



Florida High Schools Model United Nations

FHSMUN 45

UNITED NATIONS ENVIRONMENT PROGRAM (UNEP)

Human Rights and Environmental Degradation

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Introduction

The Industrial Revolution saw humanity begin to nudge the snowball of climate change off the top of its hill. For hundreds of years, there was no noticeable difference. People developed means to conquer even the harshest, most inhospitable climes – both within and without our atmosphere – to live and thrive. They developed such luxuries as flight, air conditioning, automobiles, the internet, and the lithium-ion batteries that power the devices used to access the internet. The cost of the rapid development of the last three centuries is only now being paid forward: Rising temperatures. Melting glaciers. Elevated sea levels. A damaged ozone layer. Increased carbon dioxide in the atmosphere. While climate change is a ubiquitous threat to everyone on Earth, not everyone is affected simultaneously. As developed nations continue to contribute record amounts of Greenhouse gasses (GHGs) into the atmosphere, it is the developing nations – that depend more on natural resources and are, in general, less able to respond to natural disasters – that climate change is affecting the most.¹ It may be too late once developed nations start to feel the pinch of climate change.

Historical Context

In 2012, the United Nations Office of the High Commissioner on Human Rights (OHCHR) established the Special Rapporteur on human rights in the environment. The Office has continuously asked the Rapporteur for advice when considering human rights and the environment since the establishment of the position. Before the establishment of the office, little was done to address the issue of human rights and environmental degradation. The relationship between human rights and environmental degradation began to evolve in 1994 when the Special Rapporteur on Human Rights and the Environment (separate from the modern OHCHR position) produced a report entitled Human Rights and the Environment: Final Report. The report found that the following could not be upheld as human rights with massive environmental degradation:

- The right to self-determination and permanent sovereignty over natural resources
- The right to life
- The right to health
- The right to food
- The right to safe and healthy working conditions
- The right to housing
- The right to information
- Popular participation
- Freedom of association
- Cultural rights

Since this report, the Special Rapporteur on Human Rights and the Environment (Mr. John Knox) created the Framework Principles on Human Rights and the Environment. This framework includes fifteen principles to be implemented by member states to ensure that human and environmental rights coexist. The UNEP uses aspects of both the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) and the Kunming-Montreal Global Biodiversity Framework (GBF) as ways to promote environmental protection and the progress of human rights. The GBF is particularly important as it sets goals to be achieved by 2050. These goals include the following:

1. The integrity, connectivity, and resilience of all ecosystems are maintained, enhanced, or restored, substantially increasing the area of natural ecosystems by 2050; Human-induced

¹ Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), “Poverty and Climate Change: Reducing the Vulnerability of the Poor through Adaptation,” 2003, <https://www.oecd.org/env/cc/2502872.pdf>.

extinction of known threatened species is halted, and, by 2050, the extinction rate and risk of all species are reduced tenfold, and the abundance of native wild species is increased to healthy and resilient levels; The genetic diversity within populations of wild and domesticated species, is maintained, safeguarding their adaptive potential.

2. Biodiversity is sustainably used and managed, and nature's contributions to people, including ecosystem functions and services, are valued, maintained, and enhanced, with those currently in decline being restored, supporting the achievement of sustainable development for the benefit of present and future generations by 2050.
3. The monetary and non-monetary benefits from the utilization of genetic resources and digital sequence information on genetic resources and of traditional knowledge associated with genetic resources, as applicable, are shared fairly and equitably, including, as appropriate, with indigenous peoples and local communities, and substantially increased by 2050, while ensuring traditional knowledge associated with genetic resources is appropriately protected, thereby contributing to the conservation and sustainable use of biodiversity, in accordance with internationally agreed access and benefit-sharing instruments.
4. Adequate means of implementation, including financial resources, capacity-building, technical and scientific cooperation, and access to and transfer of technology to fully implement the Kunming-Montreal Global Biodiversity Framework, are secured and equitably accessible to all Parties, especially developing country Parties, in particular the least developed countries and small island developing States, as well as countries with economies in transition, progressively closing the biodiversity finance gap of \$700 billion per year, and aligning financial flows with the Kunming-Montreal Global Biodiversity Framework and the 2050 Vision for Biodiversity.

