

Exploring Eco-Consciousness in Gary Snyder's Poetry: A Study of Selected Poems of *The Turtle Island*

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Abstract

This paper aims to explore the theme of eco-consciousness in selected poems of *The Turtle Island* by Gary Snyder. The study delves into the intricate connection between the outer natural world and human beings as depicted in the poetic works of Snyder, highlighting the poet's deep environmental awareness and his call for a sustainable and harmonious relationship with the Earth. The research employs a comprehensive analysis of Snyder's poems, focusing on key themes such as nature, spirituality, indigenous wisdom, and human responsibility. By examining the intricate interplay between these elements, the paper uncovers the underlying eco-consciousness that permeates Snyder's poetry and elucidates his vision of a balanced coexistence between humanity and nature. Furthermore, the research investigates the cultural and historical context that influenced Snyder's environmental philosophy, including his deep engagement with Zen Buddhism, Native American traditions, and the countercultural movements of the mid-20th century. By delving into these influences, the study sheds light on the intellectual foundations of Snyder's eco-consciousness and its significance within contemporary environmental discourse. Through a close reading of selected poems from *Turtle Island*, the paper highlights the diverse range of ecological themes addressed by Snyder, such as the interconnectedness of all living beings, the destructive impact of industrialization, the loss of biodiversity, and the urgent need for ecological stewardship. By examining these themes, the research aims to contribute to a deeper understanding of Snyder's role as an influential environmentalist and poet.

Key Words: Gary Snyder, Eco-consciousness , The Turtle Island

استكشاف الوعي البيئي في شعر غاري سنايدر :- دراسة في قصائد مختارة من "جزيرة السلحفاة"
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الخلاصة

تهدف هذه الورقة البحثية إلى استكشاف موضوع الوعي البيئي في كتاب "جزيرة السلحفاة" لغاري سنايدر. ويتعمق هذا البحث في دراسة العلاقة المعقدة بين العالم الطبيعي الخارجي والإنسان كما يتجلى في الأعمال الشعرية لسنايدر، مسلطة الضوء على وعيه البيئي العميق ونداءه للعلاقة المستدامة والمتناغمة مع الأرض. تستخدم البحث تحليلاً شاملاً لقصائد سنايدر، مركزاً على مواضيع رئيسية مثل الطبيعة والروحانية والحكمة الأصلية والمسؤولية الإنسانية. من خلال فحص التداخل المعقد بين هذه

العناصر، تكشف الورقة الوعي البيئي الكامن الذي يتسرب في شعر سنايدر وتوضح رؤيته للتنعاش المتوازن بين البشرية والطبيعة. وعلاوة على ذلك، تستقصي الدراسة السياق الثقافي والتاريخي الذي أثر على فلسفة سنايدر البيئية، بما في ذلك ارتباطه العميق بالبوذية وتقاليد السكان الأصليين الأمريكيين وحركات معارضة الثقافة في منتصف القرن العشرين. من خلال التعمق في هذه التأثيرات، تسلط الدراسة الضوء على الأسس الفكرية للوعي البيئي لسنايدر وأهميتها في الخطاب البيئي المعاصر. من خلال قراءة متأنية لبعض القصائد المختارة من "جزيرة السلحفاة"، تسلط الورقة الضوء على مجموعة متنوعة من المواضيع البيئية التي يتناولها سنايدر، مثل الترابط بين جميع الكائنات الحية، والتأثير المدمر للصناعة، وفقدان التنوع البيولوجي، والحاجة الملحة للرعاية البيئية. من خلال دراسة هذه المواضيع، يهدف البحث إلى المساهمة في فهم أعمق لدور سنايدر كبيئي وشاعر مؤثر.

وفي النهاية، تسعى هذه الورقة البحثية إلى عرض الوعي البيئي العميق المتجسد في كتاب "جزيرة السلحفاة" لغاري سنايدر. من خلال تحليل استكشاف الشاعر للعلاقة بين الإنسان والطبيعة، والأسس الفلسفية له، والمواضيع البيئية التي يتناولها، تهدف الدراسة إلى إلقاء الضوء على أهمية ومغزى القصائد المختارة لسنايدر في سياق أوسع من الوعي البيئي والاستدامة.

