

# Eco-Wisdom of the Vedas: Environmental Conservation and Sustainability Through Vedic Teachings

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## Abstract

The Vedas, humanity's oldest sacred texts encode an ecological worldview that reveres nature as divine manifestation. In addition, the Vedas position humans as stewards rather than masters of a sacred, interconnected cosmos. At its core lies *Rta*, the cosmic order governing seasons, ecosystems and moral conduct. Disruption through greed or excess invites imbalance, mirroring modern feedback loops in climate systems and biodiversity loss. Hymns personify Earth as *Prithvi Mata* (Mother Earth) in Atharvaveda's *Prithvi Sukta* (12.1), praising the mountains, forests, rivers and minerals while urging reciprocity: "Mātā bhūmiḥ putrohaṁ pṛthivyāḥ" (Earth is my mother; I am her child). This maternal bond demands virtues of truth, penance, non-harm for her enduring fertility, rejecting exploitation for sustainable coexistence. Water, sanctified as *Apah* (life nectar), flows through Vedic consciousness. Vedic reverence extends to water, sanctifying rivers as life-givers in Rigveda 7.49: "Waters, you are the source of vitality." Practices such as rainwater harvesting, sacred ponds (*tadagas*) and purity rituals fostered conservation millennia before contemporary water management. Forests and trees embody divine breath; while *Vrikshayurveda* details organic propagation, pest control and sacred groves (*devavanas*) that preserved biodiversity hotspots. In addition, the Upanishadic interconnectedness (*Brahman* as unifying essence) mirrors the Gaia hypothesis, viewing the universe as a conscious web where harm to one element reverberates universally. In the Anthropocene, Vedic teachings offer antidotes to climate crisis and biodiversity loss. Thus, the paper is an attempt to explore the eco-wisdom of the vedas in connection with environmental conservation and sustainability. In short, these insights position India for global sustainability leadership, healing the fractured web through reverence, simplicity and unity. The Vedas whisper: sustainability is not sacrifice, but sacred reciprocity ensuring *Prithvi's* nurture endures.

**Keywords:** Vedic Teachings, Vrikshayurveda, Eco-wisdom, Environment Conservation, Climate Change.**Copyright © 2025 The Author(s):** This is an open-access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License (CC BY-NC 4.0) which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium for non-commercial use provided the original author and source are credited.

## INTRODUCTION

The Vedas, ancient repositories of Indian wisdom embed profound ecological insights that view nature as sacred and interconnected. These texts promote harmony with the environment through principles like *Rta* (cosmic order), *Prithvi* (Earth as mother) and *Ahimsa* (non-violence), offering timeless guidance for sustainability. Far from anthropocentric exploitation, Vedic teachings position humans as stewards within a divine ecological web, relevant to modern challenges like climate change and biodiversity loss (Prime, 2002). The Vedic literature transcends ritual to articulate a holistic worldview where nature embodies divinity. The concept of *Rta* governs universal balance, linking human actions to environmental equilibrium; disruption invites cosmic disorder. Hymns personify elements: Earth (*Prithvi*) as mother, rivers as life-givers, forests as life-

breath. This sacralization fosters reverence, predated modern ecology by millennia (Cherian, 2008). *Prithvi Sukta* (Atharvaveda 12.1) exemplifies this, with 63 verses praising Earth's bounty while urging non-harm: "Mātā bhūmiḥ putrohaṁ pṛthivyāḥ" (Earth is my mother, I her son). Vedic rishis intuited interdependence of air, water, soil, life forms as one aligning with today's systems ecology. Sustainability emerges not as restraint but as Dharma: righteous living in rhythm with nature. Thus, the paper is an attempt to explore the eco-wisdom of the vedas in connection with environmental conservation and sustainability.

### The cosmic order: *Rta* and environmental balance

The concept of *Rta* stands as one of the most profound philosophical contributions of the Vedic period, representing the cosmic order that governs and

regulates the universe. Derived from the Sanskrit root 'ṛ', meaning to move or to rise, *Rta* embodies the principle of cosmic rhythm and natural law that maintains balance across all existence. In the Rigveda, the earliest of the Vedas, *Rta* is described as the fundamental framework upon which the cosmos operates. This ensures that the sun rises and sets with predictable regularity, that seasons follow one another in unbroken succession and that celestial bodies maintain their appointed paths across the heavens (Khanna, 2004). This cosmic order is not merely a physical or mechanical principle but carries profound ethical and moral dimensions. It is establishing the template for truth, righteousness and harmony in both the natural world and human society. The environmental implications of *Rta* are deeply significant for understanding ancient Indian approaches to ecological balance. The Vedas conceive of nature not as a collection of resources to be exploited but as a manifestation of cosmic order demanding reverence and responsible stewardship. Rivers flowing from mountains to seas, forests regenerating through seasonal cycles and the intricate web of life sustaining itself through predation and symbiosis all exemplify *Rta* in operation. The Rigveda explicitly connects the maintenance of cosmic order with human conduct. By this way it is suggesting that when humans act in alignment with *Rta* through truthful speech, righteous action and respect for natural processes, they contribute to universal harmony (Miller, 1978; Premnath, 1994). Conversely, actions that violate this order, whether through wanton destruction of nature or moral transgression, introduce disorder or *Anṛta*, threatening the delicate balance upon which all life depends.

