Concept note

What is etology?

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The purpose of this note is to introduce the concept of etology, first by providing some background on the basic issues etology intends to address, and then by establishing its essential features.

1. Background discussion

Knowingly or not, conventional environmentalism de facto ignores fundamental ethical issues. Some notable cases that prove this assertion are discussed below.

1.1 Sustainable development

The concept of sustainable development was coined by the Brundtland Commission as
… *"development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs."*

This concept drives environmental activities of many individuals and organizations worldwide, United Nations included.

However, such concept places human beings at the epicenter of development concerns. There is no explicit consideration of the implications this approach has on other species living on Earth. These facts raise ethical issues such as:

- Is it ethical to worry about the environment just to the extent that it meets the present and future needs of humans?
- Do humans have the right to meet their needs ignoring those of other living species?

1.2 Animal-based edibles

The intake of meat, fish, eggs, dairy and other animal-based edibles multiplies the environmental impacts of food production.

For example, land use and greenhouse gas emissions increase 5 to 9 times when meat instead of corn is eaten; water consumption raises 4 to 17 times. Other impacts include additional land use for grazing, along with emissions and local pollution from manure.

Other serious issues are brutality inherent to slaughter and fishing, and cruelty and abuse occurring at industrial animal farms.

Most environmentalists do not seem troubled by the severe consequences of animal-based produce, as their ultimate focus is on human well-being.

There are however ethical issues to consider:

- Is the intake of animal-based produce ethical, despite its severe environmental impacts?
- Is cruelty and brutality on animals justified, especially when humans have other –more efficient– choices for feeding?

1.3 Renewable energy

Conventional environmentalists support renewable energy for its apparent cleanness and friendliness. Basic ballpark calculations, akin to those made by MacKay for Britain, seem to prove the contrary.

Renewable energy demands enormous areas if fossil fuels and nuclear fission are to be phased out. Many environmentalists do not feel troubled as there is plenty of "unused land" and off-shore areas for hosting these utilities. Unfortunately, zillions of non-human beings living in these areas will eventually be exterminated consequential to the implementation of renewable energy utilities.

While less damaging than fossil and fission fuels, renewable energy does have environmental impacts, especially when deployed in large scale. Therefore, renewable energy faces ethical issues such as:

- Do humans have the right to exterminate other living beings for the sake of producing supposedly clean energy?
- Is it ethical to promote renewable energy as the ultimate solution to clean energy supply?

Reality is that renewable energy as known today is the lesser evil rather than the solution. True environmentally sound forms of energy are yet to come.

1.4 Climate regime

Scientists believe greenhouse gas emissions from human activities are warming the global climate to dangerous levels. Stabilizing the climate requires a drastic reduction of emissions. For example, current CO2 emissions must be reduced by 45% at least.

The United Nations Climate Convention and its Kyoto Protocol have so far failed to deliver reductions, as global emissions continue to rise. There is a long-standing impasse on how to share the burden. Developed countries are not willing to accept major reductions unless developing countries take some initial commitments. The latter are reluctant given their minor hitherto liability for global emissions.

Equitably sharing emissions among the global population –the obvious way of breaking the impasse– has never been seriously considered by climate negotiators.

Under the Kyoto Protocol, most developed countries committed to reduce their emissions by 8% in the period 2008-2012, and by 20% in 2013-2020, against the 1990 levels.

Reductions are however set on absolute emissions. As a result, the Kyoto Protocol de facto grants developed countries per-capita emission rights two times the equitable level[1].

The inherent inequity of the Kyoto Protocol contradicts Article 3.1 of the Climate Convention:
"The Parties should protect the climate system … on the basis of equity and in accordance with their common but differentiated responsibilities …"

The Kyoto Protocol also contradicts the principle that all human beings are equal in rights, proclaimed in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. The Protocol contradicts as well the recently adopted UN Sustainable Development Goals on fighting inequality and injustice.

Equity is neglected once again at current negotiations towards the upcoming post-2020 climate agreement. Instead, pressure is being put on developing countries to take reduction commitments, despite the fact that in most cases their emissions are –and always have been– under the level at which carbon starts accumulating in the atmosphere.

Acknowledging that every human being on Earth deserves an equal emission right would lead to a straightforward and transparent climate regime, where a global emission target is equitably distributed among the global population as absolute allowances to the countries. Sale of unused allowances would provide developing countries with significant climate funding of their own, far superior to the current ad hoc climate fund created by developed countries.

Most environmentalists do not seem aware of the inherent inequity of the Kyoto Protocol, and its consequences on the effectiveness of the Climate Convention.

The above discussion shows that the current climate regime has important ethical shortcomings:

- Is it ethical to grant developed countries disproportionate and thus inequitable per-capita emission rights?
- Is it ethical to compel developing countries to take reduction commitments?
  Most of them have minor or no responsibility for airborne emissions.
- Is it ethical to continue ignoring equity at climate negotiations?

2. Defining etology

The term "etology", coined in this concept note, is the short form of "ethical ecology".

Etology is a new environmental movement that explicitly incorporates philosophical ethics into environmentalism.

[1] For the period 2008-2012, annual emission rights of developed Kyoto parties were 9.7 tons per capita, while equitable emission rights (total emissions divided by total population of all parties) were 4.8 tons. For 2013-2020, emission rights of developed parties will be 10.7 tons, compared to equitable rights of 4.7 tons.
These figures correspond to CO2 emissions from all sectors excluding land use, land-use change, and forestry; due to constraints in data availability for developing parties, emissions from combustion of fossil fuels are used instead as a proxy.

Ethical concerns built into etology include –but are not limited to– equity, justice, peace, nonviolence, and substantive rights.

Moreover, in the realm of etology boundaries of ethical concerns are extended beyond humans to include all living beings. For the sake of illustration, etology widens human rights to substantive rights for all forms of life. By the same token, etology goes beyond pragmatic nonviolence to include all forms of life, sentient or not.

More research is needed on many theoretical and practical aspects of etology. The considerable development already achieved in closely related fields, notably ecology and ethics, provides an invaluable base for this upcoming effort.

A detailed discussion on the concept and features of etology is out of the reach of this note.