

Research Article

The Spiritual Crisis of Modern Man and Ecological Degradation: A Critical Reconstruction of Seyyed Hossein Nasr's Ecological Philosophy.

Muhammadu Nisar Roshan Safeeha, Mohamadu Lafir Mohamed Thowfeek

International Islamic University Malaysia - IIUM, Malaysia

Corresponding Author, E-mail; safiyanizar92@gmail.com (Muhammadu Nisar Roshan Safeeha)

Copyright © 2026 by Authors, Published by AL-IKHSAN: Interdisciplinary Journal of Islamic Studies. This is an open access article under the CC BY License <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>

Received : July 17, 2026

Revised : August 15, 2026

Accepted : September 13, 2026

Available online : October 11, 2026

How to Cite: Muhammadu Nisar Roshan Safeeha, & Mohamadu Lafir Mohamed Thowfeek. (2026). The Spiritual Crisis of Modern Man and Ecological Degradation: A Critical Reconstruction of Seyyed Hossein Nasr's Ecological Philosophy. *AL-IKHSAN: Interdisciplinary Journal of Islamic Studies*, 4(2), 243-263. <https://doi.org/10.61166/ikhsan.v4i2.162>

Abstract. The current ecological crisis is generally framed in terms of climate change, biodiversity loss, resource depletion, technology, economic growth, and environmental governance. But these approaches do not sufficiently explain why ecological destruction continues in the face of unprecedented scientific knowledge. The present article seeks to critically reconstruct the ecological thought of Seyyed Hossein Nasr, to investigate the metaphysical, epistemological, spiritual and ethical roots of this crisis. It mainly draws on *The Encounter of Man and Nature*, *Knowledge and the Sacred*, *The Need for a Sacred Science* and *Religion and the Order of Nature* and argues that Nasr

views ecological degradation as a consequence of the desacralisation of knowledge and nature which favours reductionism, anthropocentrism, over consumption and technological domination. Drawing on the Create-a-Research-Space (CARS) model, the article identifies a gap in the existing scholarship: while Nasr's significance for Islamic environmental thought is well recognised, little work has been done to reconstruct the causal logic of his ecological critique and to assess its practical limits. The analysis shows that *tawhīd*, *khalīfah*, *amānah*, *mīzān*, *scientia sacra* and the resacralisation of nature provide a coherent metaphysical and ethical alternative. However, Nasr's framework needs to be integrated with environmental science, political economy, institutional governance and social justice. In the end, the legacy of Nasr is to confront the worldview that lies behind ecological degradation and to link environmental responsibility to spiritual and moral transformation.

Keywords: Spiritual crisis; ecological crisis; desacralisation of nature; *scientia sacra*; Islamic environmental ethics; resacralisation.

INTRODUCTION

Contemporary ecological crisis is one of the most complicated challenges facing human civilisation. Climate change, loss of biodiversity, pollution, deforestation, depletion of resources, destruction of ecosystems and unsustainable patterns of production and consumption are not separate environmental problems, but interconnected manifestations of the increasing pressure on the life-support systems of the Earth. For instance, the Global Resources Outlook 2024 highlights the simultaneous crises of climate change, biodiversity loss and pollution, and reports that global resource extraction has continued to rise dramatically. It projects that, without significant transformation, the extraction of resources could increase by some 60 per cent between 2020 and 2060 (United Nations Environment Program [UNEP], 2024).

Hence elaborate scientific, technological, economic and institutional responses have been evolved in the contemporary environmental debate. Climate science is giving us ever more detailed information about environmental change, technological innovation is providing new systems for renewable energy and resource efficiency, environmental law is providing the regulations, and international institutions are providing coordinated responses to global ecological problems. These approaches are indispensable. But their increasing sophistication raises an important philosophical question: why does ecological degradation continue in the face of the proliferation of environmental knowledge?

This is an important question, as awareness of environmental consequences is not necessarily translated into environmentally responsible behaviour. Modern societies have more information than ever on climate change, loss of biodiversity, pollution and resource depletion, while continuing patterns of production and consumption that increase ecological pressure. The contradiction is made clear by the assessment of UNEP: resource extraction and use are still increasing, while

scientific understanding of their environmental implications is also increasing (UNEP, 2024). This situation suggests that ecological degradation cannot be regarded solely as a problem of poor scientific information. It also prompts us to ask about the meaning of nature, the purpose of knowledge, the definition of human flourishing, the legitimacy of technological power, and the moral limits of consumption. Thus, environmental degradation is not only a material crisis but also a crisis of worldviews.

This philosophical dimension has an extensive history of intellectual thought. Lynn White Jr. argued that ecological problems are rooted in history and culture and that human relationships with nature are shaped by religious and philosophical concepts of the natural world (White, 1967). White's intervention sparked a wide discussion on Christianity, technology, anthropocentrism and environmental responsibility. Merchant (1980, 2006) subsequently traced the intellectual transformation of the Scientific Revolution and the changing representation of nature in early modern European thought. Seyyed Hossein Nasr entered this debate from a different Islamic and perennialist point of view. His *The Encounter of Man and Nature*, first published in 1968, was among the first sustained religious-philosophical critiques of modern civilisation's relationship to nature. The book makes a direct connection between the environmental problem and the spiritual crisis of modern humanity, as Nasr puts it. The structure of the book itself shows the scope of his argument: after an introduction Nasr deals with the "Intellectual and Historical Causes" of the modern predicament, and then "Some Metaphysical Principles Pertaining to Nature" (Nasr, 1968).

Nasr's later works elaborate this argument in a more systematic way. *Knowledge and the Sacred* addresses the desacralisation of knowledge and puts forth *Scientia sacra* as an alternative perspective of knowledge. *The Need for a Sacred Science* contains a chapter titled "Sacred Science and the Environmental Crisis: An Islamic Perspective" that starts on page 129 (Nasr, 1981, 1993). His mature environmental argument is most fully developed in *Religion and the Order of Nature* (1996) and chapters such as "The Order of Nature," "The Traditional Sciences, the Scientific Revolution and Its Aftermath," "The Tragic Consequences of Humanism in the West," "Religion and the Environmental Crisis," and "Religion and the Resacralization of Nature" (Nasr, 1996).