الكلمات المفتاحية: غاري سنايدر ، الوعي البيئي ، جزيرة السلحفاة

Introduction

Gary Snyder's *Turtle Island* is a collection of poems published in 1974, which explores various themes, including eco-consciousness and the relationship between humans and the natural world. Snyder is a renowned American poet and environmental activist, known for his deep connection to nature and his advocacy for ecological awareness. In *Turtle Island*, Snyder provides a new vision of a harmonious and sustainable coexistence between humans and the environment. The title itself, *Turtle Island*, is a reference to the Native American creation myth, in which the earth is seen as a turtle's back, symbolizing the interconnectedness and interdependence of all living beings. Throughout the collection, Snyder assures the need for individuals to develop a conscious and respectful relationship with the natural world. He urges readers to recognize their place within the larger ecological web and to take responsibility for their impact on the environment. Snyder's poetry often reflects his own experiences living close to nature, drawing inspiration from his time spent in the wilderness, practicing Zen Buddhism, and studying Native American cultures.

Eco-consciousness can be defined to refer "to specific psychological factors related to individuals' propensity to engage in pro-environmental behaviors" (Zelezny and Schultz 2000:367). The term means both the ecological and ethical sensibility towards the environmental world. Gangwar, D. S. (2021) defines this term as "Ecological consciousness is a special value concept, which is based on the mutual relationship between all ecology and human activities in nature, including itself"(31). This term reflects the link between man and nature which contains valuable and priceless knowledge regarding environmental awareness. Eco-consciousness stems from the principles of deep ecology which means an environmental philosophy that recognizes the inherent value of all nature, regardless of its utility to human needs. In contrast to shallow ecology, which views nature primarily in terms of its usefulness to humans, deep ecology emphasizes the interconnectedness and interdependence of all living beings. A

central tenet of deep ecology is the re-examination of the concept of self and humanity's relationship with nature. It challenges the anthropocentric viewpoint that sees humans as separate from and superior to nature. Instead, deep ecology suggests that humans are an integral part of nature, and nature is an integral part of humans.

Odum (1953) confirms that the field of eco-consciousness recognizes that "all units of an ecosystem are mutually dependent"(p. 79). Such components align with the "quest" that Snyder discusses. Yamazato (1990) mentions that this eco-conscious perspective enables each individual to "see his identity and spirituality clearly and concretely in exploring the heart of the wilderness"(p. 234). Snyder emphasizes the importance of embracing a closer connection to the rhythms of the wilderness, as he believes it is significant for reconfiguring culture as well as rediscovering the humanity sense of loss.

Lyon (1968) states that Snyder's works seek to "capture those areas of the consciousness which belong to the American continent, the non-white world . . . ultimately getting in contact with the natural world, which we've been out of contact with so long we've nearly destroyed the planet" (p. 215). Snyder's works aim to facilitate a return to a more intimate relationship with nature, advocating for a reestablishment of direct link with outer environment. This involves engaging in living experiments of wilderness and actively participating in local communities in addition to passing politics needed for protecting the environment. Snyder comprehends that examining the landscape through rhetorical means becomes a vital techniques used for transforming people's perception of an exploited environment. Similar to Thoreau, he critiques governmental abuse of authority. In carrying out this, he promotes the political representation of the wild. This representation serves as a platform for advocating "green" politics, asserting the need for environmentalists to speak out on behalf of voiceless and marginalized entities, be it a forest ecosystem or an endangered species. Snyder raises the question of who will advocate for these exploited elements if not environmentalists in public forums.

Overall, *Turtle Island* addresses the detrimental effects of human activities on the planet. Snyder reflects on issues such as pollution, deforestation, and the loss of biodiversity, urging readers to confront the destructive consequences of modern societies' disconnect from nature. His poetry serves as a call to action, inviting individuals to reassess their values and adopt more environmentally responsible behaviors. Snyder's *Turtle Island* explores the theme of eco-consciousness by advocating for a deep connection with nature, ecological mindfulness, and a shift in human perspective towards greater respect and stewardship of the Earth. It remains a significant work in the field of environmental literature, inspiring readers to embrace a more sustainable and harmonious relationship with the natural world.