Deforestation and its effects

Deforestation is one of the world's largest issues today. The Americas, Africa, Eurasia, Brazil, Tanzania, and Indonesia have some of the highest deforestation rates in contemporary history. The preservation of life on land is Goal 15 of the Sustainable Development Goals and is considered paramount to the mission of the UNEP. Deforestation was at its most detrimental in the 1980s, began to slow in its growth, and has recently seen an increase in recent years. Several consequences exist to underline the seriousness of deforestation. Trees and vegetation work to regulate the water cycle, and less water is available to be used by living plants. Additionally, the lack of trees can cause soil erosion and flooding, with dry, arid land being abandoned by farmers and thus being susceptible to floods.

A significant consequence of deforestation is an increase in carbon emissions. Trees are nature's natural defense against carbon dioxide emissions, and they work through the photosynthesis process to convert greenhouse gasses into oxygen. As fewer trees exist and industrial areas increase in size and population, less oxygen is created to replace the emitted greenhouse gasses. The following are case studies of how deforestation has affected regional ecosystems, environments, habitats, and human living situations. Ultimately, most cases of deforestation affect changes that transcend borders.

Haiti

Fifty years ago, Haiti's forests covered more than 60% of the country; however, today, the country of Haiti only has 30% tree coverage. The soil erosion and deforestation have caused frequent and severe flooding, killing thousands of people each time. In January 2010, Haiti was struck by a catastrophic 7.0 magnitude earthquake followed by 52 aftershocks measuring 4.6 or

greater in magnitude. Approximately 250,000 residences and 30,000 commercial buildings were destroyed, and 160,000 people lost their lives. Since the devastation struck the nation, the Haitian government, United Nations Human Rights Council (UNHCR), various NGOs, and the international community have focused on rehabilitating the nation and its people, focusing primarily on immediate relief for the citizens of Haiti.

2016's category 4 Hurricane Matthew once again left Haiti in what United Nations Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon called "absolute devastation."² Hurricane Matthew claimed the lives of nearly 1,000 people, destroyed 80% of the nation's buildings, left 175,000 without homes, 2.2 million people were affected, and at least 1.4 million Haitians were in urgent need of clean water, food, and medicine.³ At the same time, an ongoing cholera epidemic still threatens to make the situation worse. UNHCR, United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), and UNEP have been actively working together since then to 1.) reduce Haiti's disaster risk to prevent any further devastation, 2.) provide immediate support to national and local authorities to coordinate immediate response teams, 3.) created immediate short-term jobs for the Haitian people to work on alleviating the situation, and 4.) provide for humanitarian needs.

The Amazon Rainforest: "Agro-Suicide"

Most debates and conversations about deforestation tend to mention at least the Amazon Rainforest, the world's largest, most biodiverse, most productive forest. It is also "the planet's largest deforestation front."⁴ One-fifth of the Amazon Rainforest biome has already been lost to land developers, wildfires, corporations, and governments using the felled trees for paper products. With this loss of land, over 8,000 endemic plant species and 2,300 animal species are now at a high risk of extinction in the near future.⁵

Plant and animal diversity is not the only casualty of Amazonian deforestation. One of the most culpable groups of people for the deforestation practices – Brazilian agribusiness – can "soon expect to start losing a billion dollars per year... as continued deforestation plays havoc with the biome's ability to regulate rainfall patterns."⁶ Consistent and predictable rainfall patterns are critical to the massive businesses that exploit natural resources in the Amazon and the Indigenous and other populations that live in the region and depend on that rainfall for their livelihoods. Already, some areas of the Amazon have seen rainfall reductions of 48% from previous annual trends.⁷ Forest engineers are calling the self-destructive tendencies of the big businesses "agro-suicide," as in less than three decades, the environment will have degraded so much to drive out big businesses, right after thousands of species of plants and animals and countless communities to depend on the biome for their culture, income, and more.⁸

Although the Amazon Rainforest's biome falls within the borders of nine different nations, the vast majority of the ecosystem lies within Brazil. Brazil is also the largest culprit of deforestation practices, and even though other countries may be less egregious in their

² "Ban Ki-Moon in Haiti Inspects Matthew's Damage | Climate Crisis News | Al Jazeera," Al Jazeera, accessed December 29, 2023, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2016/10/16/ban-ki-moon-in-haiti-inspects-matthews-damage>.