Nasr's central claim can consequently be reconstructed as follows: Desacralisation of knowledge → Desacralisation of Nature → Reductionism → Anthropocentrism → Technological Domination and Unlimited Desire → Ecological Degradation. The alternative he proposes reverses this sequence: Recovery of sacred knowledge → Recognition of nature as sacred → Awareness of Cosmic Order → Ethical Responsibility → Moderation → Responsible Human Action Toward Nature. This article argues that this causal sequence represents the core of Nasr's Philosophy.

Studies in the religious and ecological fields have shown that environmental issues cannot be cleanly separated from cultural and religious worldviews. White's influential thesis prompted a major discussion about Christianity and ecological attitudes, and later environmental scholarship broadened the discussion to include the Islamic, Hindu, Buddhist, Taoist, indigenous, and other religious traditions. Nasr has a unique place within the discipline of Islamic environmental thought. The volume *Islam and Ecology: A Bestowed Trust*, edited by Richard C. Foltz, Frederick M. Denny and Azizan Baharuddin, demonstrates the scope of Islamic environmental discourse and includes Nasr's contribution "Islam, the Contemporary Islamic World, and the Environmental Crisis" as well as accounts of Qur'anic ethics, Islamic environmental law, ecological justice and Islamic engagements with modernity (Foltz et al., 2003).

Contemporary scholarship continues to demonstrate the importance of Seyyed Hossein Nasr's ecological thought, especially in its engagement with Sufi cosmology, *tawhīd*, sacred science, the resacralisation of nature, and the spiritual foundations of ecological ethics. A growing number of recent studies view Nasr's environmental philosophy not only as a critique of pollution or resource exploitation but as a metaphysical and epistemological response to the desacralisation of nature in modernity. This interpretation relates the ecological crisis to the loss of awareness of the sacred character of the cosmos and the separation of scientific knowledge from transcendent meaning (Suryadi & Anwar, 2026). Recent studies have indicated that Nasr's Sufi ecotheology views nature as a manifestation (*tajallī*) of the Divine, which creates an ontological connection between God, humanity, and the natural world.

This perspective holds that the ecological responsibility of the human being is a consequence of the awareness of *tawhīd* and the complementary roles of *khalīfah* (vicegerent) and *'abd* (servant of God) rather than a purely utilitarian conception of responsibility for the environment (Santono et al., 2026). Other current scholarship has also reconstructed Nasr's thought based on the concepts of sacred science and theophany, stating that restoring the sacred meaning of nature requires a change in the human worldview and spiritual consciousness (Ruswanda & Hambali, 2026). Recent scholarship thus bolsters Nasr's central proposition that ecological responsibility cannot be divorced from metaphysical awareness, as the recovery of *tawhīd*, the recognition of nature as a manifestation of Divine signs, and the resacralisation of the natural world provide the intellectual and spiritual foundations for a more holistic ecological ethic (Nasr, 1990, 1996; Santono et al., 2026).

Much of this literature, however, still leaves three problems. First, Nasr is presented primarily as an authority of Islamic principles of ecology and environment like *tawhīd*, *khalīfah*, *amānah* and *mīzān*, without reconstructing the philosophical chain that connects these principles to ecological degradation. Second, some

discussions do not distinguish between Nasr's critique of modern science as an epistemological worldview and his critique of scientific and technological applications, thus reproducing Nasr's critique of modernity. This is a crucial distinction, for Nasr's argument is better understood as a critique of reductionism than a simple denial of science. Third, the existing scholarship often acknowledges the spiritual and metaphysical strength of Nasr's thought but does not adequately engage its limitations regarding a political economy, institutional power, global inequality, environmental governance, and practical use of ecological principles. This problem has recently started to be recognised in scholarship, including claims that Nasr's metaphysics needs more attention to the structural and political aspects of ecological degradation.

The research gaps this article addresses is therefore not the lack of literature on Nasr. Instead, the gap is about the need to undertake a critical reconstruction of Nasr's ecological argument as a unifying philosophical model. The article thus poses three questions: how does Nasr explain the intellectual and spiritual roots of modern ecological degradation? What metaphysical and ethical alternative does Nasr offer? What are the explanatory powers and practical limitations of Nasr's ecological philosophy in contemporary environmental issues? the article's main thesis is that Nasr offers a powerful metaphysical diagnosis and normative basis for ecological responsibility, but his argument is even more compelling when combined with empirical environmental science, political economy, institutional governance, and social justice.

METHODOLOGY AND ANALYSIS

The article uses qualitative philosophical analysis and critical textual interpretation. Primary sources of the study are Nasr's major works, especially *The Encounter of Man and Nature* (1968), *Knowledge and the Sacred* (1981), *The Need for a Sacred Science* (1993) and *Religion and the Order of Nature* (1996). The analysis proceeds in three steps. It reconstructs Nasr's diagnosis of modernity by identifying, first, his concepts of desacralisation, reductionism, anthropocentrism, technological domination and consumerism. Second, it re-constructs his positive ecological vision through tawhid, the sacred character of nature, ayat, khalifah, amanah, mizan, scientia sacra and resacralisation. Thirdly, it explores the explanatory and practical adequacy of his framework by engaging with environmental history, Islamic environmental scholarship and contemporary ecological and environmental governance. The CARS model is mainly used to arrange the article's research problem and scholarly contribution: the ecological and environmental crisis constitutes the research territory; the limitations of existing treatments of Nasr define the niche; and the critical reconstruction of his causal argument fills that niche.

Nasr's Diagnosis: Ecological and Environmental Crisis as Spiritual Crisis

The starting point in Nasr's ecological philosophy is the denial of the assumption that the environmental degradation is just a technical malfunction of modern civilisation. Ecological destruction, for Nasr, is a symptom of a more fundamental change in the human conception of reality. Contemporary man has slowly separated knowledge from the sacred, nature from transcendence, human existence from some larger cosmic order. Thus, the ecological crisis is an external symptom of a more profound intellectual and spiritual malaise (Nasr, 1968/1991, pp. 13-14, 136-137; Nasr, 1996, pp. 3-8).

This argument is already present in *The Encounter of Man and Nature: The Spiritual Crisis of Modern Man*, where Nasr discusses the intellectual and historical roots of the modern crisis and questions the reduction of nature to a merely material and quantitative reality (Nasr, 1968/1991, pp. 51-80). Thus, his concern is not just that modern humanity has destructive technologies. The deeper problem is the worldview in which modern science and technology are developed and deployed. The desacralisation of nature and the limitation of legitimate knowledge to the empirical and quantitative aspects of reality threaten the traditional view of nature as having a spiritual and symbolic meaning (Nasr, 1968/1991, pp. 17-23, 51-80).