Analysis

McClintock (1994) assures that Snyder is considered "one of America's singular voices raised in the defense of nature and against industrial civilization" (p. 109). Marin (1992) states that the poems written by Snyder can stand "outside the dominant discourse . . . In doing so, he identifies with that which the dominant order defines as binary opposite, in particular, that 'wildness' which the ideology of 'civilization' requires to be 'other' in order to confirm its own 'selfhood'" (p. 4). The main purpose of this article is to tackle and analyze some poems from which reflect Snyder's contributions to the developments of his visions.

Snyder experienced a transformative shift with the publication of *Turtle Island* in 1974, which went on to win the Pulitzer Prize. It pushed him forwards in a way of embracing a more ecological perspective, propelling him to become a prominent advocate for an environmentally conscious worldview. *Turtle Island* consists of four parts; with the first three are written in poetry whereas the final part is written in prose. Throughout this collection, Snyder's role as an ecologist becomes more evident. Altieri (1979) states that in *Turtle Island*, Snyder crafts verses that not only explore concepts but "with modes of action and with the unity of interrelationships in nature, and its verification is the fullness of the environment it creates" (p. 135).

The poetic diction of Snyder indicates an essential shift in his poetic vision. Starting from *Turtle Island*, his eco-conscious perspective becomes more prominent. He emphasizes the importance of embracing a primitive connection with nature to achieve harmony. In line with his eco-conscious interests, he advocates for a poetry that encompasses humans, animals, and ecosystems, envisioning a more unified community where all are considered "brothers and sisters." His focus now lies more on humanity's harmony with the environment rather than spiritual states. Snyder believes that humans should possess knowledge of environmental traits and practices such as agricultural life, seasons and weather, the different and best types of soil, and other essential aspects in order to keep ecological existence.

Turtle Island reflects the poet's transcendental relationship with the land in various ways. He endeavors to bridge the divide between his scientific discourse as an ecologist and his poetic creations. As soon as ecologists discuss the "ecology of oak communities," Snyder suggests that individuals should comprehend that these communities include not only humans but also oaks, sharing common attributes. He says: "they are communities" and the communities of humans and oaks "share attributes" (Snyder, 1974, p. 108). That is to say, people are integral to a broader community that encompasses other creatures such as botanical species, animals, in addition to "a variety of wild life" (p.108). Snyder perceives the different elements of the globe as having equivalent effectiveness, and the magnificence and multiplicity of the non-human universe deepen our accountability towards the human realm. Hunt (2016) states that, for Snyder, "the

richness and diversity of the nonhuman world only deepens felt responsibility for the human one” (p.1).

According to Snyder, things such as nature, environment, society, and spirit have been interconnected, and any changes in one aspect will necessarily impact the other components. Specifically, natural occurrences have social and spiritual ramifications, societal events have natural and spiritual consequences, and spiritual developments have not only natural but also social consequences. *Turtle Island* serves as a testimony of the poet's burgeoning collective consciousness and his ongoing commitment to promoting love, compassion, and concern for all living creatures and the biosphere as a whole. Steuding (1976) confirms that *Turtle Island* is “evidence of Snyder's flowering social conscience and of his continuation of ministry of love and concern for one's fellow creatures and for the biosphere” (p.156).

The opening poem in this collection of poems which is entitled "Anasazi," holds significant importance since it establishes a comprehensive shade of the entire collection. This poem reflects Snyder's deep fascination with Native American culture, specifically dedicating it to the Anasazi tribe. It praises the harmonious coexistence between these ancient people and their natural surroundings. Snyder's interest in Native Americans began during his childhood and was not limited to books; he actually lived among them at a young age.

Anasazi,
Anasazi,
tucked up in clefts in the cliffs
growing strict fields of corn and beans
sinking deeper and deeper in earth (Snyder 1974,p.3)

The poem vividly portrays the Anasazi's remarkable skills in gardening, pottery making, basket weaving, and architecture. Particularly, their ability to construct villages within steep cliffs is highly admired.

Trickling streams in hidden canyons
Under the cold rolling desert
Corn-basket wide eyed
Red baby
Rock lip home
Anasazi (Snyder, 1976, p.3).

The poet's intention was to examine human life as an inseparable part of the natural world, rather than in isolation from it. This belief is a prominent theme not only in this poem but also in much of Snyder's body of work. Molesworth (1983) states that "Anasazi", “applies to us only insofar as we can see ourselves as products of, and preservers of, a physical environment”(p. 94).

