Chapter 6: Environment and Natural Resources

Exercises — Exercises

Q1 Which among the following best explains the reason for growing concerns about the environment? (a) The developed countries are concerned about protecting nature. (b) Protection of the environment is vital for indigenous people and natural habitats. (c) The environmental degradation caused by human activities has become pervasive and has reached a dangerous level. (d) None of the above.

(c) Environmental degradation caused by human activities has become pervasive and has reached a dangerous level. Shrinking fertile land, depleted and polluted water, forest loss, the ozone hole and polluted coasts are problems no single government can handle alone.

Q2 Mark correct or wrong against each of the following statements about the Earth Summit: (a) It was attended by 170 countries, thousands of NGOs and many MNCs. (b) The summit was held under the aegis of the UN. (c) For the first time, global environmental issues were firmly consolidated at the political level. (d) It was a summit meeting.

(a) Correct: 170 states, thousands of NGOs and many multinational corporations attended. (b) Correct: it was the UN Conference on Environment and Development, Rio de Janeiro, June 1992. (c) Correct: it firmly consolidated the growing focus on environmental issues in global politics. (d) Correct: it was known as the Earth Summit, a high-level international meeting.

Q3 Which among the following are TRUE about the global commons? (a) The Earth's atmosphere, Antarctica, ocean floor and outer space are considered as part of the global commons. (b) The global commons are outside sovereign jurisdiction. (c) The question of managing the global commons has reflected the North-South divide. (d) The countries of the North are more concerned about the protection of the global commons than the countries of the South.

(a), (b) and (c) are true; (d) is not stated as true. The chapter lists these four as global commons, places them outside any one state's jurisdiction, and shows that their management is shaped by North-South inequalities in technology and industrial development. The South, not only the North, has stakes in them, so (d) is not supported.

Q4 What were the outcomes of the Rio Summit?

The Rio Summit (June 1992) produced conventions on climate change, biodiversity and forestry, and recommended a list of development practices called Agenda 21. The Rio Declaration accepted the principle of common but differentiated responsibilities. There was a consensus on combining economic growth with ecological responsibility, known as sustainable development. However, considerable differences were left unresolved, notably how sustainable development was to be achieved. Critics argued that Agenda 21 favoured economic growth over ecological conservation. The summit also exposed that the developed North and developing South pursued different environmental agendas: the North focused on ozone depletion and global warming, the South on the link between development and environmental management.

Q5 What is meant by the global commons? How are they exploited and polluted?

Commons are resources not owned by anyone but shared by a community. Global commons are areas outside the sovereign jurisdiction of any single state that therefore need common governance by the international community (res communis humanitatis). They include the Earth's atmosphere, Antarctica, the ocean floor and outer space. They are exploited and polluted in several ways. Atmospheric pollution has produced the ozone hole and global warming. In Antarctica, activities such as research, fishing and tourism have left waste and oil spills, even though the continent is protected by special rules. Outer space and the ocean floor are open to exploitation mainly by countries with technology and industrial strength, so the benefits are unequal for present and future generations. Some states also claim sovereign rights over Antarctica, complicating protection. Agreements like the 1959 Antarctic Treaty, the 1987 Montreal Protocol and the 1991 Antarctic Environmental Protocol try to protect them, but consensus is hard to reach.

Q6 What is meant by 'common but differentiated responsibilities'? How could we implement the idea?

It is the principle, accepted in the 1992 Rio Declaration, that all states must cooperate to protect the Earth's ecosystem but bear different responsibilities because they have contributed differently to environmental degradation. Developed countries industrialised earlier, caused most historical and current greenhouse gas emissions, and command greater technological and financial resources, so they carry a larger burden. Developing countries have low per capita emissions and are still industrialising, so their special needs must be considered. The UNFCCC (1992) adopted it, and the 1997 Kyoto Protocol set emission-reduction targets only for industrialised countries, exempting India, China and other developing nations. It can be implemented by binding targets for developed countries, transfer of clean technology and new financial resources to developing countries on concessional terms, and by interpreting international environmental law in light of developing countries' needs.

Q7 Why have issues related to global environmental protection become the priority concern of states since the 1990s?

Environmental degradation has become widespread and dangerous: cultivable land is losing fertility, water bodies are depleted and polluted, millions lack safe water and sanitation, forests and biodiversity are disappearing, the ozone layer is thinning and coastal waters are polluting. Most of these problems cross borders, so no single government can solve them and they became part of world politics. Awareness grew from the 1960s, with the Club of Rome's Limits to Growth (1972), UNEP conferences and the 1987 Brundtland Report, which warned that traditional growth was unsustainable. The 1992 Earth Summit firmly placed the environment at the centre of global politics. Environmental issues are also political because they raise questions of who causes degradation, who pays and who gets to use how many resources, which are questions of power.

Q8 Compromise and accommodation are the two essential policies required by states to save planet Earth. Substantiate the statement in the light of the ongoing negotiations between the North and South on environmental issues.

The North and South hold different positions. The developed North wants to treat environmental problems as they stand now and wants everyone equally responsible. The developing South argues that the North's industrialisation caused most degradation, so the North must do more, and the South must not face the same restrictions while it industrialises. Neither side can protect the Earth alone, so compromise is needed. The Rio Declaration's principle of common but differentiated responsibilities is such a compromise: all states share the duty, but developed states take the larger share. The Kyoto Protocol exempted developing countries while binding industrialised ones. The Rio Summit also agreed to combine economic growth with ecological responsibility (sustainable development). India supports this but wants developed countries to provide finance and clean technology, and is wary of binding commitments on industrialising countries. Continued accommodation of both development needs and ecological limits is essential.

Q9 The most serious challenge before the states is pursuing economic development without causing further damage to the global environment. How could we achieve this? Explain with a few examples.

This is the idea of sustainable development: economic growth combined with ecological responsibility. It can be pursued through cleaner energy, better efficiency, community-based resource management and cooperation between states. Examples from India: the National Auto-fuel Policy mandates cleaner vehicle fuels; the Energy Conservation Act (2001) promotes energy efficiency; the Electricity Act (2003) encourages renewable energy; India imports natural gas, promotes clean coal technology, planned a National Mission on Biodiesel, runs one of the world's largest renewable energy programmes and ratified the Paris Climate Agreement in 2016. Traditional practices also help: sacred groves, managed by village communities, show how common property resources can be used sustainably. Internationally, developed countries must transfer finance and environmentally sound technology to developing nations, and states should honour agreements like the Kyoto Protocol and UNFCCC. Environmental movements also pressure governments to protect forests and rivers.