This argument is more systematically developed by Nasr in *Religion and the Order of Nature*. In that, he maintains that the devastation of the natural world has been nourished by the reductionist conception of nature that is suggested by modern secular science and he calls for the recovery of the traditional understanding of nature as sacred (Nasr, 1996, pp. 3-8). Similarly, the description of the work on the Oxford University Press identifies the environmental crisis with the "gulf between knowledge and the sacred" and pollution and destruction of nature as visible consequences of a deeper spiritual and intellectual disorder (Nasr, 1996, pp. 3-8). Nasr then contends that the recovery of the sacred dimension of nature requires not only technological reforms but a transformation in human consciousness as well as a renewed understanding of nature as the theatre of Divine Creativity and Presence (Nasr, 1996, pp. 270-292).

This difference is important for Nasr's ecological philosophy. Nasr does not simply ask how technology can repair environmental damage; he asks what conception of reality produced a civilisation in which technological power could be exercised without adequate moral and spiritual restraint. This is a singular aspect of his ecological thought. His approach thus redirects focus away from the technological symptoms of ecological degradation and toward their more fundamental metaphysical and spiritual causes.

Desacralisation of Knowledge

The first part of Nasr's argument concerns knowledge. The traditional worldview does not equate knowledge with empirical observation, sensory

experience, and quantitative measurement. Reality has various levels and human beings have matching capacities for knowing. Nasr suggests that traditional civilisations recognised both the empirical study of nature and higher forms of knowledge concerning metaphysical and spiritual reality. Modernity, by contrast, is progressively restricting what counts as legitimate knowledge to the rational and empirical methods concerned mainly with the measurable physical world. In Nasr's analysis, this transformation is the desacralisation of knowledge as knowledge increasingly becomes divorced from its transcendent and sacred dimensions (Nasr, 1981, pp. 1-4, 20-23).

This is not to say that Nasr believes that empirical science is wrong, or that he rejects scientific investigation. It is rather against the elevation of modern empirical science into an exclusive theory of reality that he directs his criticism. Scientific knowledge can give an accurate description and explanation of physical processes, but it does not necessarily answer metaphysical questions such as the meaning, value, purpose, or ultimate nature of reality. Thus, Nasr differentiates between science as a valid method of investigating some aspects of the natural world and scientism that extends the authority of empirical science beyond its proper domain and considers its methods as the only valid way of knowing reality (Nasr, 1981, pp. 1-6, 68-72). Knowledge and the Sacred (Nasr, 1981, pp. 1-6, 119-143) is an ongoing discussion of these themes and discusses the desacralisation of knowledge and its alternative conception of *Scientia sacra*, or sacred knowledge, which re-establishes the relationship between knowledge and transcendent reality.

This epistemological change is of considerable ecological importance. If nature is conceived only as measurable and quantifiable matter, its spiritual, symbolic, qualitative and sacred dimensions are progressively excluded from human consciousness. Nature thereby becomes more open to calculation, prediction, manipulation and technological transformation. Thus, Nasr's ecological argument can be read as an epistemological sequence: the desacralisation of knowledge leads to a reduction of reality, which in turn facilitates a reductionist understanding of nature and ultimately contributes to its instrumentalization (Nasr, 1981, pp. 68-72; Nasr, 1990, pp. 17-23). In this sense the ecological crisis is not only a crisis of environmental management but also a crisis of knowledge and consciousness, since the way in which human beings understand reality is a factor that fundamentally shapes the way in which they relate to the natural world.

Desacralisation of Nature

The second stage is a result of the first. When knowledge is separated from sacred reality, nature is increasingly understood as an autonomous material system. The cosmos ceases to be known as a meaningful order and begins to be understood more as an object of scientific analysis and technological manipulation. This is the core argument of *Religion and the Order of Nature*. The chapter "The Order of

Nature" is on p. 29, and "The Rediscovery of Nature: Religion and the Environmental Crisis" is on pp. 191-234 (Nasr, 1996). The latter deals specifically with the eclipse of the religious significance of nature in the West, and the modern environmental crisis. In this respect, Nasr's notion of desacralisation is particularly significant. In his mature formulation, nature is not made sacred by human beings arbitrarily assigning sacredness to it. Nature is already sacred in its relation to divine creativity. The thing that must change is human consciousness. In "Religion and the Resacralization of Nature" Nasr asserts that resacralisation requires a change in humanity itself, so that humans can find again the sacred quality of nature (Nasr, 1996, pp. 270-292). Therefore, resacralisation is mainly a change of perception. The problem for the environment is not just that forests are being destroyed or rivers polluted. It is that humans have lost the ability to see the natural world as anything other than an economic utility.

Modernity, Mechanistic Nature, and the Problem of Historical Reductionism

Nasr's critique of the ecological crisis is a critique, in essence, of the modern worldview that has altered the meaning and status of nature. He does not see environmental degradation as simply a byproduct of some technologies or economic practices. Rather he attributes the crisis to a more fundamental intellectual change whereby the traditional conception of nature as a meaningful, hierarchical and spiritually significant order was slowly replaced by a notion of nature as an external object for measurement, manipulation and technological control. In *Man and Nature*, Nasr argues that the modern environmental crisis cannot be adequately understood without considering its "profound intellectual and historical causes" (Nasr, 1990, pp. 17-18).

He argues that contemporary science was gradually restricting the domain of legitimate knowledge to the physical domain, and the metaphysical and spiritual dimensions of reality were increasingly absent from the prevailing view of knowledge (Nasr, 1990, pp. 18-23). This reduction of reality is key to his ecological critique, for once nature is viewed only in its measurable physical properties, its symbolic, spiritual, and sacred dimensions are lost to sight.

