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## **Paul Taylor's Egalitarian Biocentrism: Implications for Environmental Sustainability in Nigeria**

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### ABSTRACT

Taylor's work is primarily summarized under three themes namely; the attitude of respect for nature, the biocentric outlook on nature, and the system of rules and standards. Taylor is of the view that humans are members of earth's community of life, in other words, each individual organism is a teleological centre of life, hence, is an end in itself. The problem this work addresses has to do with human centred approach to issues of the environment, which is excessively anthropocentric in Nigeria. The aim of this work is to interrogate the life-centred theory of Paul Taylor and its implications for environmental sustainability in Nigeria. However, the objective of this work amongst others is to;critique the egalitarian biocentric ethics of Taylor with a view to applying its relevant aspects to Nigeria's ecological domain. The work employs the method of content analysis. The findings of this work show that it is the anthropocentric attitude to nature that is primarily destroying the environment. As a result of this, there is an urgent need for a non-anthropocentric ethics to guide policy makers and Nigerians on their relations to the natural environment. This work concedes to Taylor's biocentrism but goes further to extend the moral scope beyond the units of the biota to include abiotic components of nature. In conclusion, to achieve environmental sustainability in Nigeria, we suggest that the activities of human beings as moral agents need to be compatible with the well-being of the entire ecosystems.

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**Keywords:** Biocentrism, egalitarian, environmental sustainability, respect for nature and Nigeria

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### Introduction

Environmental ethics basically have two views which are the anthropocentric view and the non-anthropocentric view. Anthropocentrism views humans as the centre of ethical concern, while the environment is often seen as a useable resource there for our personal exploitation. Anthropocentrism justifies protecting the environment for human needs, whether it is in form of aesthetic, economic or social benefit. It attaches intrinsic value to humans solely, while the non-human world contains only instrumental value - a value as a means to some further ends. Whereas, intrinsic value loosely means value in itself, that we contain value as ends in ourselves regardless of whether or not we are also useful as a means to some other ends. Consequently, non-anthropocentrism takes a different approach to the environment, as it attacks intrinsic value to nonhuman world. It claims that philosophers have tended to ethically devalue the nonhuman world in the past, but now there is no need to re-evaluate these views in order to take a morally just position towards the environment. Non-anthropocentrism endorses an environmental ethic that respects and values other living and non-living entities as part of our moral community. There are many different non-anthropocentric positions, but three of the most predominant ones are ecocentrism, biocentrism, and deep ecology.

Disturbed about the rising environmental issues in Nigeria and with little efforts so far put in this issue, we started thinking about a possible solution or remedy that could be proposed to curb these issues degrading the natural environment in Nigeria. This made us to go into eco-based research on a possible ethics that could guide Nigerians on how to relate with the environment in a sustainable manner. Paul Taylor's book titled *Respect for Nature: A Theory of Environmental Ethics* was found to be very useful in this direction. Taylor's ideas are quite striking and relevant to our quest for environmental sustainability in Nigeria. The anthropocentric approach to environmental issues by Nigerians has contributed in no small way to the despoliation of the environment. The human-centred tradition has promoted environmental pollution, deforestation, desertification, climate change, global warming and other environmental problems.

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### Statement of the Problem

The problem that this work tackles is that of human relations to the environment, which is excessively anthropocentric in Nigeria in particular and the issue of sustainability which arises as a result of human unethical activities or relations with the environment which neglects our obligations to the future generation.

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### Method of the Study

This work employs the method of content analysis. The primary text for our work is Taylor's book "*Respect for Nature: A Theory of Environmental Ethics*". Secondary sources such as journals, articles, text and internet sources that are relevant to this research work were consulted.

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### Aim and Objectives of the Study

The aim of this work is to interrogate the life centred ethical theory of Paul Taylor and its implications for environmental sustainability in Nigeria.

The objectives of this study are to;

- (i) critique the egalitarian biocentric ethics of Taylor with a view to applying its relevant aspects to Nigeria's ecological domain.
- (ii) examine the implications of Taylor's biocentrism for sustainable environment in Nigeria.

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### Research Questions

- (i) What are the relevant aspects of Taylor's ethics that can be applied to Nigerians ecological domain?
- (ii) What are the implications of Taylor's biocentric ethics for a sustainable environment in Nigeria?

