



RESEARCH PROGRAMME IN THE STUDY
OF MUSLIM COMMUNITIES OF SUCCESS

Insights and Perspectives

Islamic Perspectives on Environmental Stewardship:

Rituals, Cohesions, and Cooperations

Dr. Saidul Islam

Associate Professor of Sociology

Nanyang Technological University, Singapore

Publication date: 24 September 2026



Introduction

Our research has shown that seven cooperative principles found across the natural world also underlie human patterns of moral reasoning: Be loyal to your group; help your family; return favours; be brave; defer to superiors; divide resources fairly; respect others' property.

From climate change to biodiversity loss and resource depletion, the world today faces multiple environmental crises that imperil human and planetary well-being. Scientists warn of dire consequences, including catastrophic biodiversity loss and human hardship. These challenges are compounded by unsustainable consumption patterns that concentrate wealth and environmental harm in the hands of a few, degrading the planet for all. Modernity has also ruptured humanity's long-standing harmony with nature, creating an alienation of humans from the natural world and even from the divine (Shaleh and Islam, 2024). In this context, there is growing recognition that technical solutions alone are insufficient; ethical and spiritual perspectives are needed to foster a more sustainable relationship between humans and the environment.

Islamic teachings offer a rich framework for environmental stewardship grounded in theology, ethics, and communal practice. As *khulafā'* (stewards or vicegerents) of Earth, human beings have a divinely mandated responsibility to care for the natural world. This paper explores how an Islamic ecological paradigm encompassing core theological principles, ritual practices, and community engagements can address contemporary environmental challenges. We integrate theoretical analysis of Islamic environmental ethics with practical examples of "green" practices in Muslim communities, highlighting how rituals, social cohesion, and interfaith cooperation contribute to ecological sustainability. The discussion is aimed at both academic and general readers, demonstrating how Islamic concepts can translate into action and drawing out clear policy implications for leveraging faith-based initiatives in environmental management.

By examining Islamic perspectives on environmental stewardship, this paper shows how faith communities can be pivotal partners in achieving sustainability goals. Recognising the moral authority and mobilising capacity of religious leaders and institutions, policymakers and civil society can collaborate with Muslim communities to promote eco-friendly practices, incorporate ethical teachings into environmental education, and strengthen the global coalition for climate action. In short, Islamic environmental ethics can enrich the broader search for solutions to our ecological crisis, fostering a shared moral responsibility for the Earth.

The Islamic ecological paradigm: Theological foundations

Islam's approach to ecology rests on an integrated view of religion and nature – often termed the Islamic Ecological Paradigm (IEP) (Islam 2012). In this paradigm, humans are understood as part of nature rather than above it, and the relationship between humanity and the environment is governed by the principles of the Qur'an and *Sunnah* (Prophetic tradition). Crucially, Islamic law and ethics (*Shari'ah*) emphasise that just as humans have rights over the Earth, the Earth has rights over humans. Mufti Imam Tajuddin al-Hilaly expressed this eloquently: "The earth is our first mother... therefore it has certain rights over us". This view, cited by Islam (2012), epitomizes the Islamic conception of mutual rights between people and planet. It is echoed in classical Islamic concepts such as *Maqāṣid al-Shari'ah* (the higher objectives of Islamic law), which include preservation and protection of life and welfare of God's creation. Protecting the environment can thus be seen as part of fulfilling a divine trust aligning with the objectives of *Shari'ah* and the Qur'anic injunction not to "do mischief on the earth" (Qur'an 2:11).

Several key Qur'anic principles form the bedrock of Islamic environmental ethics, providing a moral and spiritual compass for stewardship. These include:

1. *Tawhīd* (Divine unity)

The foundational Islamic tenet of *tawhīd* affirms that all of creation is united under the sovereignty of the One God. The natural world is full of signs (*āyāt*) of God, and every creature is a community (*ummah*) "like you" (Qur'an 6:38), deserving of respect and compassion. This principle fosters a sense of interconnectedness between humans and other beings where harming the environment is seen as transgressing the divine order of unity.

2. *Khilāfah* (Stewardship)

The Qur'an describes humans as *khalīfah* (steward or vicegerent) on Earth, a trustee appointed by God to govern the Earth's resources justly. This status is not a license for domination but a responsibility for *amānah* (sacred trust). Humanity's role is to act as guardians of nature, accountable to God for our treatment of the environment. Any exploitation or damage must be checked against the duties of justice and trusteeship.