For Nasr, therefore, the ecological crisis is linked to the historical desacralisation of nature in Western civilisation. In the preface to the revised edition of *Man and Nature* he explicitly situates the problem in the gradual "de-sacralization of the cosmos" and associates this transformation in particular with the rationalism and humanism of the Renaissance that helped prepare the intellectual conditions for the Scientific Revolution (Nasr, 1990, pp. 5-6). His argument is not that environmental destruction was produced by Renaissance humanism or Cartesian philosophy or Baconian science alone. Instead, these changes were part of a larger transformation in the relationship between people, knowledge, and nature. According to Nasr, the Scientific Revolution of the seventeenth century occurred in

an intellectual atmosphere in which metaphysics and the symbolic view of nature had already been undermined. Thus, the new sciences increasingly operated on assumptions about reality, matter, space and time which were taken as if they were merely objective descriptions of nature and not philosophical premises for a particular mode of inquiry. (Nasr, 1990, pp. 68-71)

This is particularly the case with Cartesian dualism and mechanistic cosmology. Nasr argues that the Cartesian method reduced the plurality of the external world to mathematical quantity, thereby contributing to the establishment of a mathematical and mechanistic view of the world of nature (Nasr, 1990, pp. 68–70). In his report, it was not mathematics or empirical investigation per se that was the problem, but their elevation into an epistemological framework, that could define the whole of reality. When nature is understood primarily as extended matter, which can be mathematically analysed, measured and manipulated, the qualitative and spiritual dimensions of existence are gradually excluded. Hence, Nasr associates the mechanistic worldview with the alienation of human beings from nature and with the growth of technological attitudes toward the natural world (Nasr, 1990, pp. 17-23, 68-71).

In *Religion and the Order of Nature*, Nasr develops this argument further, particularly in his discussion of the Scientific Revolution. Traditional sciences were subsumed in a cosmological and religious world view in which nature had an intelligible order linked to higher levels of reality. In contrast, modern science constantly detached the idea of natural order from this traditional metaphysical frame and replaced it with an idea of nature as subjected to laws like the operation of a machine (Nasr, 1996, pp. 126-162). So, his concern is not with science but with the reduction of science to scientism, the belief that the methods and categories of modern science provide a complete account of reality. Nasr explicitly distinguishes between legitimate empirical science and the wider philosophical claim that nothing exists outside what modern science can measure or verify (Nasr, 1990, pp. 3-4; Nasr, 1996, pp. 126-162).

This distinction also helps to account for Nasr's treatment of Francis Bacon. Nasr links Bacon to the new notion of knowledge to gain power over nature and links this to the technological orientation of modern civilisation (Nasr, 1990, pp. 5-6). It would, However, this should not be taken as a claim that Bacon alone initiated ecological destruction. Carolyn Merchant's *The Death of Nature* states that the Scientific Revolution was characterised by intertwined changes in representations of nature, science, technology, gender and economic organization (Merchant, 1980). Most importantly, in a later reappraisal, Merchant acknowledges that Bacon did not use the phrase "torture of nature," but he argues that some aspects of his experimental rhetoric justify the control of nature (Merchant, 2006, pp. 513-533). The familiar environmental interpretation of Bacon thus requires historical qualification, rather than wholesale acceptance.

The same caution is to be applied to Cartesian philosophy. It would be reductionist to construct a linear historical explanation in which the mind-body split of Descartes directly gave rise to the current ecological crisis. Such a formulation overlooks the complexity of early modern intellectual history and the diverse religious, philosophical, scientific, technological and economic developments that contributed to modernity. Nasr himself gives a more elaborate historical sequence than a simple Cartesian explanation. Nasr discusses the decline of mediaeval metaphysical and symbolic understanding of nature, Renaissance humanism and rationalism, the Scientific Revolution, Cartesian mathematicism, mechanistic philosophy, Enlightenment rationalism, utilitarianism, and the technological and economic orientation of modern civilisation (Nasr, 1990, pp. 61-74).

Accordingly, Nasr's ecological argument is strongest when interpreted structurally rather than monocausally. However, the historical relationship should not be presented as: Descartes → ecological crisis or Bacon → exploitation of nature → ecological crisis. Rather, Nasr's analysis can be reconstructed as a cumulative transformation: Desacralisation of nature → Metaphysical reductionism → Mechanistic conception of the cosmos → Separation of knowledge from the sacred → technological mastery of nature → Utilitarian and economic instrumentalization → Large-scale ecological degradation.

This reading reinforces Nasr's larger argument that the environmental crisis is an external manifestation of a deeper spiritual and intellectual crisis. In the new preface to *Man and Nature*, he argues that ecological destruction is a "externalization" of the inner condition of modern humanity and cannot therefore be resolved through environmental engineering or technological adjustments alone (Nasr, 1990, pp. 3-4). In a similar vein, in *Religion and the Order of Nature*, he calls for a revival of the sacred notion of nature, as the crisis is ultimately related to the loss of a worldview that can see nature as more than a collection of material objects (Nasr, 1996, p. 270-290). The ecological problem is thus metaphysical, epistemological, spiritual, technological and economic all at the same time.

This interpretation retains the essential thrust of Nasr's critique, without lapsing into historical reductionism. The importance of Descartes, Bacon, Renaissance humanism, and the Scientific Revolution is not that they were isolated causes of environmental destruction, but that they participated in a larger historical transformation in which the sacred and symbolic understanding of nature was gradually replaced by a mechanistic and instrumental conception. Thus, Nasr's basic criticism is not so much of individual thinkers but of the modern intellectual structure that separates knowledge from transcendence and nature from sacred meaning.

Anthropocentrism and the Loss of Cosmic Accountability.

Another aspect of Nasr's critique is that of anthropocentrism. The problem is not that humans have unique capabilities. Islamic metaphysics itself confers upon

human beings a special moral status. The problem is when humanity reads this as absolute autonomy and absolute ownership. Nasr's alternative is essentially theocentric. "Humans are part of creation, not apart from it. Their special position comes with a responsibility, not an absolute dominion. This position may be associated with Qur'anic ideas like *khalīfah* and *amānah*. The Qur'an describes humanity as *khalīfah* on earth (Qur'an 2:30; 6:165) and the *amānah* as a trust given to human beings (Qur'an 33:72). These ideas offer theological resources for recognising human authority as morally accountable and not proprietary. The difference can be expressed analytically: Power without accountability = domination. Power with accountability to God → stewardship or vicegerency. This explanation clears a big misunderstanding. Nasr is not only anti-human. He would do better to speak of theocentric human responsibility: humans have a special role, but that role is subordinate to divine order.

