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CURRENT AFFAIRS	ENVIRONMENTAL APATHY

Possible Essay Questions

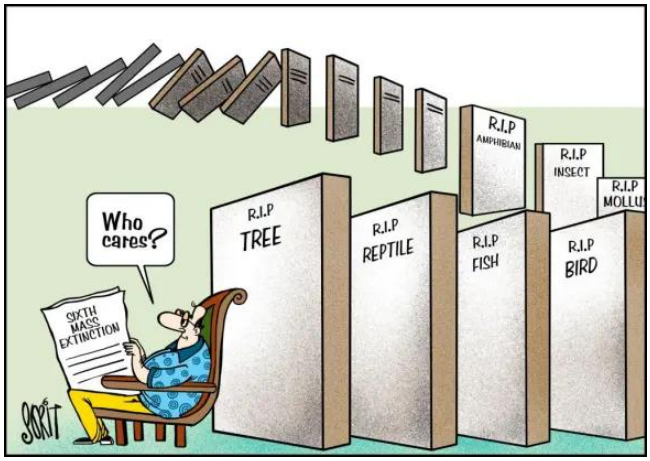
1. Assess the view that the individual is helpless in the face of environmental degradation.
2. Assess the view that climate crisis is inevitable no matter what we do.
3. How far is technology the answer to environmental problems? (CJC Prelims 2023)

Introduction

As global temperature increases, our ecology is gradually ruined by the intensifying heat. We would assume that humans would, out of fear for themselves and their descendants, scramble and make right the wrongs they have done to the environment. Yet, reality suggests otherwise. As of 2023, carbon dioxide emissions exceeded 40 billion tones, with nearly 37 billion tons of it coming from fossil fuels. There seems to be no end our pollutive ways. What explains for our inaction in the face of climate crisis? This set of notes seeks to elaborate on the various reasons why stakeholders in society disregard the climate crisis.

1. The lack of awareness of the severity of climate change is a contributing cause for the passivity we show towards the climate crisis.

- While many of us, well exposed to the studies of environmental science, will know the dangers of the climate crisis, others may not have the luxury of such knowledge.
- It may be the case that they have heard of the climate crisis, but they may not be fully aware of the severity of the threats it poses. This is well supported by a study by SWNS Digital. According to the survey conducted in 2021, most of the respondents thought that the planet loses 101 species to extinction a year, when in fact the real number is at least 100 times larger. Moreover, the survey also revealed the incorrect assumption held by 64 per cent of its respondents, where a shrinking natural world is only seen when animals go extinct rather than a plant or insect. To many, it seems like the loss of a plant or insect is but an insignificant worry that does nothing to affect the web of ecological interactions.



- Hence, it is easy to see why many would underrate the severity of the climate crisis. According to an Ipsos Global Advisor survey in 31 countries, only 48 per cent of people said that climate change was a significant issue. 31 per cent of them said that it was a minor problem, with another 15 per cent of them saying that it was not a problem at all.
- These results are worrying. Without a clear understanding of the threats of the climate crisis, people will not be motivated to do their part in readjusting their lifestyles.

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- This may explain why 46 per cent of the respondents to a survey conducted by Kantar Public felt that there was no real need for them to change their personal habits.

➢ An awareness of such an attitude is important for it reveals to us the importance of education as a solution to mitigate the climate crisis. If the root of apathy is ignorance itself, the way to motivate others in the adoption of sustainable practices is to inform them on the true dangers and definition of the climate crisis. In short, they will come to care about the environment if they know how their livelihood and well-being is inextricably linked to the health of the ecology.

➢ Thus, while we may assume that many individuals today will know the true extent of the climate crisis (due to the free exchange of information facilitated by the Internet), that is not always the case. These survey results tell us that there is indeed more to be done when it comes to addressing the climate crisis. And that the way forward is to educate society on the true harms of the climate crisis.

2. Moreover, given that changes to our lifestyles entail sacrifices, many are unwilling to give up the comfort and convenience for more sustainable alternatives.

- For the individual, the most immediate way for them to do their part for the environment is to change the way they consume goods and services. They can renounce their use of plastic products, avoid the use of personal vehicles, and observe a strict practice of recycling. However, to adopt more sustainable practices will inevitably bring about sacrifices, either as financial costs or disruptions to their routines.
- Thus, the unnecessary hassle disincentivises the average consumer to adopt greener practices, and instead they will choose to continue business as usual because it is the most convenient (and pleasurable) approach to living.
- According to a study by Netherlands consulting firm Kearny, sustainable products are 75 – 85 per cent more expensive than conventional products. One reason that accounts for the high cost of sustainable products is the high cost of raw materials.
- Unlike conventional products, which often use cheap and accessible raw materials, sustainable products are made from materials that are responsibly sourced.
- This means that the raw materials are usually grown, harvested, extracted in a way that minimises the harms it brings to the environment, while supporting the local community.