3. *Mizān* & *wasāṭiyyah* (Balance & Moderation)

The Qur'an emphasises that the entire cosmos was created in balance: "And the heaven He raised and imposed the balance – that you not transgress within the balance" (Qur'an 55:7–8). Humans are commanded not to upset this equilibrium. The principle of *wasāṭiyyah*, or the "middle way," further requires moderation in consumption and lifestyle, avoiding extremes or excess. Together, these teachings call for sustainable resource use, mindful consumption, and living within our means in harmony with nature.

4. *ʿAdl* (Justice)

Justice is a central value in Islamic ethics – not only social justice among humans, but also justice towards other creatures and future generations. The idea of environmental justice in Islam implies that one should not gain at the undue expense of others or cause disproportionate harm. Environmental damage often affects the poorest and voiceless (including wildlife); Islam's call to justice demands that we prevent and remedy such inequities. Policies like protecting common resources and curbing pollution can be seen as upholding *ʿadl*.

5. *Amānah* (Trustworthiness)

The Earth is understood as an *amānah*, a trust from God to humankind. The Qur'an (33:72) describes how the "Trust" was offered to all of creation and accepted by humans, a profound responsibility. Betraying that trust by ravaging the environment is a sin, while caring for creation is an act of fidelity to God. This concept instills an ethic of accountability: humans will answer before God for how we used or abused the environmental gifts entrusted to us.

These principles collectively form an Islamic eco-ethic, a vision in which caring for the environment is not a secular agenda external to Islam, but rather an intrinsic part of living a faithful life. Preservation of natural resources, planting trees, and protecting animals are taught as virtuous deeds in both classical jurisprudence and contemporary Islamic discourse (Shaleh and Islam 2024). Historically, Muslim societies put some of these ethics into practice through institutions like *ḥimā* (protected areas where resources are left untouched) and *ḥarām* sanctuaries (inviolable zones, such as the sacred precincts in Mecca and Medina, where hunting and tree-cutting are prohibited). Islamic law also developed guidelines on water rights and land use that aimed to prevent abuse and ensure equitable sharing of resources (Marsuki 2009). Such measures reflect a pre-modern Islamic awareness of conservation and sustainability.

It is important to note that Islamic environmental stewardship is fundamentally tied to spiritual accountability. In Islamic theology, humans will be questioned by God about how they utilised the blessings of land, water, flora and fauna. This belief instills a sense of caution and responsibility: environmental ethics are not merely good practices but part of one's religious duty. As Seyyed Hossein Nasr has argued, the environmental crisis is fundamentally a spiritual crisis, born from modern humanity's arrogance and forgetfulness of the sacredness of nature. He argues that an Islam concerned only with ritual observance but heedless of nature's condition is spiritually deficient. Caring for creation, therefore, must be seen as an integral part of faith (Nasr 1968). In other words, a truly Islamic lifestyle cannot be spiritually sound while neglecting the environment. By re-centering our relationship with nature as part of our relationship with God, Islam offers a path to reconnect *dhikr* (remembrance of God) with *shukr* (gratitude) for the natural world – making environmental stewardship a form of worship.

Rituals and ecological consciousness

A distinctive feature of an Islamic approach to environmental stewardship is the way ritual practices foster ecological consciousness. Far from being isolated “religious” acts, Islamic rituals can serve as constant reminders of humanity's relationship with nature and the Creator. Daily, weekly, and annual rituals in Islam embed environmental ethics in subtle but meaningful ways, creating what might be called eco-spiritual cohesion linking personal piety with responsibility toward creation.

For example, the act of *wuḍū'* (ablution) performed by Muslims multiple times a day before prayers teaches respect for water. The Prophet Muḥammad (pbuh) exemplified moderation in ablution by using only a small amount of water, and he admonished against excess “even if you were by a flowing river.” This ritual purification thus doubles as a discipline in avoiding water waste, instilling conservation as a spiritual habit. Many Islamic scholars today highlight such teachings to encourage water conservation; in some places, mosque wash areas post reminders with the Prophetic guidance to gently remind worshippers that saving water is part of faith.

Fasting in Ramadan, likewise, builds an ethic of restraint and gratitude. During the month of fasting, Muslims abstain from food and drink during daylight hours, ideally learning to curb their appetites and empathize with the less fortunate. The spirit of fasting can translate into mindful consumption beyond Ramadan: wasting less food, buying only what one needs, and appreciating the sources of our sustenance. In recent years, “green Ramadan” initiatives have urged communities to reduce food waste at Ramadan *iftār* meals and to use reusable or biodegradable tableware at mosques, aligning the month’s spiritual focus with environmentally friendly practices. Such efforts tap into the heightened mindfulness of Ramadan to promote habits of moderation (*wasāṭiyyah*) and avoidance of extravagance (*isrāf*) in daily life.

