

**GOD-LIGHT AND THE RELEVANCE OF STEWARDSHIP FOR ENVIRONMENTAL
SUSTAINABILITY IN THE SOUTH-EAST NIGERIA: A CALL FOR CHRISTIAN
ACTION**

BY

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The last decades of 20th century and the beginning of the 21st century have seen a surge in environmental challenges including erosion, pollution, loss of biodiversity, and climate change. The consequences on the quality of human life and other forms of life have invoked concerns both at the global and domestic levels, recognizing the need for collective action and cooperation. The growing call for sustainable solutions that balance human needs and activities with environmental protection and care informs the relevance of environmental stewardship. The objective of this study is to assess the impact of human unfriendly activities on environment in the Southeast, examine the relevance of stewardship for environmental sustainability and to proffer solutions. Data was collected mainly from secondary source while environmental ethical theory and theological approach were used for data analysis and interpretation. The paper identified among others, the misinterpretation of biblical stewardship and misapplication of the Dominion mandate as contributing factors to human unbridled economic activities, improper waste disposal, and other environmental issues. The work further x-rayed the consequences of environmental degradation on the human well being, and other forms of life including health problems, economic losses, displacement, loss of species and ecosystem. The paper recommends among other things, the reorientation of the Christian community towards its eco-stewardship responsibility and integrating stewardship values and public responsibility into government environmental policies to enhance actions by communities, individuals and organizations.

Keywords: Stewardship, Environment and Sustainability

INTRODUCTION

The importance of environmental sustainability has become very crucial and increasingly evident in years, as the world grapples with the emerging environmental problems such as climate change, pollution, erosion, deforestation, degradation, loss of biodiversity to mention just a few. This trend is largely attributed to the shift from agrarianism to industrial and technological evolutions, which occurred between the 19th and the early 20th centuries. This transformation was associated with much attendant challenges, including the rise of capitalism, rapid urbanization and the development of heavy industrial machines and chemicals. Consequently, these challenges have been identified with long and short negative effects on the health, social, religious, and economic well-being and sustainability of both human beings and other life forms, thereby placing deliberate and conscientious moral demands on humanity.

In Nigeria, particularly in Southeast, environmental sustainability has become a pressing concern due to rapid development, urbanization, population growth and poverty. The human Unsustainable economic activities, exploitation of natural resources, poor and inadequate waste management and lack of pollution control, violation of environmental policies and paucity of stewardship of environment have contributed significantly to environmental crisis, thereby threatening the region's ecosystem, health, and well being of the inhabitants despite various efforts and measures of governments to achieve sustainability of environment.

As a collaborative tool and framework, stewardship has been employed in advancing environmental sustainability amidst global and domestic concerns. The researchers beckon on individuals, communities and organizations to work together in protecting and preserving the natural environment, promoting sustainable development and a livable future for generations to come. This paper examines environmental challenges in Southeast, the causative factors and the relevance of stewardship from the biblical perspective with the view to advancing environmental sustainability.

Objective of the Study

The core objective of this paper is to investigate environmental crisis in the Southeast Nigeria, the effects on sustainability of human beings and other forms of life, and to present the relevance of stewardship in advancing sustainability of environment. To achieve this, the paper's specific

objective is:

- To present the reality of environmental crisis in the southeast
- To raise the effects on human beings and other forms of life
- To elucidate the relevance of biblical stewardship in addressing the crisis
- To advance a panacea

Methodology

The paper is an expository discourse and will make use of qualitative methodology. Data used is mainly secondary source: textbooks, journals, articles, newspapers, and internet materials. The data's contents were analyzed with the socio-descriptive methodology and subjected to further interpretation using the philosophical and theological tools. Thereafter, the findings were drawn.

The Conceptual Definition

For proper elucidation, we shall define some words to enhance correct perspective and understanding. Such words include: Stewardship, environmental sustainability and Christian action.