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### Significance of the Study

This work is significant at two levels namely the theoretical and practical. Theoretically, it can serve as a contribution to the growing literatures in biocentrism and environmental sustainability in Nigeria. At the theoretical level too, this work is challenging the human-centred theory (anthropocentrism). At the practical level, it is hoped that this work will challenge or motivate Nigerians and our policy makers to look into the issue of environmental degradation and how to preserve our natural environment and ecosystem using the relevant aspects of Taylor's ethics.

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### Theoretical Framework

This work adopted two theories for the analysis of this research work. They are non-anthropocentric theory and the Sustainability theory. Environmental ethics emerged as a reaction against the age-long anthropocentric philosophical tradition by extending the boundaries of ethics to natural world. Albert Schweitzer is a proponent of this new framework and approach broadly termed non-anthropocentrism or non-human centred (nature-centred) ethics. Non-anthropocentrism does not embody a single theoretical perspective but, rather, a cluster of ethical theories that are either biocentric or ecocentric in nature.

Second is the theory of Sustainability. It has been over three decades since the theory of sustainability and sustainable development rose to the prominence of a mantra. In 1987, the word sustainability was popularized by the Bruthland Commissions report *Our Common Future*. Giving it an almost universal definition "development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their needs". With the publication of Bruthland report, the word sustainable development has often been used without understanding its real value and implications.

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### Concept of Biocentrism

Biocentrism is a theory which holds that all living things have a right to exist and they do not need to be useful to humans. Humans are one species in many according to biocentrism. Biocentrism is an ethical point of view that extends inherent values in all living things. It is an understanding of how the earth works particularly as it rotates to biodiversity. This view stand is in contrast with anthropocentrism. Biocentrism does not imply the idea of equality among the animal kingdom, for no such can be observed in nature. Biocentric thoughts or views are nature based and not human based. Vanguard and advocates of biocentrism often promote the preservation of biodiversity, animal right and environmental protection. This term has also been employed by advocates of left biocentrism which combines deep ecology within anti-industrial and anti-capitalist.

Put succinctly, the word biocentric means life-centred. Biocentric ethics refers to any theory that views all life as possessing intrinsic value. Thus, although someone like Tom Regan is willing to attribute intrinsic value to some animals; his position is not holistically biocentric because it does not extend to all living things. On the other hand, Kenneth Goodpaster's emphasis on life itself as a sufficient condition for moral considerability is comprehensively biocentric (Ezedike, 2020).

This term biocentrism encompasses all environmental ethics that extends the status moral objects from human beings to all living things in

nature. Consequently, biocentric ethics calls for a rethink of the relationship between humans and nature. It states that nature does not exist simply to be used or consumed by humans but that humans are simply one species amongst many and that because since we are part of an ecosystem any action which negatively affects the living system which we are part of adversely affect us as well whether or not we maintain our biocentric world view. Biocentrists observe that all species have inherent value and that humans are not superior to other species in a moral or ethical sense. Biocentrism is life centred and is of the view that humans have an ethical responsibility not to cause premature extinction of any species. Secondly, every organism has the inherent right to survive. Thirdly, species can have a potential for human use and lastly, every organism is capable through evolution of adapting to changing environmental conditions.

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### Concept of Environmental Sustainability

Sustainability is a concept subject to different interpretations but our use of the term here shall be restricted to environmental concerns. In 1987, Brundtland Commission of the United Nations which attributed sustainability to development and defined it as development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs. Concisely therefore; “environmental sustainability refers to the conservation, management and rational utilization of natural resources in such a way to maintain the integrity of each ecosystem, support all life, ensure the preservation of biodiversity and prevent environmental degradation” (Gbenda, 2002:3). Consequently, environmental sustainability is one of the pillars of sustainable development. According to Ezedike (2020), the fundamental flaw in “sustainable development” is that it naturally sees the earth only as a resource. Continuing, Ezedike (2020) observes that sustainability is all about the future, our environmental concerns towards it, and moral responsibility for our actions that affect future generations. Put succinctly, it has everything to do with our moral obligations to future generations in terms of environmental stewardship.