The personification of *Rta* through deities such as Varuṇa, who serves as the cosmic guardian of this order, reinforces the sacred obligation humans bear toward environmental preservation (Rupwate, 1982). Varuṇa's all-seeing gaze monitors both celestial movements and human actions, ensuring that neither deviate from established cosmic patterns. This theological framework transforms environmental conservation from a matter of utilitarian prudence into a spiritual imperative. When Vedic hymns praise the dawn goddess Uṣas for her punctual arrival each morning, they celebrate not merely aesthetic beauty but the faithful operation of cosmic law. Similarly, when prayers invoke abundant rains and fertile harvests, they acknowledge human dependence upon natural processes governed by *Rta*. Thus, the path toward environmental sustainability, viewed through the lens of *Rta*, becomes a journey of restoring balance, honoring interconnectedness and recognizing the sacred order.

### Prithvi Sukta: Hymn to Mother Earth

The Prithvi Sukta, found in the twelfth book (Kanda) of the Atharva Veda, stands as one of humanity's earliest and most profound expressions of ecological consciousness and reverence for the natural world (Lanman, 1905). Comprising sixty-three verses

dedicated entirely to the Earth, this hymn elevates the planet from mere physical terrain to a living, sentient and divine mother figure deserving of respect, protection and gratitude (Joshi, 2012). In the Vedic worldview, the Earth, or Prithvi, is not inert matter to be exploited but a sacred presence, as *Bhu Devi*, the divine embodiment of cosmic balance and Dharma itself. The invocation immediately establishes that the Earth's stability and generosity are upheld not merely by physical forces but by cosmic and moral laws. Thus, it is suggesting that human conduct is intrinsically linked to the planet's well-being.

The verses of the Prithvi Sukta envisions the Earth as the common mother of all beings, a concept that underpins the later Indian ethos of '*vasudhaiva kutumbakam*', the world as one family. The text declares, "Sacred are thy hills, snowy mountains and deep forests... May you be fertile, arable and nourisher of all. May you continue supporting all people and nations". This is not a prayer for dominance but a recognition of interdependence. Perhaps most strikingly, the hymn contains a verse that serves as a timeless environmental ethic: "Whatever I dig from thee, O Earth, may that have quick recovery. O purifier, may we not injure thy vitals or thy heart". This remarkable appeal acknowledges that while humans must utilize Earth's resources for survival. But, there exists a vital point that must not be transgressed. It is an ancient mandate for sustainability, cautioning against exploitative depths that would prevent the Earth from regenerating itself.

The hymn's ecological wisdom extends to a holistic understanding of Earth's systems. It implicitly recognizes the Earth as a complex, integrated entity where the atmosphere, hydrosphere, biosphere and ecosphere are interlinked (Joshi, 2012). The text's underlying message is that all elements of nature have a place and purpose within a cosmic order. To disrupt this order through greed or ignorance is to invite imbalance and suffering. The Prithvi Sukta thus provides a spiritual and philosophical foundation for environmental stewardship that is remarkably relevant today. It challenges the modern world's often utilitarian and extractive relationship with nature. Thus, proposing instead an "anthropocosmic" perspective where humanity exists within the cosmos, not apart from it and bears a sacred responsibility for its health. The Verse 12.1.45 prays for harm-free life on abundant Earth, echoing biodiversity conservation. Unlike modern extractivism, Prithvi Sukta views soil fertility as divine gift, demanding reciprocity *via* sustainable use.

### Reverence for water: Rivers as sacred lifelines

Vedas sanctify water as *Amṛita* (nectar). Rigveda 7.49.2: "Apo hi śthā mayobhuvas" (Waters grant vitality). Seven Sindhus (rivers) are invoked daily; pollution defiles maternal essence. Atharvaveda 19.2.2 praises pure waters for healing (Whitney, 1962S; Swaminathan, 2014). The reverence for water and the

sacred status of rivers constitute one of the most enduring and significant aspects of Vedic civilization, reflecting a profound ecological consciousness that recognized water as the very essence of life itself (Kalyanaraman, 2008). In the Vedic worldview, water was not merely a physical resource. But it is a divine, life-giving force imbued with purifying, healing and sustaining powers that connected the earthly realm with the celestial order (Dwivedi, 1997). The Rigveda contains numerous hymns celebrating water as *Apas*, the divine waters that precede and enable all creation. These hymns describe waters as mothers, goddesses and guardians who bring immortality, strength and prosperity to those who honor them. The cosmological understanding embedded in these text positions water as the primordial element from which the universe emerged.