Stewardship: According to English Learners dictionary, stewardship is the act of caring for or improving with time. To Whelchel cited in Oha (2016) , stewardship is utilizing and managing all resources God provides for the glory of God and betterment of his creation” (p.2). The Greek word for stewardship is “*Oikonomia*”. It is also the root of the word “economics”. *Oikos*, however, is the root of our modern word, “ecology”. Thus in a broad sense, stewardship, economics, and ecology are and should be related. Scholars such as Jackson (2011) asserts that stewardship core emphasizes is deep sense of responsibility, management and care of resources. It has its etymological roots in Gen. 2: 15 and other biblical teachings and has been applied in various contexts, including environmental conservation. To Alokwe (2013), “stewardship seeks among other things to affirm the inherent worth, the goodness, and the integrity of creation”. (P: 126). Freheim (2005) maintains that the concept of stewardship emerged to create human-earth relationship from the perspective of dominion to stewardship. Stewardship therefore, seeks to bring all of the resources at our disposal into efficient and conscientious use through our participation in the saving activity of God.

Environmental sustainability: According to Gbenda cited in Edeh (2023), environmental sustainability is “the conservation, management and rational utilization of natural resources in such a way that maintains the integrity of such ecosystem, support life, ensure the preservation of biodiversity and prevent environmental degradation” (p.11). Environmental sustainability forms one of the pillars of sustainability development such as social sustainability and economic sustainability. It is an aspect of development processes which emphasizes the harnessing of natural and social resources with major considerations for continuity and the future. Environmental sustainability therefore beacons on human sustainable actions and environmental friendly living. The fundamental purpose of environmental sustainability informed the submission of Mead (2010) that ecological integrity is maintained , all of the earth’s environmental systems are kept in balance while natural resources within them are consumed by humans at a rate where they are able to replenish themselves” (p.2). It is therefore essential to assert that environmental sustainability is utilization of economic, social, religious and developmental aspirations via respect of divine virtues and promulgations of government environmental laws.

Christian Action: The phrase “Christian action” has been elucidated upon from the lens of theological perspective, pointing at the social responsibilities of Christians and Christian community to our common world. According to Wallis (2005), Christian action is “the pursuit of justice, peace, and compassion, rooted in the biblical vision of the kingdom of God, and seeking to transform the world according to God’s will” (p.23). To Newbigin (1989) asserts “it is the expression of the church’s faith in the world, through which it seeks to embody the gospel in the midst of human society and to bear witness to the Lordship of Christ over all of life” (p.115) while Sider (2005) maintains that “Christian action involves demonstration of Christ’s love and compassion in the world through the act of service, advocacy, and witness, aiming at the transformation of individuals, communities and societies” (p.15).

It is therefore imperative to note that Christian action in this paper entails among other things an intentional engagement and participation of Christians and the Christian communities in the act of socio- ethical responsibilities for environmental sustainability through advocacy, service, respect and care of environment.

A Brief Presentation of the Southeast Nigeria

Southeast Nigeria, also known as the Igbo-dominated region has a rich and diverse culture and history. According to Shaw (1978) “archaeological findings suggest human habitation in the region dates back to around 3000 BCE” (p.45). The region has histories of pre-colonial era, Colonial era and post-colonial era. To Afigbo (1981) the pre-colonial era of the Southeast Nigeria had a complex and decentralized system of governance, with various kingdoms and chiefdoms. The region was known for its skilled craftsmen, traders and farmers. Whereas, in the colonial era, Isichei (1976) asserts that the British imposed their own system of governance, which disrupted traditional Igbo institutions and a major hub for the palm oil trade.