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### The Ethics of Sustainability

According to Donald Scherer in his work *The Ethics of Sustainable Resources*, he states that trends in energy conservation, pollution control, population growth, urban planning, and economic development have brought the concept of sustainability to international attention. Yet substantial fuzziness remains in the concept. That fuzziness arises partly from the multiplicity of goods at which actions aim, the multiple uses of resources and the multiple effects of these uses. Different foci then allow the construction of plausible arguments that resources are both sustainable and unsustainable and that fuzziness arises significantly from disagreement about what it is to be sustained. Set aside the idea that choice is to be sustained and sustainability can either be a matter of lifestyles or of resources. With each of those discussions, one must question how holistically sustainability is to be understood. The key to a non-fascistic but holistic understanding of the sustainability of resources is to conceive resources themselves non-anthropocentrically: all forms of life use resources. From that perspective the functional value intrinsic to an ecosystem provides the only clarity humans presently have about what value sustainability has and why. The most clearly sustainable resources are renewable. The danger that no adequate substitute will be found for some non-renewable resource grounds the argument that non-sustainable resources, if used should be used for bootstrapping, not for lifestyle maintenance.

Indeed, the hardest and riskiest was to fulfil the obligation of sustainability to our descendants is to predicate sustainability as the product of an unending substitution of resources. As many substitutions as human history records, the record clearly shows much suffering and non-sustainability for individuals in the midst of substitution. Even the attribution of that suffering to normal significance the suffering retains, both because lives are centrally disrupted and because the vulnerability of the disrupted lives underlines the non-consensual character of their description.

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### Nigeria and Environmental Sustainability

In the month of September, the year 2000, a Millennium Declaration was embraced by 147 Heads of State. Captured in this was a worldwide plan of eight Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), in which the seventh is to ensure the achievement of environmental sustainability, with time bound targets. This incorporation of ensuring environmental sustainability (MDG7) was triggered by the recognition of the destruction being inflicted on the environment. Although a number of actions had been worked out in the past, the fruitfulness of such actions and increasing threat to environmental sustainability resulted to a global concern which brought about the Millennium Declaration. Tibaijuka (2005) observes that the MDGs are people centred, time-bound and measurable. Whereas the goals are universal, every nation involved was expected to set targets putting into consideration local priority problems and resource capacity in recognition of individual country's characteristics. Nigeria cannot help but to be part of this global campaign and consequently desire to look into all the social and economic issues that are affecting the wellbeing of individuals and which are targeted by MDGs (Ademola, 2013).

The state of affairs in Nigeria especially in connection with the issues addressed by MDG7 is appalling. For example, UNDP observes that the country's natural resources, some of which makes up the country's national assets are seriously threatened ([www.ng.undp.org/mdgsnprogress.shtml](http://www.ng.undp.org/mdgsnprogress.shtml)).

The government is not unaware of the magnitude of environmental issues and the need to address the problems squarely. Consequently, in order to align with global thinking in making life better for individuals by attempting to achieve the goals and targets of MDGs, hence, Nigeria set in motion the machinery for attaining the MDGs by 2015 (Ademola, 2013).

A policy brief by UNDP ([www.ng.undp.org/mdgs/policy\\_brief.pdf](http://www.ng.undp.org/mdgs/policy_brief.pdf)) showcase the different efforts made by the government. As underlined in the policy brief, two steps taken by the government is linked with the wide objective of making available a good foundation for policy, budgeting, planning and financing strategy on the MDG. The study carried out and its findings made available inputs into the policy brief prepared by the UNDP

(Ademola, 2013). Furthermore, efforts made to look into the different challenges facing the country and which are part of the restriction militating against the achievement of MDGs include:

1. Economic reforms with the launch in 2004, of the National Economic Empowerment and Development Strategy (NEEDS) at the federal level; the State Empowerment and Development Strategy (SEEDS) at the state level and the Local Economic Empowerment and Development Strategy (LEEDS) at the local level;
2. The envisioning of placing the country among top 20 leading economies in the world by 2020 leading to the preparation of the vision 20:2020 document in October 2009 and the preparation of the consequent preparation of the First National Implementation Plan for NV20:2020 (2010-2013);
3. The introduction of 7-Point Agenda, focusing on;
  - a. Sustainable growth in the real sector of the economy
  - b. Improvement of infrastructure (power, energy and transportation)
  - c. Agriculture and agro-industry development
  - d. Human capital development (education and health)
  - e. Security, law and order (including electoral reform)
  - f. Combating corruption and
  - g. Conflict resolution through promoting equitable and sustainable regional development (Niger-Delta development)
4. Adoption of MDG-related development planning in 2006 to channel investments quickly for meeting the MDGs
5. The establishment of the Virtual Poverty Fund (VPF) into which fortuitous gains from the debt relief are posted and from which MDG activities are financed
6. Inauguration of the Presidential Committee on the Assessment and Monitoring of the MDGs in Nigeria.
7. Introduction of Public Expenditure in NEEDS (OPEN), for tagging and tracking MDG expenditures;
8. Establishment of the office of the Senior Special Assistant to the President on Millennium Development Goals (OSSA-MDGs) (Ademola, 2013).

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#### **Factors militating against Achievement of Environmental Sustainability in Nigeria**

Obviously, there are challenges and limitation towards achieving MDG. These challenges are highlighted as follows:

- i) *Explosion of Population*: there has been a rapid increase in population in Nigeria and there is no clear signal of any measure planned to control the upsurge. The link between environmental resource exhaustion and population pressure is direct. Consequently, any well intended policies and programmes aimed at achieving MDG7 and is confronted with increasing and uncontrolled population growth will not be effective
- ii) *High rate of Poverty*: the rate of poverty is soaring very high in Nigeria. The country from some quarters is seen as the capital of poverty in the world and there is said to be serious collapse of infrastructure there is also a direct connection between power and environmental resource depletion, hence with increasing impoverishment of people, achieving, MDG7 will likely be a phantasm.
- iii) *Inconsistency in Policies*: the issue of policy inconsistency is something akin to the Nigeria system. Whenever power changes in governance policies changes too because continuity is not practised. With respect to economic policies, between 1986 and 2013, Nigeria has experimented with (a) Structural Adjustment Program (b) National Economic Empowerment and Development Strategy (NEED) (c) Vision 20:2020 (d) 7-Point Agenda (e) Transformation Agenda.

In general, the issue of also merging and collapsing of ministry is one major reason why the MDG7 has not been achieved. For instance, the Federal Ministry of Water Resources was merged with the Federal Ministry of Agriculture with a new name Federal Ministry of Agriculture and Water Resources. In 1979 the both ministries were separated again. Nevertheless, 1984, it was merged again with the Federal Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development only to be separated again in 1989. As time went on the ministry was later merged with the Ministry of Agriculture and this remained so until April 2010 when the two ministries were again separated. This inconsistency, undoubtedly, is among the constraints against addressing or looking into squarely MDG7 target 10 (target 7C for Nigeria) (Ademola, 2013).

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#### **Paul Taylor's Egalitarian Biocentrism and its Implications for Environmental Sustainability in Nigeria.**

Biocentrism as an ethical perspective in environmental ethics proposes a life-centred ethics. By this, we are talking about an ethics that proposes that moral status or consideration should be allocated to all that possess life in the environment. In other words, both humans and nonhuman living beings should have a moral status. In this view, there are two divides namely: Egalitarian biocentrism and Hierarchical biocentrism. Paul Taylor who is one of the vanguards of biocentrism is of the opinion that biocentrism should be egalitarian. By this he meant that there should be equality amongst all that possesses life in the environment in the process of awarding moral status.

Paul Taylor's idea of biocentrism is encapsulated in his book *Respect for Nature: A Theory of Environmental Ethics*. In this book, he summarized his environmental ethics in three divides namely (i) The attitude of respect, (ii) the belief system or the biocentric outlook on nature (iii) the system of rules and standard.

### ***Attitude of Respect***

This view simply states that respect for nature can be viewed as the attitude that all living things have inherent worth. This attitude calls on moral agents not to engage in acts that would cause damage to the living beings of the natural world. This standpoint is further explained using the concept of the good of a being which simply means the idea that every individual living being has a good of its own which chases and grasp in its own unique way; and the concept of inherent worth which means the value something has simply by virtue of the fact that it has the good of its own (Taylor, 1986)

### ***The Belief System/The Biocentric Outlook on Nature***

This showcases a system of belief that conceptualises our relationship with all other living beings, in a way that we are provided with a general worldview of the natural world and our place in it. Taylor's proposes four basics of the belief-system which are;