The haj (pilgrimage) to Mecca offers another profound intersection of ritual and environmental values. Pilgrims enter a state of *iḥrām* in which harming any living thing – even a plant or insect – is forbidden. This sacred state underscores the sanctity of all life during the pilgrimage rites. Moreover, the gathering of millions of people in one place dramatically highlights issues of waste management and resource use. In response, scholars and officials have advocated for a “green hajj,” including projects for recycling waste, using clean energy in pilgrimage sites, and educating pilgrims on minimising their environmental footprint. Notably, centuries-old rules prohibit cutting trees or hunting within the Meccan sanctuary (*ḥaram*), effectively making it a wildlife refuge. Such rules demonstrate that conservation principles have long been embedded in Islamic rites.

Even daily prayer (*ṣalāh*) connects worshippers to nature’s rhythms. The five prayer times are set by the position of the sun, tying human activity to the solar day. The Qur’an often invites believers to contemplate natural phenomena – sunrise, sunset, the alternation of night and day – as signs of God. Thus, the cadence of ritual prayer also embeds awareness of celestial and atmospheric conditions. When Muslims pray outdoors or orient toward Mecca, it reinforces a sense of the Earth’s geography and our place within creation. Many mosques are now incorporating green spaces or gardens, providing worshippers a direct experience of nature’s tranquility as they engage in devotion.

In summary, rituals in Islam are not disconnected from worldly concerns; when understood holistically, they reinforce cohesion between spiritual life and earthly responsibilities. They remind believers that worship of the Creator includes respect

for the creation. As one United Nations-backed initiative on faith and ecology observes, “Environmentalism is deeply embedded in the practice of Islam. It is about personal behaviour and how it manifests in our relationship with the natural world and other sentient beings” (UNEP 2019). By infusing ecological mindfulness into rituals, Muslim communities can harness spiritual devotion as a motivational force for environmental action. In this way, shared rituals lay the groundwork for shared responsibility, strengthening both community bonds and the commitment to protect our planet.

From principles to practice: Green lifestyles and activism in Muslim communities

Muslims worldwide are increasingly putting these principles into practice. Many families have embraced green lifestyles as a form of *zuhd* (asceticism or simplicity) (Zbidi 2013), making daily choices such as conserving water and energy, reducing waste, and eating sustainably (for example, buying local produce and avoiding excess). Resources like the Muslim Green Guide to Reducing Climate Change (IFEES 2008) encourage households to implement simple eco-friendly steps grounded in Islamic values. At the same time, grassroots activism – “green jihad” – is on the rise. Local mosque groups organise clean-ups and tree-plantings, and Muslim youth networks (such as Singapore’s FiTree) collaborate with national environmental campaigns to “enjoin good” in the form of ecological protection.

Internationally, Muslim leaders and organisations have launched initiatives like “the Islamic Declaration on Global Climate Change” to rally the *ummah* toward climate action (IFEES and IRW 2025). Complementing these efforts, scholars and jurists exercise “green *ijtihad*” (Zbidi 2013), issuing fatwas that support conservation and integrating eco-ethics into religious education and sermons. For example, fatwa councils have deliberated on topics such as wildlife protection (declaring poaching and illegal trade as immoral) and renewable energy (encouraging investment in solar and wind power as collective obligations). In essence, a multi-level movement is underway aligning Islamic practice with sustainability – spanning personal behavior, community projects, and thought leadership.

Community cohesion and religious leadership

Religious leaders and institutions have a pivotal role in mobilising Muslim communities for environmental stewardship. Imams and scholars possess moral authority: when they preach about conservation or issue guidance on eco-friendly practices, their communities respond. Mosques can serve as centers of sustainability, from adopting green infrastructure (like solar panels and recycling programmes) to hosting workshops that teach Islamic eco-ethics. For example, some imams deliver “green *khuṭbahs*” (sermons) on themes such as water conservation and caring for animals, drawing on Qur’anic verses and hadiths to emphasise that these are religious duties. Through youth groups and madrasah curricula that include environmental lessons, the next generation of Muslims is being taught that protecting nature is part of their faith. These efforts build strong internal cohesion: a shared understanding that looking after the local environment – keeping neighborhoods clean, planting trees, conserving resources – is a collective religious responsibility.