The Anasazi people, with their deep connection to the land and their eco-conscious lifestyle, offer the modernist people several valuable lessons and

practices that they can learn from such as: Sustainable Architecture in which the Anasazi built their homes using natural materials found in the surrounding environment. They utilized local stones, timber, and earth, minimizing the need for resource-intensive construction methods. Learning from them, modern individuals can explore sustainable building practices like using renewable materials, employing energy-efficient designs, and incorporating natural elements into our structures. Another thing that modern individuals can learn from Anasazi people is "Low-Impact Living" where the Anasazi practiced a low-impact lifestyle by taking only what they needed from the land. They respected the balance of nature and lived in harmony with their surroundings. Modern people can adopt their principles by embracing minimalism, reducing their consumption, and practicing mindful living. This includes reducing waste, recycling, and reusing materials whenever possible. Sustainable Agriculture is a third benefit individuals can benefit from the Anasazi as they cultivated crops in accordance with the natural cycles and seasons. They understood the importance of soil fertility and practiced techniques like terracing and irrigation to maximize crop yields. Taking inspiration from them, we can promote sustainable agriculture by embracing organic farming methods, crop rotation, and permaculture principles.

Living in an arid region, the Anasazi had a deep appreciation for water conservation. They devised intricate systems to capture and distribute water efficiently, ensuring its availability for various purposes. Modern people can learn from their wisdom by adopting water-saving practices such as collecting rainwater, using efficient irrigation systems, and employing water-conserving fixtures in our homes. Moreover, the Anasazi passed down their ecological knowledge and practices from one generation to another. This ensured the continuity of their eco-conscious lifestyle. People can emulate their approach by valuing traditional ecological knowledge, promoting environmental education, and fostering intergenerational learning. By sharing wisdom and experiences, we can create a more sustainable future. Finally, the Anasazi had a deep respect for the wildlife that inhabited their surroundings. They understood the interconnectedness of all living beings and coexisted with animals in a harmonious manner. We can follow their example by advocating for wildlife conservation, protecting natural habitats, and promoting responsible tourism that prioritizes the well-being of wildlife. By embracing these eco-conscious practices inspired by the Anasazi, people can strive to live in harmony with the Earth, promoting sustainability, and preserving the planet for future generations.

By exploring the poem, a dynamic association among people, animals and botanical species is quite reflected. This connection extends to include the different shapes of soil such as the sandstone and rock canyons. It rounds off with a striking portrayal that emphasizes the deep connection and identification between the Indian tribe and the surrounding landscape. Snyder's poem highlights the urgent demand to identify the Earth and treat it as an existing entity,

encompassing its different elements—forest, different types of soil, botanical species, animals, and humans—in unity.

In his poem 'Front Lines,' Snyder delves into the unrelenting exploitation of nature, interweaving it with his personal surroundings. In addition to the search for a sense of belonging, there arises a compelling need to protect the land. In this context, the wilderness holds a distinct human essence, and through vivid depictions of violence, Snyder effectively portrays the forceful domination of the natural landscape. 'Front Lines' echoes Thoreau's portrayal of Flint's Pond, as Snyder taps into the same ecological instinct to safeguard the land. It is not only the land itself that faces the risk of disappearance or alteration; wild animals also confront the threat of extinction when they venture too close to human settlements.

"Front Lines" vividly describes the encroaching cancer of consumer culture, stating, "The edge of the cancer/ Swells against the hill - we feel/ a foul breeze" (1-3). This metaphor symbolizes the destructive force that waits, poised to consume everything in its track whereas humanity downplays the severity of the issue. Instead of immediately changing their ways, humanity persists in welcoming land developers who view nature as nothing more than a resource to exploit, as expressed in the lines, "[bring] in/Landseekers, lookers, they say/ To the land) Spread your legs" (10-13). If humanity does not change its trajectory, it will persist in perpetuating its arrogance and the notion of its own superiority. The divide between humans and the natural world will grow even wider as developers construct over once wild and untamed landscapes. The continuous disregard for nature will result in the persistence of this violation, ultimately causing harm to the familiar way of life that many have become accustomed to. The poet predicts a gloomy future approaching steadily if humanity continues to consume and deplete the Earth's resources at its current pace. While acknowledging the damage already inflicted, Snyder emphasizes that this is where "we must draw/ Our line" (25-26). The contemporary status of devastation must be the point at which this behavior stops, and Snyder urges us to cease. If this failure persists, future generations will suffer from a limited understanding of American history, culture, and community, as they will have lost the natural world that was once deeply intertwined with these fundamental aspects of our heritage.