The region is one of the six geo-political zones in Nigeria with a strong emphasis on community, family, and tradition. It comprises five states: Abia state, Anambra state, Enugu state, Ebonyi state, and Imo state. The region since post colonial and civil war eras, has experienced rapid and diverse economic, institutional, infrastructural, human, social, cultural, technologically and political developments facilitated by the efforts of her various governments and individuals. This has led to the quantum trajectories in road network constructions, markets such as Onitsha Main market, Ariara International market, Ogbete Main market, new market located in Aba, International market in Ebonyi and Nnewi markets to mention just a few. Plethora of private and public primary and secondary schools, tertiary Institutions, filling stations, industries, hotels, banks, hospitals and farm settlements, commercial activities, modern buildings and city settlements. No doubt that these developments are associated with diverse environmental challenges.

Southeast Nigeria and the Environmental Crisis

Environmental crisis in the Southeast region of Nigeria has become a serious concern in the modern days both to the government and to the citizenry. Hence; Edeh (2023) asserts “ the present age has brought much more degradation on environment, that environment has become messy, dirty, and even poor with the natural things that made environment what it was” (p.47).

Among the Southeast environmental critical experiences are gully erosion, deforestation, water and land pollution, climate change, loss of biodiversity, degradation to mention just a few. These experiences are hitched on bi-polar factors –“the natural and human factors” with the human factor contributing very significantly. An in-depth examination and enquiry into the role and

contributions of human factor to this crisis is revealing and as well, demands an academic and unbiased appraisal. Hence; the following:

The Nonchalant Attitude of Government and the citizenry to Environmental Sustainable Laws and Policies

Human nonchalant attitude towards environmental sustainability creates a void between the spirit and letters of sustainability, laws and policies aimed at achieving interconnectedness, stewardship, balance and equity in all human activities and development. According to Edeh (2023) “this unconcerned attitude manifests itself in various ways such as; the frequent burning of bushes and/or forests for farming and animal games especially during dry seasons, thereby, chasing away and destroying animals and plant species” (p.58). This is in contradiction to the 1999 Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria, section 20, chapter 11 (as amended) which prescribes that the state shall protect and improve the environment and safeguard the water, air and land, forest and wildlife of Nigeria. The National Forest Policy of the Federal Ministry of Environment, item 1.12.8, states that all the factors causing environmental degradation and depletion of resources, none has as much destructive effect as uncontrolled forest fires.

Moreover, the human waste generation and indiscriminate disposal are acts that have contributed to undermine the laws and policies of waste management in the Southeast despite the establishment of Environmental Protection and Waste Management Agencies in the region states. This untamed attitude in waste disposal of non-biodegradable, toxic, solid and radioactive materials from homes, industrial, agricultural, clinical, construction and demolition sites as well as business premises contribute significantly to climate change, land degradation and other environmental crisis in the region. This critical crisis stems from the lack of or limited progress in recycling culture and adoption of renewable energy.

Urbanization and Poor Urban Planning

That the region cities are experiencing unprecedented growth both in human population and developments is not in doubt, thereby, putting pressure on already strained resources. This has led to the inadequate waste management, poor sanitation, and increased pollution. The supposedly strategies meant to mitigate the rapid urbanization and the challenges have been poorly implemented by both the government and developers as the region is yet to see effective integrated

planning and sustainable development that insists on prioritization of environmental sustainability and social equity in urban development projects. As a result, the tolls on the region's environment are plethora with instances of flooding, soil erosion, traffic congestion, overcrowding, poor sanitation, rural- urban migration, insufficient housing, and inadequate waste management. Interestingly, the states have master plans that have been variously compromised over the years as a result of inadequate legislation, corruption, lack of political will, inadequate funding and lack of effective institutions as observed by the Premium Times (2019) and Nigerian National Planning (2013).