Muslim communities are also reaching out in interfaith cooperation on environmental issues. Many ecological values are shared across religions (e.g. stewardship of creation, avoiding waste), providing common ground for collaborative action. In multi-religious societies like Singapore, Muslims have joined with Christians, Buddhists, Hindus and others in tree-planting drives and climate-awareness campaigns under interfaith platforms such as the Harmony Centre and the Inter-Religious Organisation. Globally, Muslim leaders participate in initiatives like the United Nations Environment Programme’s (UNEP) Faith for Earth coalition and have partnered with other faith leaders to advocate for stronger climate action.

A recent example is Al-Mizan: A Covenant for the Earth (UNEP 2019), a declaration that restates Islamic principles for protecting nature in the face of current challenges. Al-Mizan was developed by Islamic scholars in coordination with international bodies and launched alongside Christian and other representatives, symbolising a shared moral vision. By cooperating across faith lines, religious communities not only amplify their impact but also strengthen social harmony working together as stewards of a shared Earth.

Policy implications and recommendations

Drawing on the above, several concrete steps can be suggested for policymakers and community leaders seeking to harness Islamic environmental ethics:

1. Engage religious leaders and institutions

Governments and non-governmental organisations (NGOs) should partner with imams, Islamic scholars, and mosque committees to promote sustainability. They can invite religious leaders to endorse conservation campaigns and consult Islamic councils when drafting environmental policies. Involving faith authorities lends moral credibility and cultural resonance to policy measures, making initiatives like recycling or energy-saving more persuasive to local communities.

2. Support faith-based green initiatives

Provide financial and logistical support for environmental projects led by Muslim organisations, such as eco-mosque retrofitting, Islamic school gardening programmes, or mosque-led recycling drives. Small grants or technical assistance can empower community efforts. For instance, helping fund solar panels at mosques or water-saving devices for ablution areas demonstrates a respect for Islamic practices while achieving sustainability goals. Such support encourages innovation and signals that faith-driven environmental action is valued in broader society.

3. Integrate Islamic teachings in environmental education

Environmental authorities and educators should incorporate Islamic principles into outreach aimed at Muslim audiences. School curricula and media campaigns can reference Qur'anic ethics (like prohibiting waste or maintaining *mīzān*) to frame sustainability in familiar terms. By showing that modern environmental goals align with Islamic duties, educators can motivate behavior change. For example, water conservation messages might cite the Prophet's example of minimal water use in ablution – making the advice not just scientific, but also religiously resonant.

4. Foster interfaith collaboration

Policymakers can facilitate inter-religious environmental partnerships, leveraging the fact that all major faiths preach care for creation. Interfaith green councils or joint events (community clean-ups, tree plantings, climate rallies) create unity and shared purpose. Government support for such collaborations providing meeting platforms and seed funding can strengthen social cohesion while tackling environmental issues. A united moral voice from multiple faith communities can also influence public opinion and inspire broader participation in sustainability initiatives.

Islamic Perspectives on Environmental Stewardship

By implementing measures like these, policymakers and religious leaders together can amplify the impact of environmental programmes. Aligning policy with ethical and spiritual values taps into deep wells of motivation and social capital in Muslim communities, making sustainable behaviors more normative and enduring. Drawing from the above discussion and expanding with examples from community practices and interfaith collaborations, the table below presents a taxonomy of practical applications of Islamic environmental stewardship.

Practical applications of Islamic environmental stewardship

Domain	Practice/Example	Islamic Value Underpinning	Environmental Impact
Green lifestyle (<i>Zuhd</i>)	Conserving water during ablution, switching off appliances, using energy-saving bulbs, reducing, reusing, recycling	<i>Iṣrāf</i> (avoid waste), <i>wasāṭiyyah</i> (moderation)	Lowers household carbon footprint; reduces pressure on natural resources
Food practices	Growing own food, eating seasonally, buying locally and organically, avoiding fast food, reducing meat consumption	<i>Mīzān</i> (balance), <i>ʿadl</i> (justice for people, animals, and nature)	Promotes sustainable agriculture; reduces food miles and industrial system dependency
Community & family actions	Donating items, walking and cycling instead of driving, sharing environmental information in families	<i>Amānah</i> (trust), <i>khilāfah</i> (stewardship)	Strengthens eco-conscious households; reduces waste and emissions