³ "Rapidly Assessing the Impact of Hurricane Matthew in Haiti," Text/HTML, World Bank, accessed December 29, 2023, <https://doi.org/10/20/rapidly-assessing-the-impact-of-hurricane-matthew-in-haiti>.

⁴ <https://ballardbrief.byu.edu/issue-briefs/deforestation-in-the-amazon-rainforest>

⁵ Natasha Vizcarra, "UN Science Panel Calls for End to Amazon Deforestation," #ThinkLandscape (blog), August 31, 2021, <https://thinklandscape.globallandscapesforum.org/54277/u-n-science-panel-releases-initial-findings-of-upcoming-overview-of-the-amazon/>.

⁶ Vizcarra, "UN Science Panel Calls for End to Amazon Deforestation."

⁷ Vizcarra, "UN Science Panel Calls for End to Amazon Deforestation."

⁸ Vizcarra, "UN Science Panel Calls for End to Amazon Deforestation."

environmental guilt, their nations are still affected. The discombobulated rain patterns resulting from deforestation do not occur only in the deforested areas; they occur throughout the biome and greater region, meaning that hundreds of millions of people will be affected by the destruction of a single biome within the borders of a single nation.⁹ Two million of the forty million people living in the Amazon are Indigenous peoples, including 350 ethnic groups.¹⁰ Indigenous territories face less deforestation than unprotected areas, and the changing rainfall patterns have begun to affect their territories, even though the agricultural frontier – though rapidly advancing toward them – has not yet arrived. International cooperation is necessary to stop the destruction of the rainforest, and thus natural patterns in rainfall and the water cycle, before it is too late.

Deforestation and its Effects on Women and Girls

As a UN report bluntly states, "the threats of climate change are not gender-neutral."¹¹ Because of entrenched patriarchal structures in both developed and developing countries, women often do not have the same opportunities to be in leadership positions, either within their own households or at local, regional, or national government levels, where policies can be enacted to address or mitigate the impact of climate change or other environmental trauma. Take, for instance, the example of deforestation. In much of the developing world, wood-burning stoves are still primary sources of heat for food preparation and keeping warm. As deforestation occurs and women & girls must travel farther afield to acquire this fuel, they are not able to spend as much time on other things, be they other domestic responsibilities or, especially for younger persons, educational endeavors.¹²

Consider the domino effects of the aforementioned example of deforestation in a particular area: increased burning of wood and the removal of carbon dioxide-absorbing trees increase CO₂ emissions & contribute to soil erosion, making it harder for further agricultural development to occur for future generations. Similarly, using wood as a fuel source inside closed quarters, like a home, can lead to respiratory and other health issues, which, as stated earlier, tend to be exacerbated among women. Strategies like replanting trees to address deforestation and utilizing different sources of fuel for heating and cooking can help mitigate multiple problems at once, with some not being as obviously seen as others.

Carbon Emissions and its Effects

The Industrial Revolution marked a significant turning point in human history, catalyzing unprecedented economic growth and development. However, this progress came at a steep cost to the environment. Burning fossil fuels like coal and oil releases carbon dioxide and other greenhouse gasses into the atmosphere.¹³ As these emissions have escalated since the Industrial Revolution, they have begun dangerously altering Earth's climate system. The impacts of anthropogenic climate change are wide-ranging, disproportionately affecting the most vulnerable people and ecosystems worldwide.¹⁴ Immediate, cooperative action across all sectors and nations is required to curtail emissions and mitigate the threats of a warming world. The greenhouse

⁹ Vizcarra, "UN Science Panel Calls for End to Amazon Deforestation."

¹⁰ Vizcarra, "UN Science Panel Calls for End to Amazon Deforestation."

¹¹ UN WomenWatch, "Women, gender equality and climate change," 2010, http://www.un.org/womenwatch/feature/climate_change/.

¹² UN WomenWatch, "Fact sheet: women, gender equality and climate change," 2009.

