a way of living that honors what is given to us and leaves room for others, the Earth, and generations yet to come.

5. Interconnectedness of All Living Beings (Reverence)

From the smallest ant tracing its path across the soil to the giant beasts that roam oceans and mountains, Islam teaches that all living beings are not lesser forms of life but communities like us, nations fashioned by Divine wisdom. Each creature walks the Earth purposefully, whispering praises in languages we may not understand but are fully known to the Creator. Their lives are sacred, their presence intentional, woven into the same tapestry of Creation that holds all of us. To harm them without need is to disturb what God has delicately balanced. To honor them is to live in harmony with the chorus of Creation and remember that we, too, are one community among many, entrusted with care, bound by responsibility, and accountable for how we walk the Earth we all share.

"There is no creature that crawls upon the earth, nor a bird that flies upon its wings, but that they are communities like yourselves." ¹⁷

This verse invites humility and reminds Muslims of the spiritual kinship shared with all living beings. It calls believers to respect the natural world, learn from it, protect it, and not dominate it. It reminds Muslims that ethical responsibility does not stop at human relations because it extends to how we treat animals, walk upon the Earth, and care for the ecosystems entrusted to us.

¹⁶ (Qur'an, Chapter 17, Verse 27)

¹⁷ (Qur'an, Chapter 6, Verse 38)

Ultimately, it echoes the more profound truth that all Creation is interconnected and that each life, no matter how small, is part of a larger, divinely orchestrated harmony.

Dr. Howard Thurman, an African-American theologian and mystic, ¹⁸ was a well-known Nature lover, and his spirituality was deeply contemplative. He often spoke of a profound sense of connection with Nature and the presence of God in silence and stillness. In his autobiography, With Head and Heart, Dr. Thurman¹⁹ shares how deeply Nature comforted his spirit, particularly through the quiet companionship of an oak tree in his Florida backyard. Resting against its sturdy trunk, he felt peace as familiar and soothing as his bed. In that stillness, he would open his heart, speak his sorrows and joys loudly, and feel heard. That oak tree, night, the woods, and the sea became a part of the fabric of his inner life, a silent witness, a sacred presence, and a steady friend. Dr. Thurman's esoteric connection with Nature mirrors his belief in the ever-present, living spirit of the Divine woven through all of life. To him, the oak tree was more than just a tree; it was a sacred companion, a symbol of the unity of all beings. He leaned on its quiet strength, drawing the courage to remain rooted, steady, and true as it stood firm through the seasons. Dr. Thurman's experience invites us to consider our relationship with Nature not as dominators but as companions in a shared journey. It calls us to listen deeply, find solace in the trees' silence, and recognize the sacred presence that permeates all of Creation.

Personal Reflection and Embodied Faith

As a Muslim, I understand that my relationship with Nature is not merely ethical; it is also devotional. The Qur'an speaks of the Earth as a sacred trust, and our Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) embodied this trust with profound gentleness. ²⁰ He talked to trees, spared birds from nests, and warned his followers against wasting even a drop of water while standing beside a flowing river. ²¹ His life was a living example of what it means to walk lightly upon the Earth while carrying the weight of Divine responsibility.

Inspired by the Prophet's love for Creation, I have tried to live my faith in prayer and practice. My self-sustainability home is a home of embodied remembrance. With a stream water well on my land that supports my house and nourishes my garden, organically growing autochthonous plants, supporting local farmers, and a compost pile transforming scraps into soil, my dwelling becomes a rhythm of harmony with Nature. Food waste, for me, is not only a global concern but a spiritual one. As a Muslim, I believe every seed and every breadcrumb carries a blessing (Arabic: Barakah), and to waste it is to forget the Giver $(Al-Wahh\bar{a}b^{22})$.

This journey is also intellectual and communal. Recently, I developed Green Deen: Ecology in the Islamic Tradition, a curriculum that weaves Qur'anic teachings, prophetic practices, and ecological knowledge into a spiritual framework for environmental justice. Through it, I hope to plant a seed of awareness in others, encouraging them to see Nature not as a resource but as a sign of God. Yet, this journey has not been without frustrations. I grieve the silence of many Muslim leaders when it comes to climate justice. Too often, environmental ethics are sidelined as secondary concerns when, in truth, they are woven into the very fabric of our faith. We cannot claim the love of God while remaining indifferent to His Creation. There is a deep need to revive eco-consciousness within our mosques, schools, and spiritual circles, a call to return to Nature not as conquerors but as caretakers.

¹⁸ ("Who Is Howard Thurman? | Howard Thurman Center for Common Ground" n.d.)

¹⁹ (Thurman 1981)

²⁰ (De Chatel 2022)

²¹ (Dargin 2023)

²² ("99 Names of Allah (Al Asma Ul Husna)" n.d.)

Scholars and intellectuals of many traditions have profoundly shaped my path. Dr. Seyyed Hossein Nasr's work reminds us that ecological crisis is a spiritual ailment that causes us to forget the sacred order. Xaren Armstrong urges a return to awe, reverence, and kinship with Nature. And in the quiet wisdom of Dr. Howard Thurman, who sat beneath an oak tree and listened, I see the echo of God's Oneness that binds all things in divine harmony. In all this, I walk humbly. I listen to the wind, the birdsong, the whisper of leaves, and I walk in the rain as our Prophet Muhammad did. I teach what I learn and try to live what I teach. In honoring Creation, I honor the Creator (Al-Khāliq²⁶), and in caring for Nature, I seek to draw closer to the One who shaped it.

Conclusion

In a world frying at the edges, where forests burn²⁷, waters rise²⁸, and silence falls heavy on the voices of the Earth, Islam offers guidance and grace in return. The teachings of the Oneness of God, Stewardship, Trust, Wastefulness, and Reverence for all living beings are not ancient echoes lost to time but urgent reminders of how we must live today. Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) taught us to honor Creation with humility and care, and his example still calls out to us from the folds of time: plant a tree even as the world ends, and do not waste water even besides a flowing river, and feed the hungry, including the birds.²⁹ His traditions (Arabic: Sunnah) are not just a ritual but ecology in action. Through the lens of intellectuals like Dr. Seyyed Hossein Nasr, Karen Armstrong, and Dr. Howard Thurman, we see that the environmental crisis is more than political or technological; it is also spiritual. It is forgetting who we are in relation to Nature and who Nature is in relation to God. In my own life, this realization shaped the way I live, pray, teach, and eat. From my self-sustaining home to the Green Deen curriculum I have developed, I strive to live in alignment with the sacred trust that has been placed in our hands. I do not claim to have all the answers, but I know the path forward begins with remembrance. Worship to God (Arabic: Dhikr) not only on the tongue but in our footsteps on the soil, in how we harvest, share, and protect. To live this way is not just to be an environmentalist but to be a believer (Arabic: Mu'min).

²³ (Nasr 1997)

²⁴ (Armstrong 2022)

²⁵ (Thurman 1981)

²⁶ ("99 Names of Allah (Al Asma Ul Husna)" n.d.)

²⁷ ("National Fire News | National Interagency Fire Center" 2025)

²⁸ (Emric 2024)

²⁹ (Miras 2024)

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