Poverty and Environmental Degradation

Scholars and other environmentalists have adjudged poverty as a serious factor to environmental degradation across the globe, including the Southeast region. The activities of low income earners who depend majorly on agriculture, manual works, and petty businesses and on monthly salary for survival do contribute significantly. Since poverty can be absolute or relative, the poor depends much on natural resources for survival without recourse to its sustainability. Such dependence further leads to unsustainable practices such as logging, charcoal production and usage, deforestation, environmental degradation as a result of the lack of clean water, sanitation and pollution of river and soil. Poverty contributes also to loss of biodiversity and climate change vulnerability. Besides, poverty driven activities often lead to improper waste management resulting to littering, pollution and health hazards. This character is so glaring around Southeast communities, market places and at times on streets, being it, Abia state,, Anambra state, Ebonyi state, Imo or Enugu states. This substantiates the assertion of the late Prime Minister of India, Gandhi who opined that “poverty is the greatest danger to the environment” (p: 62). While Southeast is not rated as the poorest region in Nigeria, the tolls of poverty cannot be completely underestimated. Hence; majority households are dependant of agricultural activities and petty businesses for survival.

Paucity of Environmental Ethical / Stewardship Knowledge

The paucity of environmental ethical knowledge and practices amongst citizens in the Southeast has contributed greatly to the crisis of environment. This is caused by the weak transfer of stewardship culture and value of environment to the younger generation via our social institutions

such as family, church and schools. Francis (2015) refers to this void when he opines “if everything is related, then the health of a society’s institutions has consequences on environment and the quality of human life, hence, every violation of solidarity and civic friendship harms the environment” (p:93). The implication is obvious, failure of social institutions on her assignment to inculcate the culture and attitude of environmental stewardship and ethical solidarity leads to dire consequences on the future sustainability.

Effects of Human Unsustainable Activities on Environment, Human Beings and other Forms of life

Human unsustainable actions and activities have had negative effects on human beings, other forms of life and society at large. Although, the effects are multifaceted, this paper will examine the following effects:

The Loss and Dearth of Biodiversity

The dearth and loss of species of animals and plants as a result of human eco-unfriendly activities is alarming. God created these species for human benefits such as food, medicine, air purification, fiber, shelter to mention just a few. Human beings from the beginning were commended to provide care and protection (stewardship) to these creatures for our common good. Unfortunately, human untamed production, development, commercial and economic activities especially at the wake of industrial revolution and modernization has led to serious loss and dearth of many of these precious creatures.

The extinction no doubt has present and future social, economic and health implications as plants known for curative benefits are now scarce and some nowhere to be found. Francis cited in Edeh (2023) opine that the loss of forests and woodlands entails the loss of species which may constitute extremely important resources in the future, not only food but also for curing disease and other uses’ (p:76).

Poor Environmental Aesthetics and Values

Environmental aesthetics and its social, psychological, economic and physical benefits have been significantly impeded by environmental degradations. As a result, visual qualities such as natural

beauty is affected through the destruction of natural habitats, visible pollution with trash, oil spills and industrial waste as well as alteration of landscape via soil and land erosion which are too pronounced in Southeast States especially its markets environment.

Sensory qualities are as well affected by environmental degradation via noise pollution such as traffic, vehicular horn blaring, construction, and air pollutants which create unpleasant odors and reduces air qualities. Behind these activities is human loss of environmental aesthetic value and paucity knowledge of the impact of environmental aesthetics on the physical, psychological, social, religious and economic benefits. This loss are traceable to human immediate social and economic gratification, lack of care and respect for environment, as well as poor response to sanitation, and other environmental sustainable activities and regulations. Environmental aesthetics doubtlessly promotes good health, economic activities, attracts men and women that love hygienic environment and industrialization.

Health and Quality of Human Life

The connection between good health, quality of human life, and a healthy environment is crystal clear and intricately inseparable. In all reasonability, this can be achieved through sustainable environment and this has been greatly neglected in pursuit of the immediate economic and social benefits and gratification. Hence; humanity is currently faced with numerous environmental related health challenges such as stroke, chronic obstructive pulmonary disease, ischemic heart disease, lower respiratory infections and trachea, bronchus and lung cancer to mention just a few. To this effect, Julia and Tanya (2018) assert that “those who live in cities with increase in air pollution and poor sanitation suffer from respiratory diseases and lower productivity” (p.2).