Land use issues present complex challenges in modern society, yet the ecological perspective of the poet has been deeply established in the significance of place as a source of ecological stability (McClintock, 1994, p. 111). Grassroots engagement by either humans or communities becomes imperative in guarding the environment against aggression and violation carried out by both government representatives and developers. What reinforces one's connection to a place is the recognition that development is often not the optimal choice for the land. When their cherished places are threatened, people will fiercely fight for their existence, akin to defending themselves in a dark alley. This defensive stance contributes to the progress of contemporary environmentalism (McClintock, 1994, p.120). As

individuals gradually grasp the importance of understanding their surroundings and the need to live in a careful and wise manner within a specific place (Snyder, 1980, p. 86), they actively challenge the values of capitalist culture. This attitude is reminiscent of Thoreau's actions when he constructed his cabin and cultivated his own food, serving as a statement of their principles.

In "The Call of the Wild," Snyder explores the notion of making connection with the wilderness and embracing a more primal and instinctual way of being. The poem encourages readers to listen to the call of natural world and to find solace and inspiration in its natural beauty. Without succumbing to simplistic partisanship, Snyder criticizes; first and foremost, individuals whom he refers to as "ex acid-heads" who opt for perpetual state of bliss while forsaking any sexual aspect of life, avoiding the intriguing existence out of fear. His portrayal of individuals missing the true essence of existence by dwelling in tendency "Geodesic domes, that/ Were stuck like warts/ In the woods" has been as catastrophic as his satirical depiction of supreme technology proclaiming "a war against earth," with pilots accompanied by ladies sporting elaborate puffy hairstyles, casually applying nail decoration to the lowest parts of their gunships.

Moreover, due to capitalistic relentless consumption of the ecological system with its different components, it becomes increasingly challenging to view humanity and nature as separate entities, especially with the mounting threat of climate change. The environmental dilemmas we face now have a direct impact on people's lives. This argument is crucially addressed in Naomi Klein's influential contemporary work, "This Changes Everything". In addition, it becomes a central idea within the broader environmental movement, since the seriousness of the climate critical situation has the potential to unite various political issues into a coherent narrative. The theme of reconnecting with nature and intertwining human interests with environmental issues recurs throughout Gary Snyder's book *Turtle Island*. In the "Introductory Note," Snyder portrays people as "beached up on these shores," suggesting a feeling of displacement. The poet yearns for a return to "old cultural traditions" when individuals acknowledged their place as integral components of "life-communities" and sought to rediscover the "ancient solidarity" that fosters a sense of unity with all individuals and the whole planet. He perceives his role as a poet to depict what the ordinary world was like or how it could be like if individuals actively dedicated themselves to rebuilding our connections with one another and the natural world.

Snyder illustrates how such environmental assaults transcend limits geographically and politically in his poem entitled "The Call of the Wild", with "All these Americans up in special cities in the sky" suggesting a privileged position above those they assault, who have been left to suffer from the dumping of poisons across Asia. However, eventually, the consequences of these actions reach North America as well. For the poet, this aggression primarily manifests in the dislocation of local individuals, basically indigenous communities whose

lands have been colonized by others. While Rob Nixon (2011) notes that displacements facilitate collective forgetfulness as places become irretrievable to their original inhabitants, Snyder counters with the acknowledgement that "Something is always eating at the American heart like acid; it is the knowledge of what we have done to our continent, and to the American Indian." However, in spite of the poet's assurance, his poetry also touches upon the unconsciousness or a state of losing memory observed by Nixon, as evident when he questions, "who remembers the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo," that put an ended to the war between America and Mexico and led to the annexation of a significant portion of Mexico. In this sense, the fatal consequences of war have been forgotten. *Turtle Island* as a whole with its numerous mentions to non-American cultures can be viewed as a means of getting away from the collective cultural memory of the poet's nation.