- a) *Humans as members of the earth's community of life*: this simply means that human beings are "integral part of the natural order of the earth's biosphere in the same vein as other living entities, since we are biological beings just like they are. Human beings are just one specie out of many in the natural world and thus just a member out of many members.
- b) *The Natural World as a System of Interdependence*: this simply means that the survival of each living being is not just as a result of environment and biological conditions but also as a result of its interactions and relations with other beings. In other words, the system works as a whole because of these interactions and relations. Consequently, there is no living entity in an isolated unity, but a chain of life.
- c) *Individual Organism as Teleological Centre of Life*: this simply means that all individual organism as an entity has its life to live in its own unique way.
- d) *The Denial of Human Superiority*: here Taylor denies and rejects this belief-system of human superiority and states that it is necessary and important to discard the belief-system of human ethics. In other words, ethics should not be limited to only humans but should go beyond. Furthermore, he stated that humans should not see themselves as superior because of some attributes they possess because nonhuman living beings also possess some special features that humans do not possess.

### ***The System of Rules and Standard***

This system is all about rules and principles which would be used as a normative guide for moral agents if they were to take the belief-system and because of that accept the attitude of respect for nature. This system is summarized in three aspects: the basic rules of conduct, the basic standard of virtue and the priority principles.

- a) *The basic rules of conduct*: these rules do not in any way point out what a certain moral agent in a particular situation should do. The first of the basic rules of conduct towards the natural world and all living being is the Rule of Nonmaleficence. This according to Taylor (1986), "is the duty not to do harm to any entity in the natural environment that has a good of its own". The second is the Rule of Non-interference. Encapsulated in this rule are two types of negative duties; the first of these duties calls moral agents not to involve in acts that places restriction on the freedom of individual organism whereas the second duty calls for a general "hand off" policy with respect to nonhuman living organisms and the biotic communities at large. The third rule is the Rule of Fidelity: in this rule moral agents are advised not to act falsely against animals in the wild that could be deceived through human activities such as hunting, trapping and fishing. Lastly, the fourth of these basic rules of standard is the rule of Restitutive Justice. As the name implies, this rule is of the view that some sort of restitution or compensation ought to be made by moral agents once any of the above stated three rules are violated.
- b) *The Basic Standards of Virtue*: with respect to good character in the area of respect for nature, there are two types of virtue namely general and special virtue. The general virtue stands for those good character traits necessary for deliberating and acting rightly in any situation no matter the particular moral rules and standard advocated, the special virtue is a type of disposition that allows one to fulfil a certain type of duty, accurately and clearly in a given situation (Taylor, 1986).

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### **The Priority Principles**

These principles are been set to guide human living beings and their relation with the environment. Reflecting back at the priority principles, it pointed out that they need to satisfy the five formal conditions on which the validity of any set of rules and standards are measured. Consequently, the five priority principles articulated by Taylor are: (i) The principle of self-defence, (ii) The principle of proportionality, (iii) The principle of minimum wrong, (iv) The principle of distributive justice and (v) The principle of restitutive justice.

- i) *The principle of self-defence*: this principle "permits actions that are absolutely required for maintaining the very existence of moral agents and for enabling them to exercise the capacities of moral agency" (Taylor, 1986).
- ii) *The principle of proportionality*: this principle states that when the basic interest of nonhuman living beings clashes with the non-basic interest of humans, which are intrinsically incompatible with respect for nature, Taylor (1986) observes that "greater weight is to be given to basic than to non-basic interest".
- iii) *The principle of minimum wrong*: this principle deals with situations where non-basic human interest that are intrinsically compatible with the respect for nature are permitted even when such actions bear some kind of bad results on nature
- iv) *The principle of distributive justice*: this principle deals with the conflict situations where the interests of both humans and nonhuman living beings are all basic ones and this calls for fair consideration and sharing.

- v) *The principle of restitutive justice*: this principle requires that some form of compensation be made when the principles of minimum wrong and distributive justice has not been properly followed.