Postulations from health experts attest that environmental degradation is largely responsible for three infectious diseases common in the Southeast – diarrhea, malaria and acute respiratory infections. Unfortunately, the most vulnerable of environmental related diseases are the poor who lack the essential facilities for clean environment and the financial power to access quality medical care. Another effect of environmental degradation is poor quality of human life and this has significant effect on sustainable development and life expectancy.

Mortality Rate and Child’s Development

The correlation between environment, mortality rate and child's development is indisputable. Sustainable environment contributes to effective development of human capabilities right from the uterus to early childhood. This has been established by scholars such as Heckman as cited in Julia and Tanya (2018) that "environment helps to shape child's health, cognitive skills, and non-cognitive abilities and therefore, is responsible for most socio-economic outcomes later in life" (p.4).

On the contrary, environmental related factors that affect negatively the quality of human life and mortality rate are exposure to poor air quality, unclean water due to pollutants, toxic chemicals in soil and climate change as a result of rise in temperature, extreme weather events and alteration of ecosystem. The above are associated with diverse health related issues such as respiratory diseases, cardiovascular problems, and lung cancer. Besides, unclean or contaminated water causes cholera, diarrhea and typhoid fever. Moreover, exposure to environmental toxins can affect brain development leading to cognitive and behavioral problems, stunted growth and developmental delays and other conditions that affect quality of human life. There is no doubt that poverty, weak institutions, climatic conditions and degrading environment play a role in exposing mothers and children to health challenges.

The Relevance of Stewardship for Environmental Sustainability in Southeast

The relevance of stewardship of environment as a collaborative compass for sustainable environment is indisputable. Theologians and other environmentalists have diversely explored its relevance and synergy towards sustainable efforts in salvaging the emerging environmental criticalities. This paper offers few insights on stewardship relevance for environmental sustainability in the Southeast and makes demand on inclusive participation rather than exclusivity (government alone).

Stewardship Promotes Reversal of Anthropocentrism

At the foundation of stewardship relevance for environmental sustainability is a clear reversal of the existential anthropocentrism promoted by consumerism theory and Judeo-Christian tradition. As a novel trend aims to shift the human dominion mentality by recognizing and promoting the intrinsic value of nature beyond its usefulness to humans. Other potential characteristics include

prioritizing the health and well-being of ecosystems over immediate utilization of natural resources and fostering a sense of individuals and communities' responsibility and care of their immediate environment and the natural world. Consequently, stewardship offers a paradigm shift from anthropocentric dominance to a balanced eco-friendly relations and recognition that all creatures have an intrinsic value and should be respected and cared for.

It Reveals the Interconnectedness of Environment and Human Sustainability

Stewardship takes its roots from the biblical injunction to human beings to “care or tend” the earth (their environment) and this invokes in humans the sense of interconnectedness. Adam’s mortal body came from the earth and all humans’ returns to earth at the end of their earthly journey. The recognition that human beings own their survival to environment reaffirms the urgency and necessity for interdependence and relationship to the rest of the creation. Spencer, Nick and White cited in Alokwu (2013) assert that humanity shares the same food as other animals and the same breath of life is given to animals and humans alike. To care for the creation is therefore, to care for a system of which we are a part and upon which we are utterly dependent” (p.116)

As a result, we need the beauty of the world around us- the air, mountains, rivers, birds, animals to experience the fullness of the life God has created. In addition, humans need water, air and food to survive. Therefore, the loss or extinction of species, decline of other creatures, environmental pollution, food insecurity and water scarcity are interconnected threats that demand attention through our common shared stewardship care.