Consumerism, Desire, and the Spiritual Economy of Modernity

Nasr's ecological critique becomes especially meaningful when he shifts from technology to the issue of human desire. Machines are not the sole producers of Ecological and Environmental degradation. Machines work within economic and cultural systems shaped by patterns of consumption. A civilisation that equates human happiness with increased acquisition must constantly increase material production. Technological efficiency alone cannot neutralise the pressure generated on natural resources. And this is why Nasr's critique of consumerism goes beyond a conventional call for "green technology." His question is about the very idea of the good life. If flourishing is defined as more production, more consumption, more acquisition and more material satisfaction, environmental limits become constraints on human progress. Nasr provides a radically different understanding: spiritual flourishing → moderation → disciplined desire → less material excess → more ecological responsibility. His argument thus also has an ethical dimension that cannot be reduced to environmental management. The ecological question is a question of what human beings should desire. This is one of Nasr's best contributions, for it addresses the demand side of ecological destruction. Modern environmental governance also acknowledges that changes in consumption and production systems are necessary for resource sustainability, not only technological improvements (UNEP, 2024).

Technology: Nasr's Critique is Anti-Reductionist, Not Simply Anti-Scientific

One of the most important revisions that need to be made in the interpretation of Nasr is on science and technology. Nasr is sometimes depicted as an opponent of modern science. That presentation is too rough. His main criticism is directed at the philosophical absolutisation of modern science. Scientific methods allow us to obtain reliable knowledge about measurable physical processes. Climate

modelling, biodiversity monitoring, satellite observation, environmental chemistry, renewable-energy engineering and ecological restoration all demonstrate the indispensable value of science. The problem is that scientific knowledge is treated as the only valid knowledge, and technological capability is an end. So:

Science as method → legitimate, Science as total metaphysics → reductionist. Likewise: Technology as instrument → potentially beneficial. Technology as an autonomous criterion of progress → potentially destructive.

Nasr's position should not, therefore, be described as anti-science, but rather as anti-reductionism. This reading also accords with his notion of *Scientia sacra*. Nasr indicates that his intent is to redefine the relationship between science, knowledge, and sacred reality rather than to eliminate scientific inquiry (Nasr, 1993) in *The Need for a Sacred Science* in a section titled "Sacred Science and the Environmental Crisis: An Islamic Perspective" beginning on page 129.

Tawhīd: The Metaphysical Unity of Creation

The *tawhīd* is where the positive side of Nasr's ecological philosophy begins. *Tawhīd* is the assertion of God's absolute oneness. Its ecological significance is rooted in its implications for the unity and interconnectedness of creation. Creation can never be finally understood as a set of independent objects, standing apart from divine reality. The cosmos has order, hierarchy, correspondence and meaning because it is from the One. The core of this is Nasr's idea of the cosmos as theophany. Nasr's chapter "The Cosmos as Theophany" in *Knowledge and the Sacred* starts on page 189 of the Crossroad edition, illustrating the centrality of this idea to his metaphysics (Nasr, 1981). The ecological implication is not that all natural objects are to be taken literally as God. To read it thus would be to contradict Islamic monotheism. Creation is seen rather as a sign of divine creativity. Thus, nature possesses value beyond its economic utility.

Āyāt: Nature as Signs

The Qur'anic notion of *āyāt* offers a vital link between Islamic revelation and Nasr's ecological metaphysics. The Qur'an frequently asks people to look at the heavens, the earth, biological life, the alternation of night and day and other natural phenomena as signs that need to be thought about (Qur'an 3:190-191; 41:53; 45:3-5). Ecological perception, in Nasr's view, is a form of spiritual contemplation. Scientific observation investigates the physical processes of nature; metaphysical contemplation asks what these processes mean for the totality of being. The two modes are not necessarily exclusive. Scientific observation asks how nature works. Sacred contemplation asks what nature is. Nasr's ecological philosophy gains force when these questions are seen as complementary rather than mutually exclusive.

Khalīfah and Amānah: Responsibility Rather Than Ownership

The ethical basis of human responsibility is rooted in the concepts of *khalīfah* and *amānah*. *Khalīfah* is commonly translated as vicegerent, successor or steward. In the ecological interpretation this is not to be taken to mean an unlimited dominion over creation. Instead, it creates a relationship of delegated authority. Similarly, *amānah* also means trust and responsibility. Together they yield an ethical formula: Responsible stewardship = human capacity + divine trust + accountability. This is completely different from absolute ownership. If nature is merely property, then it can be destroyed when the economic benefits are perceived to be greater than the costs. If nature be a divine trust, man's action is morally responsible. Thus, Nasr's theocentric framework turns environmental responsibility from a preferred option into a spiritual obligation.

Mīzān: Cosmic Balance and Moral Restraint

Another key ecological principle is the Qur'anic concept of *mīzān*. The Qur'an, 55:7-9 relates the creation of the heavens to the establishment of the balance and commands human beings not to transgress that balance. This vision of an ordered cosmos is compatible with Nasr's mature ecological philosophy. The order of nature is the key notion in the metaphysical analysis of Religion and the Order of Nature (Nasr, 1996, pp. 29-79). But an important methodological caveat is necessary. The *Mīzān* should not be confused with the modern scientific concept of ecological balance. *Mīzān* is essentially theological and ethical. Ecological balance is an empirical, scientific concept. They can be put into dialogue, but they are different epistemological categories (Nasr, 1998, p. 121). The ecological significance of *mīzān* is found primarily in its ethical implication. Human beings should not transgress the limits and relationships established within creation (Qur'an, 55: 7-9, Khalid, 2009). Thus, *mīzān* is the introduction of the principle of restraint in environmental ethics.

Resacralisation as Transformation of Consciousness

Nasr's mature ecological argument reaches its apex in the notion of resacralisation. Importantly, resacralisation is not about inventing a new religion of nature. As Nasr argues, nature is already sacred as it is the theatre of divine creativity. "The human ability to recognise this sacredness has been lost. The last chapter of Religion and the Order of Nature is titled "Religion and the Resacralization of Nature" and here Nasr explicitly links ecological restoration with the transformation of human beings (Nasr, 1996, pp. 270-292). Which brings us to a key anthropological proposition: ecological restoration requires human restoration. A polluted environment cannot be entirely divorced from polluted desires; a culture of excessive consumption cannot be separated from a conception of happiness dependent on acquisition; and a technological system without moral limits cannot be divorced from a conception of progress based mainly on power and efficiency.