¹³ "Fossil Fuels and Climate Change: The Facts," ClientEarth, December 21, 2023,

¹⁴ "Fossil Fuels and Climate Change: The Facts," ClientEarth, December 21, 2023,

effect is a natural process that makes the Earth habitable, as greenhouse gasses like carbon dioxide, methane, and nitrous oxide trap heat in the atmosphere. However, since the Industrial Revolution, human activities have pumped out enormous quantities of these gasses, enhancing the greenhouse effect.¹⁵ CO₂ levels today are the highest they have been in at least 800,000 years. These heightened concentrations of greenhouse gasses induce extra heat retention, causing global temperatures to rise over the long term. The past five years have been the hottest on modern record.¹⁶

Rising temperatures do not affect all regions equally but induce fundamental changes worldwide. Increased heat melts glaciers and ice sheets, rising sea levels. Ocean waters are also expanding as they warm, further contributing to sea level rise. Low-lying islands and coastal communities are existentially threatened by the creeping tides and heightened storm surges.¹⁷ At the current trajectory, sea levels may rise 2-7 feet higher by 2100. This would displace tens of millions living along coastlines.¹⁸ Notably, the countries least responsible for historic emissions - such as small island states and the Least Developed Countries - tend to be hit hardest by the effects of climate change.¹⁹ Though large corporations in the developed world account for a substantial portion of greenhouse gas releases, these entities are better equipped to adapt and mitigate risks. In contrast, vulnerable populations in poorer nations face existential threats to ways of life, food security, shelter, and health. Drought, changing rainfall patterns, and crop failures also disproportionately impact low-income farmers.²⁰ The injustices of climate change must be addressed.

The diverse impacts of climate change will exacerbate existing social vulnerabilities and inequities. Developing nations face the most significant threats, often lacking adequate resources and capacity to prepare and respond. Within countries, minorities, children, the elderly, disabled individuals, and outdoor laborers will be most imperiled by storms, heat, and changing disease patterns.²¹ Food and water insecurity triggered by droughts, crop failures, and shifting fisheries will amplify poverty and conflict globally. Climate change thus poses grave challenges to human health, livelihoods, and stability, particularly in regions already facing resource stresses.²² Mitigating the hazards of climate change necessitates an immediate, cooperative global response. All nations must commit to dramatically reducing greenhouse gas emissions, transitioning to renewable energy, enhancing efficiency standards, and revolutionizing agricultural practices and land use. Adaptation measures like constructing flood barriers, expanding social services, improving public health infrastructure, and identifying migration pathways will also be critical. Success hinges on unprecedented multilateral cooperation and sociopolitical will to enact solutions commensurate to the scale of the problem.

Positively, the Paris Climate Agreement and frameworks like the UN's Sustainable Development Goals demonstrate growing consensus on the urgency of climate action. Many governments, corporations, and individuals are pursuing emissions reductions and preparing communities for climatic disruptions. But current commitments remain inadequate to hold

¹⁵ "FAQ: What Is the Greenhouse Effect?," Climate Change: Vital Signs of the Planet, n.d.,

¹⁶ "FAQ: What Is the Greenhouse Effect?," Climate Change: Vital Signs of the Planet, n.d.,

¹⁷ "Climate Change: Global Sea Level," NOAA Climate.gov, April 19, 2022,

¹⁸ "Climate Change: Global Sea Level," NOAA Climate.gov, April 19, 2022,

¹⁹ "Smallest Footprints, Largest Impacts:Least Developed Countries Need a Sustainable Transition," UNCTAD, n.d.,

²⁰ "Smallest Footprints, Largest Impacts:Least Developed Countries Need a Sustainable Transition," UNCTAD, n.d.,

²¹ World Health Organization: WHO, "Climate Change," October 12, 2023,

²² *Poverty and Climate Change* (n.d.),

warming below 2°C, the target set in Paris.²³ Near-term action this decade will determine whether societies can avoid the most catastrophic projections. Our descendants' world hangs in the balance. The next ten years are our chance to secure their future

Climate Diaspora

Climate change is increasingly recognized as a threat multiplier that can exacerbate political instability and spark mass displacement. As global temperatures rise, extreme weather events like droughts, floods, and storms become more frequent and severe. These climatic disruptions strain resources and livelihoods, especially in vulnerable developing nations, forcing growing numbers of people to migrate in search of habitable environments.²⁴ However, this climate diaspora often catalyzes further humanitarian crises and political tensions.