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- Organic cotton is a good example. Unlike conventional cotton, which uses synthetic fertilisers and pesticides, organic cotton are free of these chemicals. Thus, that makes it harder to produce, and even more difficult for harvesters to ensure that its quality remains unaffected in the absence chemicals that help with its production. Thus, this will invariably increase the cost of organic cotton, and consequently, increase the price of sustainable goods that rely on organic cotton.
- The same can also be said of sustainably sourced wood. Due to the intensive processing and manufacturing methods required to ensure that lumber is harvested sustainably, the cost of FSC-certified lumber is always higher than that of conventionally sourced wood.
- Thus, 52 per cent of consumers have yet to adopt a more sustainable lifestyle due to the high cost of eco-friendly alternatives, according to research by Deloitte.
- Another way in which consumers can change the way they consume is to change their diet.
- Adopting a vegetarian or vegan diet is an effective way for individuals to reduce the damage done to the environment caused by food production. Research conducted by the Oxford University showed that vegan diets resulted in 75 per cent less climate-heating emissions, water pollution and land use than diets in which more than 100g of meat a day was eaten. Vegan diets also cut the destruction of wildlife by 66 per cent.
- Unfortunately, consumers are hesitant to switch to meatless diets because of concerns of taste and health. According to a study by UCLA psychologists, consumers were concerned that a meatless diet would not provide adequate protein and nutrition for the body. More importantly, many meat eaters were primarily concerned that a meatless diet would not taste as good as an omnivorous diet.

➢ These examples show us that aside from ignorance, our unwillingness to forgo common pleasures is a major obstacle that prevents us helping the environment. And while we may educate individuals about the dangers of our daily practices, it is entirely up to them to decide whether they wish to adopt it. Hence, this demonstrates the limits of education in persuading consumers blinded by their obsession with comfort and convenience.

➢ It could perhaps be better to coerce the most reluctant of consumers to do their part using the laws of the state, albeit, at the expense of individual freedoms.

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3. **Blinded by their greed for profit, firms continue business as usual, ignoring the harms of their business practices that come at the expense of the ecology.**

- Firms, fixated on maximising their profits, often ignore the environmentally damaging effects of their actions. And while firms may earn a substantial amount from their actions, they fail to account for the long-term effects of their practices. Concerns about the environment seem insignificant to avaricious firms, for these are costs not borne by them, but by the descendants of humankind. It is reasonable to say that firms are enriching themselves at the expense of the well-being of future generations to come.
- A good look at the dirty energy industry well illustrates our point. Take for instance the coal company, Peabody energy. As of 2023, it was the most polluting company, producing a total of 15.39 billion tonnes of carbon dioxide since 1965. By exploiting the natural resource of coal, it was able to earned a total of US$4.95b in 2023. Yet, the environment is hurt by the emission of greenhouse gases, toxic gases, and carcinogenic substances
- And to make matters worse, Peabody energy has also spent decades spreading disinformation concerning climate change. According to the Guardian, the coal company has funded at least two dozen groups that cast doubt on manmade climate change, groups that are also opposing environmental regulations. It does so to protect its own economic interest; environmental regulations will only create unnecessary obstacles to its business. So, even when the evidence suggests that the climate crisis that we are facing today is anthropogenic, the wilfully ignore it, just so that they can enrich themselves further.

- Coca cola, a company that we are all familiar with, is also environmentally negligent.
- In an annual report by Break Free From Plastic, Coca Cola was ranked as the world's top plastic polluter. The coke bottle was the most frequently discarded item on beaches, in rivers, parks, and other litter sites, in 51 out of the 55 countries survey, according to Break Free From Plastic. In 2020, Coca Cola also received flak when it announced that it will not abandon plastic bottles because they are popular with consumers.
- And while Coca Cola continues to pump out harmful single use plastic packaging, they pay lip service to the world by claiming that they are working hard in solving plastic pollution.

➢ This is a worrying trend considering how 91 per cent of all plastic waste ever generated has not been recycled and have ended up being incinerated, buried, dumped.

➢ As seen, in the pursuit of profit, firms have turned a blind eye to the devastating problem of environmental degradation. And if their practices are not restrained by the laws of the state, future generations will have to suffer from the irresponsibility of our actions.