It Gives Insight on Human Eco-Responsibility

Stewardship promotes human eco-responsibility through ethical values of respect, care and love. This value oriented approach stems from God’s love for the world. Hence; it is expected of the same virtue dispositions from us as men and women created in God’s image and as his representatives on earth by maintaining, respecting and caring for the earth and all creatures. Human eco-responsibility promotes the sense of obligation to environment for its sustainability as managers and stewards of God’s gift of nature. It behooves on us to show a friendly, caring and

loving attitudes to our environment and its resources for present and future utilization and sustainability. Consequently, the poor in the society are to be cared for since the most vulnerable of environmental degradation are the poor. They are as well, more responsible for anthropocentric activities in an effort to meet their daily needs with majority of them so ignorant of the after effects of their activities on environment, human beings and other forms of life. This entails practical actions on the side of humanity especially Christians and their leaders via planting of trees to enhance fresh air, protection of environment from erosion, proper waste management and disposal, adherence to environmental sustainable rules and regulations and inculcation of stewardship values orientation.

Stewardship and Christian Action

Christian action is inevitably needed in current environmental dialogue from the line of stewardship approach. To achieve this synergy, this paper offers the following insights:

A Holistic Approach to the Gospel of Salvation

Greater percentage of messages from the Christian pulpits excludes integration of the redemption of nature as captured in the bible. God's salvation plan is bonded with creation as shown by God's covenant of salvation and preservation with Noah in Gen.9:8-11. Besides, the creation groans in wait of redemption and Christians are expected to share in this groaning for its liberation Rom.8:18-24. This calls for action by Christian leaders in mobilizing for environmental support and advocacy against systems, attitudes and culture that undermines the intrinsic value of other creation and creates damage to our common environment. A holistic gospel of salvation entails not only redemption from individual sin, but renewal and transformation of all aspects of creation, including the social and economic structure. This is the albatross that holds the connective thread of Christian eco- responsibility and spirituality, as stewards of the environment and bearers of divine instruction to care for, respect and love nature and environment.

Promotion of New Lifestyle and Environmental Practices

One cannot exempt Christians and the Christian communities from the modern anthropocentrism. To herald a paradigm shift from consumerism, anthropocentrism to stewardship of environment,

a new lifestyle of care, moderation and respect for nature is to be inculcated and lived on as enshrined in Christian environmental ethics. The essence of this is to create a new culture of non-anthropocentric living and imbibe the value of environmental care, respect and love in advancing sustainable environmental commitment for the benefits of the present and future generations.

It Reveals that Christians as Agents of Environmental Advocacy

The church has been at the center of various advocacies being it social, political or environmental. The need to transform Christians into agents of environmental advocacy is now through teaching, mobilization and orientation. Ezech (2012) asserts that ethical advocacy of respect for creation recognizes that human beings have special role to play in the cosmic community” (p.20). The interdependence of human sustainability and environment forms the thrust of this advocacy and that the intrinsic value of all creation should be protected by both government and citizenry through sustainable policies and living.

Environmental Care as an Integral Aspect of Christian Community Social Work

The church is represented as the light of the world. This calls for action and responsibility. Scholars and various governments have acknowledged the impact of church and Christians in charity, social works like education and health but much has not been recorded concerning environmental activities. As bearers of this instruction of stewardship of environment, it is expected that the various Christian organizations vote money and as well, set aside days of practical participation in the activities of environmental sustainability via sanitation and public orientation for proper waste management.

Conclusion

God’s-light on the relevance of stewardship for environmental sustainability is a great tool in the modern fight against the emerging environmental challenges and trends ravaging the global and local communities including Southeastern Nigeria. An academic x-ray into these challenges of environment among the Southeast states reveals multi-dimensional challenges, factors and consequences on human beings and other forms of life. This paper identified human significant contribution to environmental degradation facing the world today especially in the Southeast

through anthropocentric living, improper waste management and disposal, and lack of stewardship.

Southeast has experienced diverse environmental challenges including climate change, deforestation, and extinction of species, degradation, erosion and pollution to mention just a few. Light on the impact of human unsustainable activities were examined and same with the relevance of stewardship of environment. The paper calls for Christian actions through insights on stewardship and Christian action. This action is in cognizance to the God's love to the world and divine instruction to care and respect environment. This is in synergy and collaboration to combat and mitigate the effects of environment for the sustainability of humanity and other forms of life.

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