One of the most destabilizing effects of climate change is intensifying drought and water scarcity in arid regions. Prolonged drought destroys crops and livestock, eliminates jobs, and strips communities of food and income security.²⁵ With vital resources diminished, social cohesion frays while poverty and resentment build. These stresses can ignite underlying ethnic and political divisions, even armed conflict. The tragic Syrian Civil War illustrates this process. From 2006 to 2010, Syria endured one of its worst droughts on record.²⁶ The drought caused widespread crop failures, killing 85% of livestock and forcing 800,000 people off farms into urban peripheries.²⁷ As these climate refugees crowded cities, resources were strained to the breaking point. Meanwhile, the Assad regime proved unwilling to enact meaningful reform or aid, stoking public anger. Civil uprisings eventually shifted into a protracted civil war in this volatile context.²⁸ Over 13 million Syrians have now been displaced, with the country in ruins.²⁹ While many factors enabled the conflict, the climate-exacerbated resource stresses were an underlying driver that eroded Syrian stability.

Climate change can also directly displace people through worsening storms, floods, erosion, and rising sea levels. Rising seas engulf coastal settlements and islands, leaving entire communities without homelands. In Bangladesh alone, up to 20 million people may be displaced by encroaching shorelines this century. Storm surges displace thousands more following hurricanes and typhoons as people permanently relocate inland.³⁰ Drought also propels migration over time, as rural families abandon barren fields for urban slums. Experts estimate that up to 1 billion people could be driven from their homes by 2050 due to climate disruptions alone.

This unfolding climate diaspora has complex humanitarian and geopolitical consequences. The sudden influx of large migrant populations into new regions strains infrastructure and breeds local resentment. Migrants clustering in informal settlements often lack adequate sanitation, health services, or economic opportunities, creating ribbons of entrenched poverty.³¹ Tensions may flare between migrants and host communities as competition grows over scant resources and jobs. Where migrants differ ethnically or religiously from local populations,

²³ "Climate Plans Remain Insufficient: More Ambitious Action Needed Now," UNFCCC, n.d.,

²⁴ World Health Organization: WHO, "Climate Change," October 12, 2023,

²⁵ "Climate Change Is Driving Millions to the Precipice of a 'Raging Food Catastrophe,'" Pulitzer Center, n.d.,

²⁶ Npr Staff, "How Could a Drought Spark a Civil War?," *NPR*, September 8, 2013,

²⁷ Npr Staff, "How Could a Drought Spark a Civil War?," *NPR*, September 8, 2013,

²⁸ Steve Bonitatibus, "Northern Syria Security Dynamics and the Refugee Crisis," *Center for American Progress*,

²⁹ "Syria Situation," Global Focus, n.d., <https://reporting.unhcr.org/operational/situations/syria-situation>.

³⁰ Tim McDonnell, "Climate Change Creates a New Migration Crisis for Bangladesh," *Environment*, May 3, 2021,

³¹ Sarah S. Willen et al., "Flourishing: Migration and Health in Social Context," *BMJ Global Health* 6, no. Suppl 1 (April 1, 2021): e005108,

the stage is set for exploitation and deepening divisions.³² Political destabilization can follow, undermining good governance and security.³³ Climate migration thus demands proactive international cooperation and support to protect the rights of migrants while stabilizing the communities that receive them.

Climate change is rendering some lands uninhabitable while undermining livelihoods and food security, forcing growing waves of migration. These displacements strain regional stability and resources. Global action is needed to reduce emissions and fund climate adaptation initiatives to ease climate pressures and the resulting diaspora preemptively. With foresight and solidarity, the international community can help climate migrants recover and rebuild while constructing more resilient systems for the turbulent decades ahead.