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4. **Among developing nations, their economic circumstance compels them to prioritise their own livelihood over that of the environment.**

- As addressed in one of the previous paragraphs, we have seen how environmentally sustainable practices are costlier compared to conventional practices.
- So, while richer, more developed, nations have the means to afford these environmentally sustainable alternatives, the same cannot be said for developing nations.
- Poorer nations, because of their lack of resources, may choose to prioritise economically convenient options as opposed to environmentally beneficial alternatives. They do so to prioritise their livelihoods, for without which, life would be unbearable and intolerable.
- A good case in point is the practice of slash and burn in Indonesia. Slash and burn is a farming method that involves cutting and burning trees, as the name suggests. The intent is to create a field free of vegetation called a swidden. Once trees are deforested and the biomass burnt, a nutrient rich layer of ash covers the land, which fertilises the soil and renders it conducive for agriculture. This method has always been preferred for clearing and fertilising land since the Neolithic period. Today, it remains a favourite of developing nations, since the entire process requires only axes and a match stick.
- During Indonesia's dry season from July to October, farmers would engage in slash and burn to fertilise their land and to make space for their agricultural endeavours. And while farmers know that forest fires are harmful to the ecology, they are compelled to continue with such a tradition so that they can ensure that their earnings are unaffected.

- What is interesting to note is that slash and burn is illegal in Indonesia. Despite it being outlawed, corruption and weak governance enabled the practice to continue for years.
- As a result, a cloud of haze hovers over Southeast Asia, measuring up to hundreds of kilometres across in size. It has mainly affected countries like Singapore, Malaysia, Thailand, and even the Philippines. This worsens the Pollutants Standards Index (PSI) levels, not just for neighbouring states, but also for the denizens of the East Indies.
- Beyond the air quality, slash and burn leads to forest fires, which has destroyed much of the natural habitat in Indonesia. In Kalimantan, home to the region's Orangutans, the Bornean orangutan is critically endangered because of the fires of men.

➢ Thus, while affluence and poverty are both causes of pollution, the example given above shows us the ramifications of poverty. It also demonstrates the necessity of economic growth, so that nations can wean off unsustainable practices like slash and burn.

➢ Affluence may be the cause for environmental degradation (since it leads to overconsumption and the problem of excessive waste), but without it, economies may not have the means to create sustainable relations with their environment.

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5. **Some politicians, owing to the extensive relations they have with their political supporters, are compelled to ignore environmentalism, prioritising instead on fulfilling the interests they serve.**

- Having explored some reasons why consumers, firms, and developing nations, would opt for environmentally unsustainable options, let us turn our attention to developed states.
- Given the substantial resources they have, and the knowledge they possess of the environment, we would assume that all developed nations would do their best to steer their economies towards a greener future. Unfortunately, that is far from the truth.
- We need to understand that politicians, especially those in democratic nations where lobbying (any attempt by individuals or interest groups to influence the decisions of the government) is a norm, cannot simply act as they please, but must act according to the interests they represent. Their legitimacy and power are inextricably tied to the interests of others. In other words, if they choose to ignore these interest groups, they will lose the favour of their supporters, reducing their odds of winning and retaining power.
- Current affairs have given us examples where politicians are bounded by their ties with stakeholders in environmentally harmful industries. The ex-president of America, Donald Trump, is an apt example. After he took office in 2017, he has received numerous donations from firms like Midland Energy, Hilcorp Oil, and Murray Energy.

- Given the support that energy moguls have extended to Trump, it is no surprise when we find that Trump has used his powers as president to roll back auto emissions standards, weaken environmental regulation, and to open the Artic National Wildlife Refuge for drilling. These were his pursuits during his four-year term as president.
- Many of these pursuits will present new economic opportunities for the energy industry to exploit energy sources, while also improving the efficiency of their resource extraction. Moreover, the intent to roll back on environmental regulations will effectively undermine the many political victories that ex-president Obama had laboured for.
- And according to Columbia University's Sabin Center for Climate Change Law, a total of 159 actions were taken by Trump since he took office to "to scale back or wholly eliminate climate mitigation and adaption measures." And while many of these actions have been slowed or blocked by the courts, they undeniably demonstrate Trump's allegiance to the energy industry, which has given him complete unwavering support in office.

➢ Thus, we need to acknowledge that politicians are usually caught in a web of relations that they must attend to should they wish to maintain and preserve their legitimacy as a leader. However, such a trend reveals how important civil society is. If the manner in which politicians act are

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informed by the interests they represent, it is vital that environmentalists aggregate and articulate their interest in society.

- And when a critical mass has been reached, their voices will become too influential for politicians like Trump to ignore. Only then will there be reform made to this economy of ours that is stubbornly resistant to progressive change.

Conclusion

As we have seen, the reasons for our apathy towards climate change are varied. Be it ignorance, greed, or our lust for influence, we need to realise that the climate crisis is a multi-faceted problem that requires the cooperation of all the stakeholders in society. That means that there is no one solution that best motivates these stakeholders to do their part. Only by adopting a multi-pronged approach, mixing legislation with a good blend of activism and education, can we ensure that our passivity can eventually give way to activity for the betterment of our natural world.

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