Resacralisation is thus the recovery of a consciousness capable of seeing nature as something other than an economic resource.

Nasr and the Wider Religious-Ecological Debate

Nasr's approach is explicitly comparative and perennialist. Religion and the Order of Nature studies religious views of nature in traditions and argues that the great religions have resources for recovering a sacred understanding of the natural order (Nasr, 1996). The book's discussion extends beyond Islam to Christianity, Hinduism, Taoism, Buddhism and indigenous traditions. This comparative aspect is important, as Nasr does not see the ecological crisis as something that can be solved within one religious community alone. Each tradition has its own resources for resisting the reduction of nature to economic utility, so there is room for dialogue with other traditions in the arena of Islamic environmental thought. But comparison cannot mean homogenisation. Islam, Hinduism, Buddhism, Taoism, Christianity, and indigenous traditions have different cosmologies. Their concepts of divinity, nature, humanity, salvation, liberation, and ecological responsibility are different. Therefore, Nasr's perennialism is most useful in opening dialogue between traditions, not in erasing their theological differences.

Critical Evaluation 1: The Strength of Nasr's Metaphysical Diagnosis

Nasr's main strength lies in his capacity to see a dimension of ecological crisis that technological environmentalism might miss. Science can help us to understand how climate systems are changing, how biodiversity is being lost, how pollution affects ecosystems and how resource extraction changes environments. But science cannot answer questions such as why human beings should restrain desire, what is a good human life, whether unlimited consumption is morally desirable, why nature should be treated as more than property, or what ultimate meaning should guide technological power. Nasr tackles these questions. Thus, his environmental philosophy fills an important normative niche.

Critical Evaluation 2: The Problem of Romanticising Traditions

The first major limitation of Nasr's work is that he tends to contrast traditional and modern worldviews. As a philosophical ideal-type distinction, his argument is at its strongest, not as a literal historical description. Traditional societies were not environmentally innocent; pre-modern civilisations suffered from deforestation, soil erosion, overgrazing, water mismanagement, and other forms of ecological degradation. So, it would be historically wrong to say traditional civilisation = ecological sustainability and modern civilisation = ecological destruction. The more defensible reading is that traditional metaphysics still possessed more robust conceptual resources for understanding nature as sacred, whereas modernity

developed unusually powerful forms of technological and economic transformation. The distinction is a safeguard for Nasr's argument against historical romanticism.

Critical Evaluation 3: The problem of Political Economy

The second major limitation is Nasr's relatively limited treatment of political economy. Environmental destruction is not just a product of individual consciousness, but is shaped by global capitalism, unequal distribution of resources, colonial histories, international trade, corporate power, extractive industries, fossil-fuel infrastructures, state policy and patterns of global consumption. These structural dimensions are increasingly emphasised in contemporary environmental scholarship. Similarly, Islamic environmental scholarship emphasises the link between environmental problems and social justice and development. For example, Khalid argues that contemporary economic growth and globalised consumer culture place great strain on the resources of the Earth (Khalid, 2010). Therefore, Nasr's metaphysical analysis needs to be supplemented institutionally. You can be a spiritual moderate and still be part of an economic system that rewards excessive extraction. Therefore, it is necessary a spiritual change.

Critical Evaluations 4: The problem of Practical Implementation

Nasr's ideas are strong on the normative level but weaker in institutional policy. What is the place of *tawhīd* in the environmental law? What should *mīzān* do for water management? How does *amānah* impact corporate environmental responsibility? How should *zuhd* influence national consumption policy? What room for *scientia sacra* in university curricula? The questions require institutional mechanisms. Thus, a comprehensive environmental framework must move from metaphysics ethics institutions policy practice. Nasr has some particularly good resources at the first two levels. The final stages must be contributed by other disciplines. This does not make his philosophy wrong. But it does make clear what its proper function is. Nasr is to be understood as providing a normative-metaphysical foundation, not a full-blown program of environmental policy.

Critical Evaluation 5: Science and Technological Modernity

A further criticism concerns the link between Nasr's traditionalism and present-day science. Modern environmental protection cannot be done without scientific knowledge and technological capacity. Understanding and addressing contemporary environmental problems requires climate modelling, satellite monitoring, renewable-energy engineering, biodiversity assessment, environmental chemistry, conservation biology and ecological economics (IPCC, 2023; IPBES, 2019). So, any reading of Nasr that involves renouncing modern science would be unwieldy." A more powerful reading is that his critique can be read as a call for the differentiation and integration of domains of knowledge, not a rejection of scientific

knowledge. Science can explain ecological processes and environmental risks, ethics can establish obligations and principles of responsibility, religion can provide moral and spiritual meaning, politics can establish institutions and governance mechanisms and economics can organise material production and resource allocation. This kind of interdisciplinary integration is gaining more and more traction within contemporary environmental scholarship, recognising that scientific evidence alone cannot establish values, and that ethical and religious perspectives can supplement scientific and technological methods for governing the environment (Jenkins & Chapple, 2011; National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine, 2022; UNEP, 2021). An adequate ecological civilisation therefore requires interaction among these domains, not dominance of one domain over all others. This holistic strategy is in line with Nasr's wider argument that the ecological crisis cannot be adequately addressed through technical knowledge alone but calls for a recovery of the spiritual and religious dimensions of humanity's relationship with nature (Nasr, 1996: 3-8, 126-62, 191-234).

Reconstructing Nasr's Ecological Philosophical Argument

The whole argument can thus be reworded in the form of a causal and normative model of ecological crisis and ecological restoration. At the diagnostic level, Nasr reads the modern ecological crisis as not simply a consequence of technological or economic practices, but rather a deeper change in the human understanding of reality. The loss of the sacred consciousness leads to the desacralisation of knowledge, which is then reduced to what can be empirically measured and materially manipulated. This epistemological reduction allows for the desacralisation of nature, supporting an anthropocentric and instrumental conception of the natural world in which technological power becomes increasingly divorced from moral and spiritual restraint.