Conclusion

Human rights are innately universal, meaning it should not matter someone's nationality or economic status. Unfortunately, the climate crisis is disproportionately degrading the human rights of those in low economic classes and/or hailing from developing nations. The United Nations Environmental Program (UNEP) is tasked with the exorbitant, arduous task of leading the world to stop the snowball in its tracks instead of increasing its momentum. Delegates must understand that the climate crisis's effects on the environment directly correlate with human rights on a global scale. Permanently repairing these human rights violations would take a complete dedication to preserving our climate and working towards repairing the damage done. While delegates must strive for such a lofty goal, the UNEP should also consider temporary measures to support the people deprived of rights as soon as possible. Time is of the essence, and the problem is only getting more dire.

³² Sarah S. Willen et al., "Flourishing: Migration and Health in Social Context," *BMJ Global Health* 6, no. Suppl 1 (April 1, 2021): e005108,

³³ "Climate Change Is Driving Millions to the Precipice of a 'Raging Food Catastrophe,'" Pulitzer Center, n.d.,

Resource Review

UN Documents

UN Resolution A/RES/76/300 (2021): <https://bit.ly/RES76300>

This groundbreaking resolution recognizes the right to a clean, healthy, and sustainable environment as a universal and fundamental human right. Delegates can cite it to argue all states have an obligation to protect this right through environmental legislation, protections, and practices. Calls for specific national laws and policies to codify this right could build on this monumental affirmation of the intrinsic link between human rights and the environment.

UN Resolution A/RES/61/295 (2007): <https://bit.ly/RES61295>

This declaration delineates the rights of indigenous peoples to sustainably develop, manage, and conserve their ancestral lands, territories, and resources. Delegates can reference this to stress that environmental policies must respect and include indigenous perspectives, stewardship, and land rights. Proposed resolutions should incorporate provisions to ensure the representation of indigenous groups in environmental decision-making processes.

UN Resolution E/CN.4/RES/1998/7 (1998): <https://bit.ly/RES19987>

This Aarhus Convention establishes rights around access to environmental information, public participation in decision-making, and access to justice in environmental matters. Delegates can argue this affirms the public has a procedural right to transparent data, inclusion in policymaking, and recourse on environmental issues. Resolutions could contain specific recommendations on how states can uphold these access rights.

UN Resolution A/RES/66/288 (2012): <https://bit.ly/RES66288>

This declaration reaffirms the intrinsic links between rights to food, safe water, health, housing and development, environmental stewardship, and sustainability. Delegates can cite this to advocate for the responsible use of resources, eradication of poverty, and low-carbon development that empowers the poor while protecting the planet.

The Amazon We Want: <https://www.theamazonwewant.org/>

This multi-stakeholder initiative outlines a vision for the future of the Amazon grounded in human rights, environmental protections, and sustainable development. It contains key principles like protecting the Amazon's biodiversity, respecting indigenous peoples' rights and leadership, ensuring fair land distribution, and promoting a post-extractivist economy. Delegates can cite The Amazon We Want as an essential civil society effort to chart a rights-based approach to ecological preservation and inclusive growth in the Amazon. Resolution provisions should align with its calls for transnational cooperation, traditional knowledge, climate resilience, and intercultural dialogue. This initiative provides a constructive model for balancing human needs with ecological imperatives.

Guiding Questions for Debate

1. What specific human rights are most threatened by issues like climate change, pollution, resource depletion, and loss of biodiversity? How can states better quantify and monitor these impacts?
2. How can marginalized communities whose livelihoods and human rights are disproportionately impacted by environmental harm be provided greater representation and voice in global policy-making?
3. What new multilateral legal frameworks or enforcement mechanisms are needed to balance economic development goals with ecological sustainability and protection of human rights?
4. How can principles of intergenerational equity and indigenous knowledge be incorporated into environmental policies and agreements to uphold both human rights and ecological preservation?

Guiding Questions For Position Papers

1. What specific environmental issues pose the greatest threat to human rights within your nation? Consider climate impacts, pollution, resource depletion, etc.
2. What binding environmental and human rights commitments has your nation ratified? How has it implemented protections and policies to uphold its obligations?
3. What marginalized groups within your nation are disproportionately impacted by environmental degradation? How are their voices included in policy-making?
4. How does your nation balance development goals with ecological sustainability and human rights protections? What tradeoffs does it see and how are these reconciled?
5. Is your nation open to new multilateral agreements codifying a universal human right to a clean, healthy environment? What specific provisions would it support or oppose?