The main thrust of this work is the implications of Paul Taylor's biocentrism on environmental sustainability in Nigeria. As stated earlier, Taylor's view was captured in three concepts namely the attitude of respect, the belief system (the biocentric outlook on nature) and the ethical system (the system of rules and standards). If these views are adopted to look at the issue of environmental sustainability the conclusion is going to be very clear. The view of the attitude of respect simply talks about the fact that human living beings have to respect non-human living beings and this is because they have a good of their own and as well inherent worth; this view is captured in the concept of the good of a being and the concept of inherent worth. If humans in Nigeria relate with the environment having such orientation to have the attitude of respect for nature, then obviously, we will act sustainably and consequently achieve environmental sustainability. Secondly, the view of the belief-system makes us to understand that humans are members of earth community of life. In other words, human living beings are not only members but there are several other members. Also, seeing the natural world as a system of interdependence simply means that no specie can live in isolation because it must depend on another for support to remain alive. If such orientation is inculcated in Nigerians, it would make individuals understand that the destruction or damage mitted on the environment is not sustainable and thus such activities should be halted since it does not bring about environmental sustainability. The belief-system also talks about individual organisms as teleological centres of life and the denial of human superiority. Lastly, is the ethical system (the system of rules and standards) which has three aspects namely the basic rules of conducts, the basic standards of virtue and the priority principles. The basic rules of standards are nonmaleficence which negates any act that will harm non-living beings of the natural world, the rule of non-interference simply means that non-living beings should be allowed to be free, in other words, there should be no restriction placed on their freedom and consequently, if these rules are adopted, there would be no harm and as well no interference of freedom. Hence, this will endear environmental sustainability in Nigeria if adopted. The others are the rules of fidelity and the rules of restitutive justice. Secondly, the basic standards of virtue simply talks about interacting or relating in a virtuous way. Here there are two types of virtue namely general and special virtue. Acting virtuous is more like acting good and if human living beings act virtuously in their relation with the nonhuman living beings of the natural environment there would be no damage hence, environmental sustainability is assured. Lastly, is the priority principles which are: the principle of self-defence, the principle of proportionality, the principle of minimum wrong, the principle of distributive justice and the principle of restitutive justice. These are principles for fair resolution of conflicting claims and they also cover all the main ways of adjudicating fairly between competing claims coming up from clashes between the duties of human ethics and those of environmental ethics. In summary, these principles help to guide in decision making when there are conflicts. Applying these principles to the Nigerian environmental situation will as well bring about environmental sustainability at the end.

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## Conclusion

The work was able to show that there was a complete rejection of anthropocentrism which is human centred ethics and this rejection brought about several other school of thoughts which include biocentrism, ecocentrism, ecofeminism, deep ecology etc. this work is centred on biocentrism which is a life centred ethics. Paul Taylor's view was thoroughly exposed using his book titled *Respect for Nature: A Theory of Environmental ethics*. This book was summarized in three views namely, the attitude of Respect for Nature, the biocentric outlook on nature and the ethical system. The concept of sustainability was also looked at from the environmental standpoint and consequently, the views of Paul Taylor were applied to the issue of environmental sustainability in Nigeria. Looking at achieving environmental sustainability in Nigeria, several measures have been put in place in other to achieve this, hence, applying the view or ethics of respect for nature as proposed by Taylor will go a long way in resolving the environmental crisis in Nigeria. This is because when we accept Taylor's conception of biocentric ethics, then a state of conflicts of interest between humans and the well-being of nonhuman living beings is unavoidable. Nonetheless, the acceptance and application of the four basic rules of conduct and the five priority principles brings about a connecting relationship where humans will advance and do well together with the wild living beings of the natural world. This in turn would lead to a sustainable environment. It is pertinent to note that the adoption of the biocentric ethics does not mean that humans cannot consume some of the nonhuman living beings as food or follow some of our cultural values that promote the achievement of our goal.

In conclusion, in other to achieve environmental sustainability in Nigeria we suggest that the choice and activities of human beings as moral agents need to be continually subject to moral evaluation in other to uphold the ethical stability that have to exist for appropriate flourishing of life. Amidst the inherent variations in Taylor's conception of biocentrism, it is comprehensible and can defend its consideration for respect for all life and environmental sustainability.

## Recommendations

- 1) The work recommends relevant aspects of Taylor's conception of biocentrism as a yardstick for resolving the environmental issues in Nigeria to attain environmental sustainability.
- 2) This work recommends that the anthropocentric approach to environmental sustainability should be deemphasized in Nigeria using extant environmental laws.

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