The resulting growth in technological capacity, coupled with unlimited material desire and consumerism, exacerbates the exploitation of natural resources and leads ultimately to ecological degradation. Central dimensions of Nasr's ecological critique are identified, akin to contemporary scholarship on Nasr, including desacralisation of knowledge and nature, anthropocentrism, and the reduction of nature to an exploitable commodity (Suryadi & Anwar, 2026; Syamsuddin & Nurbaethy, 2026). Nasr's alternative is to reverse this trajectory at the level of consciousness, knowledge and ethical action. The restoration of sacred consciousness means the reuniting of knowledge with spiritual and metaphysical significance and the awareness of nature, not as a physical object, but as an expression and a sign of Divine creativity. The renewed perception reawakens awareness of the cosmic order and places *tawhīd* at the centre of the human–nature relationship. From this theological base follow the ethical consequences of *khalifah* and *amānah*, which define human beings as responsible trustees rather than

sovereign owners of the earth, and *mīzān*, which sets out the principle of balance and ethical restraint in the created order.

Contemporary Islamic scholarship on ecology also relates *tawhīd*, *khalīfah*, *amānah*, and *mīzān* to ecological responsibility, moderation, stewardship, and the maintenance of environmental balance (Arifin et al., 2025; Raden Fatah et al., 2026). The ethical transformation that should result should temper excessive desire, guide technological development toward responsible ends, and translate spiritual consciousness into concrete ecological stewardship. The theoretical contribution of this reconstruction is thus to demonstrate that Nasr's ecological philosophy is not merely a commentary on the environmental destruction of modernity, but a coherent epistemological, metaphysical, ethical and practical framework in which ecological degradation is construed as the product of a distorted relationship between God, humanity, knowledge, technology and nature, and ecological restoration demands the reorientation of consciousness, knowledge, desire and human power toward a sacred understanding of the created order. This understanding is consistent with scholarship which identifies Nasr's ecological project as a movement toward the re-sacralisation of nature and the restoration of a sacred cosmology rather than simply a program of environmental conservation (Nasr, 1996; Suryadi & Anwar, 2026).

Towaed a Revised Nasrian Ecological Framework

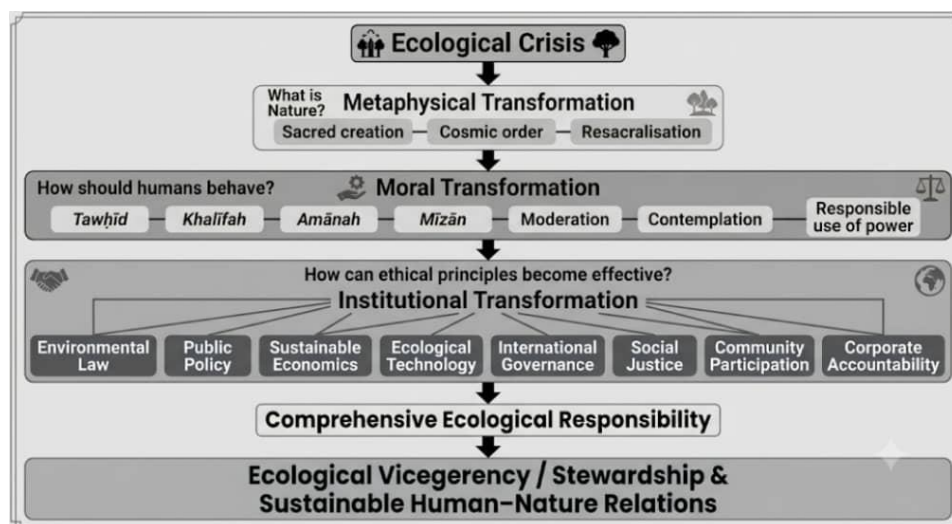
A critical reconstruction of Nasr's ecological framework proposes that his contribution can be improved by integrating three interrelated levels of ecological responsibility: metaphysical, moral, and institutional. First, on metaphysical responsibility. It is concerned with the fundamental question, what is nature? From Nasr's perspective, nature cannot be reduced to inert matter or a collection of exploitable resources; rather, it belongs to a sacred cosmic order and can be understood as a manifestation and sign of Divine creativity. This metaphysical reorientation is important in that it challenges the reduction of nature to an instrumental or economic value only.

The second level, moral responsibility, asks, how should human beings behave toward the natural world? Here, notions like *khalīfah* (stewardship), *amānah* (trust), *mīzān* (balance), moderation, restraint, contemplation and responsible exercise of human power provide an ethical framework for disciplining consumption and directing human activity toward ecological responsibility. But at the third level there is an additional critical step: that of institutional responsibility, asking how ecological principles can become socially and politically effective. Spiritual and moral transformation is necessary but not sufficient to govern corporations, markets, technologies, states, or transnational environmental problems. They must therefore be translated into environmental law, public policy, sustainable economic systems, environmental education, corporate accountability, international environmental

governance, ecological technologies, social justice and meaningful community participation.

This institutional dimension is consistent with contemporary environmental scholarship that effective responses to ecological crises require coordinated transformations across governance, economic systems, technology, social behaviour and institutions (IPCC, 2023; UNEP, 2021). The resulting framework can therefore be summarised as metaphysical transformation + ethical transformation + institutional transformation = comprehensive ecological responsibility. Such a formulation preserves the unique insight of Nasr that ecological crisis has a spiritual and epistemological dimension while overcoming a possible limitation of Nasr's framework: the presumption that the restoration of spiritual consciousness and ethical orientation is, by itself, adequate to resolve the structural and institutional causes of environmental degradation. The critical contribution of this reconstruction, therefore, is to close the gap between Nasr's sacred cosmology and the practical, operational mechanisms of environmental governance, thus transforming ecological responsibility from a primarily spiritual and moral ideal to a multidimensional framework capable of addressing the inner causes and the institutional structures of the current ecological crisis.

Three-Level Integrated Framework of Ecological Responsibility: Metaphysical, Moral, and Institutional Transformation



Nasr's Contributions to Contemporary Ecological Philosophy

Five interconnected propositions enable one to understand Nasr's lasting contribution to contemporary ecological philosophy, but also point to the need for a sixth, critical extension. First, Nasr shows that environmental degradation is not merely a technological, economic or managerial problem but a crisis of worldview. The destruction of the ecological must therefore be studied within the framework of

the way modern civilisation understands nature, man, knowledge and the purpose of existence. Second, he challenges epistemological reductionism, the tendency to regard empirical, quantitative knowledge as the only legitimate mode of understanding reality. This does not mean the repudiation of science but the recognition that scientific knowledge, indispensable as it is for the explanation of ecological processes, cannot by itself determine the ethical purposes to which knowledge and technological power should be directed.