Islamic Perspectives on Environmental Stewardship

Activism ("Green jihad")	Cleaning parks, joining water-saving campaigns, solidarity with World Wildlife Fund (WWF), preaching "green <i>khuṭbahs</i> "	<i>Khilāfah</i> (stewardship), ' <i>adl</i> (justice)	Enhances collective environmental responsibility; mobilizes civil society
Innovation ("Green jihad")	Developing fatwas supporting conservation, adopting eco-mosque designs (solar panels, rainwater harvesting)	<i>Amānah</i> (trust), <i>Mizān</i> (balance)	Institutionalizes eco-friendly practices; aligns modern innovation with Islamic ethics
Interfaith cooperation	Participating in Harmony Centre, IRO dialogues, joint tree-planting, UNEP Faith for Earth coalition	<i>Tawḥīd</i> (interconnectedness), ' <i>Adl</i> (justice)	Builds social cohesion across faiths; amplifies moral voice for policy change
Youth & education	Madrasah lessons on eco-ethics, youth-led groups like FiTree in Singapore, "Green Ramadan" campaigns	<i>Wasāṭiyyah</i> (moderation), <i>amānah</i> (trust)	Educates next generation of eco-conscious Muslims; links rituals with sustainable behavior

Conclusion

Islamic perspectives on environmental stewardship provide a holistic paradigm wherein spiritual values and ecological responsibility are deeply intertwined. In the face of a global environmental crisis, Islam's teachings remind humanity of its role as a trustee of the Earth, accountable for maintaining balance and justice in the natural world. Core principles like *tawhīd*, *khilāfah*, and *mīzān* offer both inspiration and guidance for sustainable living. Crucially, these values are not abstract, they are activated through rituals, community norms, and cooperative initiatives, as this paper has illustrated.

By integrating faith with action, Muslim communities demonstrate how environmentalism can be distinctly Islamic yet universally beneficial. Shared religious rituals and ethics strengthen social cohesion and can even foster collaboration across diverse groups. As the recent RPCS roundtable in Singapore on “Shared Rituals and Morality as Pathways to Cohesion and Cooperation on Environmental Issues” concluded, Islam “promotes environmental justice through divine trust and ethical stewardship”, and shared moral commitments can enable people of different faiths to work together for the Earth. In practical terms, Muslim leadership and interfaith partnerships are emerging as vital elements in addressing environmental challenges, complementing scientific and policy efforts to protect our planet.

In sum, an Islamic approach adds an ethical and spiritual dimension to environmental stewardship, reminding us that caring for the Earth is a sacred duty. This perspective can enrich global sustainability efforts by appealing to deep moral convictions and community solidarity. The environmental crisis is not only a technical problem but also a moral one and Islamic teachings help answer that moral call. Embracing the responsibility of *khalīfah* can inspire Muslims, and indeed all of humanity, to strive for a future where development and environmental care progress hand in hand. Such faith-based commitment to stewardship is a powerful component in building a more balanced and compassionate relationship with our planet.

References

- IFEES and IRW. 2025. "Islamic Declaration on Global Climate Change." Islamic Foundation for Ecology and Environmental Sciences (IFEES) and Islamic Relief Worldwide. (Istanbul, August 2015).
- IFEES. 2008. Muslim Green Guide to Reducing Climate Change. Islamic Foundation for Ecology and Environmental Sciences (IFEES), LifeMakers UK, and Muslim Hands, Birmingham.
- Islam, Md Saidul. 2012. "Old Philosophy, New Movement: The Rise of the Islamic Ecological Paradigm in the Discourse of Environmentalism." *Nature and Culture* 7(1): 72–94.
- Marsuki, Mohd Zuhdi Bin. 2009. The practice of Islamic environmental ethics: a case study of Harim and Hima. Doctoral thesis, University of Wales Trinity Saint David.
- Nasr, Seyyed Hossein. 1968. *Man and Nature: The Spiritual Crisis of Modern Man*. London: Allen & Unwin.
- Shaleh, Adha, and Md Saidul Islam. 2024. "Averting the Existential Threat of the Planet: Islamic Environmental Ethics to Address the Contemporary Environmental Crisis." *Intellectual Discourse* 32(1): 123–150.
- United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP). 2019. *Al-Mizan: A Covenant for the Earth*. Available at: <https://www.unep.org/al-mizan-covenant-earth> (access on 27.5.2024)
- Zbidi, M. 2013. *Islamic Environmentalism: The Call to Eco-Jihad*. Available online at: <https://en.qantara.de/content/islamic-environmentalism-the-call-to-eco-jihad> (Accessed: 06/02/2023).