In "Why Log Truck Drivers Rise Earlier than Students of Zen", the poet vividly depicts a logging truck roaring along a filthy route, trailing a thirty-mile-long dusty cloud. For the logger, this rugged existence represents his entire life, as there seems to be no other reality beyond it (Snyder, 1976, p. 63). While loggers bear some responsibility for their actions, the true blame for irresponsible logging practices lies with individuals who have received an education from esteemed universities, both men and women alike, indulging in luxurious food and consuming highbrow literature, all while orchestrating investments and legislation that contribute to the destruction of our world (Snyder, 1993, p. 119).

Snyder's poem "Tomorrow's Song" exemplifies his journey in recognizing the ecological system as an integral component of the political agenda:

The USA slowly lost its mandate

...

it never gave the mountains and rivers,
trees and animals,
a vote.

all the people turned away from it (Snyder, 1976 lines 1-6).

In Snyder's vision of the future, he envisions a life in harmony with nature, where individuals "move in rhythm"(18) and are more attuned to the natural world. While his thoughts on social change may not be explicitly stated in his poetry, he makes his stance unmistakably clear in the final part of the collection which is entitled "Plain Talk".

In the poem "Four Changes," Snyder summarizes the basic challenges facing humanity and the environment, such as pollution and overpopulation. He then proceeds to describe the actions that individuals at various levels of society must take to address these issues and save the planet. By emphasizing what each individual should do on an individual level and the community one, Snyder calls directly upon his readers, urging them to embrace "the concept of a steady-state economy" and to "dodge the blind leap into the liquid metal fast breeder reactor" (91) that contribute to excessive consumption and pollution. Snyder's message is

a call to abandon a lifestyle centered around unsustainable consumption and to embrace a more conscious and environmentally responsible way of living. His poetry serves as a powerful tool to inspire readers to take action and make the necessary changes to protect and preserve the natural world.

In fact, *Turtle Island* is written during a period when neoliberal universal capitalism has been solidifying its dominance. Snyder's literary works shed light on how this economic perspective exploited both the whole earth and its inhabitants, offering his own alternative methods of resistance. Today, we find ourselves confronted with enormous imbalance and teetering on the brink of devastating global warming, largely due to the workings of the same system.

Klein, N. (2014) asserts that "as politicians are still reluctant to declare the seriousness of the climate situation, people have to take it into their own hands" (p.6). This echoes the same message advocated by Snyder four decades prior. Klein emphasizes that inaction cannot persist for another four decades, and by taking action, people might "pull huge swathes of humanity out of poverty" (p.7), while creating a better world for all. This aligns with Snyder's earlier vision and advocacy for a more sustainable and equitable world.

Both Snyder and Klein recognize the urgent need for individual and collective action to address the climate crisis and challenge the exploitative nature of the prevailing economic system. They call for a shift away from the status quo towards a future that prioritizes environmental sustainability, social justice, and shared prosperity. By heeding their messages and taking proactive steps, we have the opportunity to confront the pressing challenges people face and work towards a more equitable and sustainable world.

Conclusion

In conclusion, this research delves into the profound environmental insights and calls for change found within Snyder's influential collection of poems. The research highlights how Snyder weaves together themes of nature, spirituality, and social critique to emphasize the urgent need for eco-consciousness and sustainable living in the face of global environmental degradation. Through Snyder's evocative imagery; he unveils the destructive consequences of capitalism, consumerism, and human disconnection from the natural world. His poems serve as a clarion call, urging readers to reevaluate their relationship with the Earth and recognize the interconnectedness of all living beings. The research underscores the relevance of Snyder's work in the contemporary context, where we continue to grapple with the devastating effects of climate change and social inequality. Snyder's vision of a society in harmony with nature, where individuals are attuned to the rhythms of the Earth and prioritize sustainability, resonates deeply with ongoing discussions on environmental activism and the need for systemic change.

Furthermore, the research highlights the parallels between Snyder's ideas and the contemporary environmental discourse presented by scholars like Naomi

Klein. Both Snyder and Klein stress the importance of individual and collective action, challenging the prevailing economic system, and striving for a future that prioritizes ecological integrity and social justice. As it navigates the challenges of the 21st century, the research concludes that Snyder's "Turtle Island" remains an inspiring and thought-provoking literary work. It encourages readers to cultivate eco-consciousness, embrace sustainable practices, and actively engage in shaping a world that fosters harmonious coexistence between humanity and the natural environment.

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