Third, Nasr re-sacralises nature, which has been reduced to a series of economically exploitable resources and reads it instead within a meaningful cosmic order in which the natural world has significance beyond its instrumental usefulness. Fourth, he shifts the idea of environmental responsibility from a technical management problem to a spiritual and moral obligation: *tawhīd* offers the unity and coherence of creation, *khalifah* describes humanity's responsible role within it, *amānah* underscores trusteeship and accountability, and *mīzān* defines balance, proportion, and restraint. Fifth, Nasr points to the reorientation of human consciousness, desire and ideas of flourishing as a necessary component of ecological transformation. Sustainability cannot be achieved solely through technological innovation if the patterns of overconsumption and material desire continue to prevail.

But a critical engagement with contemporary ecological thought must posit a sixth proposition: metaphysical and ethical transformation must be accompanied by structural and institutional transformation. Spiritual renewal can change values and motivations, but cannot regulate corporations, markets, technologies, states, environmental law or international institutions. Nasr's framework is thus most fruitful when his critique of modernity and his vision of re-sacralised nature are engaged with environmental governance, political economy, ecological technology, social justice, and institutional reform. The importance of this critical reconstruction, then, is not to diminish Nasr's contribution, but to broaden its analytical scope: ecological sustainability requires a transformation both human relationship to nature and of the social structures through which that relationship is organised. Nasr thus provides the metaphysical grounding and moral direction, and contemporary ecological governance the institutional means to translate ecological consciousness into enduring environmental action.

CONCLUSION

Seyyed Hossein Nasr's ecological philosophy offers an important Islamic metaphysical critique of modern environmental degradation. The ecological crisis, he argues, is not merely the result of pollution, resource depletion, technological failure, or bad environmental policy, but rather a reflection of a deeper crisis in humanity's understanding of knowledge, nature, progress, and its place in the cosmos. The desacralisation of knowledge confines reality to what can be empirically

measured, while the desacralisation of nature promotes an instrumental relationship which is reinforced by anthropocentrism, technological domination, consumerism and excessive material desire. Nasr's alternative is the reclamation of the sacred. Tawhīd establishes the unity of creation, āyāt allows nature to be interpreted as divine signs, khalīfah and amānah establish accountable human responsibility, mīzān promotes balance and restraint, and scientia sacra re-establishes the link between knowledge and sacred reality. His framework, however, needs critical supplementation, for spiritual transformation cannot address the political, economic, technological and institutional dimensions of the ecological crisis. Modern science, environmental governance and technological innovation are still needed. It is best to understand Nasr's contribution as a metaphysical and normative groundwork for ecological responsibility rather than as a substitute for science or environmental governance. His lasting significance is that he demonstrates that ecological sustainability must change not only environmental practices and institutions but also human consciousness, desires, values and understanding of nature.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Arifin, M. B., Rahmah, M. H., Wardaniyah, Q., & Nurin, M. N. A. (2025). The Qur'anic concept of *khalīfah* and the ecology of *mizan*: Interpreting environmental crisis through classical and modern tafsir. *Journal of Islamic Thought and Contemporary Studies*, 1(1), 1-15.
- Bacon, F. (2000). *The new organon* (L. Jardine & M. Silverthorne, Eds.). Cambridge University Press. (Original work published 1620).
- Foltz, R. C., Denny, F. M., & Baharuddin, A. H. (Eds.). (2003). *Islam and ecology: A bestowed trust*. Harvard University Press.
- Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change. (2023). *Climate change 2023: Synthesis report*. IPCC. <https://doi.org/10.59327/IPCC/AR6-9789291691647>
- Intergovernmental Science-Policy Platform on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services. (2019). *Global assessment report on biodiversity and ecosystem services*. IPBES Secretariat. <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.3831673>
- Jenkins, W., & Chapple, C. K. (2011). Religion and environment. *Annual Review of Environment and Resources*, 36, 441–463. <https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev-environ-042610-103728>
- Khalid, F. (2010). Islam and the environment—Ethics and practice: An assessment. *Religion Compass*, 4(11), 707–716. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1749-8171.2010.00249.x>
- Merchant, C. (1980). *The death of nature: Women, ecology, and the scientific revolution*. Harper & Row.

- Merchant, C. (2006). The scientific revolution and the death of nature. *Isis*, 97(3), 513–533. <https://doi.org/10.1086/508090>
- Nasr, S. H. (1968). *The encounter of man and nature: The spiritual crisis of modern man*. Allen & Unwin.
- Nasr, S. H. (1981). *Knowledge and the sacred*. Crossroad.
- Nasr, S. H. (1993). *The need for a sacred science*. State University of New York Press.
- Nasr, S. H. (1996). *Religion and the order of nature*. Oxford University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780195108231.001.0001>
- Raden Fatah, W., Hasanah, U., & Kalsum, N. U. (2026). Reframing Islamic ecology as a transformative ethical paradigm: *Khalīfah, tawhīd, mīzān*, and the global ecological crisis. *Khazanah Tarbawi: Jurnal Pendidikan Islam*, 2(1), 1-12. <https://doi.org/10.65793/j.j.khazanah-tarbawi.2026.106>
- Suryadi, I., & Anwar, S. (2026). Sacred science and the ecological epistemological crisis: Revitalizing Sufi wisdom in restoring Seyyed Hossein Nasr's sacred worldview. *International Journal of Nusantara Islam*, 14(2), 911-926. <https://doi.org/10.15575/ijni.v14i2.52583>
- Swales, J. M. (1990). *Genre analysis: English in academic and research settings*. Cambridge University Press.
- Syamsuddin, M., & Nurbaethy, A. (2026). Konsep etika lingkungan dalam buku *Man and Nature* karya Seyyed Hossein Nasr. *Sulesana: Jurnal Wawasan Keislaman*, 20(1), 110-130. <https://doi.org/10.24252/sulesana.v20i01.69280>
- United Nations Environment Programme. (2024). *Global resources outlook 2024: Bend the trend—Pathways to a liveable planet as resource use spikes*. International Resource Panel. <https://doi.org/10.18356/9789213588283>
- White, L., Jr. (1967). The historical roots of our ecologic crisis. *Science*, 155(3767), 1203-1207. <https://doi.org/10.1126/science.155.3767.1203>