Rivers, in particular, occupied a uniquely sacred position within Vedic geography and spirituality, functioning simultaneously as physical lifelines for agriculture and settlement and as spiritual arteries channeling divine grace across the landscape. The Sapta Sindhu, or the land of seven rivers, formed the sacred geography of the Vedic people, with the Sarasvati River celebrated as the mightiest and most holy among them. The Rigveda devotes an entire hymn, the Nadistuti sukta, to the praise of rivers, listing them in a geographical sequence that demonstrates intimate knowledge of their courses and confluence points. This reverence transformed rivers from mere water bodies into living goddesses, with the Ganga, Yamuna and Sarasvati invoked in daily prayers and rituals as purifiers and bestowers of blessings. The physical act of bathing in these sacred waters was understood as both material cleansing and spiritual purification, washing away not only dirt but also moral transgressions and negative karma.

The Vedic conception of rivers as sacred lifelines carried profound implications for environmental behavior and resource management. Because rivers were embodiments of divinity, polluting or damaging them constituted not merely imprudent resource management but actual sacrilege, a transgression against cosmic order itself. This theological framework effectively created an ancient system of environmental protection grounded in spiritual sanction rather than regulatory enforcement. The ritual use of water in 'yajnas' and daily observances reinforced this reverence, with strict protocols governing water collection, storage and disposal that minimized contamination and waste. The concept of 'tirtha' or sacred crossing places, further sanctified riverbanks as locations where the boundary between material and spiritual worlds grew thin. All these attracts pilgrimage, learning and settlement while simultaneously ensuring these sites received reverent treatment and protection.

The ecological wisdom embedded in Vedic water reverence becomes increasingly apparent when considered against contemporary water crises. Ancient

texts recognized what modern hydrology confirms: that rivers are integrated systems where mountain catchments, forest cover, and seasonal rainfall interconnect to determine flow and quality. The Vedic emphasis on maintaining forest cover in catchment areas, expressed through reverence for Vanaspati (lords of the forest) and sacred groves, demonstrates sophisticated understanding of watershed dynamics. Similarly, the celebration of monsoon rhythms and seasonal cycles in Vedic poetry reflects attunement to the temporal patterns governing water availability. This holistic worldview, in which rivers were simultaneously hydrological systems, divine beings and community lifelines, sustained water resources across millennia. As modern societies confront unprecedented water stress, the Vedic vision of rivers as sacred entities deserving reverence rather than mere resources awaiting exploitation offers not poetry alone but practical wisdom.

### **Sacred groves and forest ethics: Vrikshayurveda**

The ancient Indian traditions of sacred groves and the scientific discipline of Vrikshayurveda represent two complementary dimensions of a sophisticated environmental ethic that recognized the intrinsic value of forests and plant life. Sacred groves, known by various regional names such as 'Devachi Rai' in Goa, 'Sarpa Kavu' in Kerala or 'Dev Vans' in Himachal Pradesh, stand as one of humanity's oldest and most effective institutions for biodiversity conservation (Amirthalingam and Krishna, 2014). These patches of virgin forest, dedicated to local deities or ancestral spirits, have survived across the Indian subcontinent for millennia. The tradition finds its roots in the practical observations of ancient communities who recognized that unchecked deforestation led to soil erosion, water scarcity and loss of livelihood resources. The establishment of sacred groves thus emerged as a community-based response to ecological degradation, protecting remaining forest patches through spiritual sanction rather than regulatory enforcement (Kumar, 2008).

Within these sacred spaces, a comprehensive code of forest ethics governed human interaction with nature. The tradition forbade all interference with grove biota and those entering the grove did so barefoot, approaching with reverence rather than exploitation. This religious framing proved remarkably effective: trees survived, wildlife thrived and entire ecosystems found refuge within these protected enclaves. Some groves became the last sanctuaries for species that disappeared from surrounding areas, preserving medicinal plants, endemic varieties and ancient genetic stock for future generations (Khan *et al.*, 2008). The practice demonstrates how ancient societies harnessed cultural and religious values to achieve conservation outcomes that modern regulatory frameworks often struggle to accomplish.

Complementing this tradition of protection was the sophisticated science of Vrikshayurveda, literally the "science of plant life," which provided the theoretical and practical knowledge for nurturing and sustaining vegetation. Attributed to the sage Parashara and dating possibly between the first century BCE and fourth century CE, Vrikshayurveda represents one of the world's earliest comprehensive treatises on botany (Ramachandran, 1984; Sircar and Sarkar, 1996). The text systematically addresses diverse aspects of plant science including morphology, classification, ecology, physiology and the distribution of forests. It classifies plants into categories such as 'Vanaspati' (trees yielding fruits without visible flowers), 'Druma' (trees with flowers and fruits), 'Lata' (creepers) and 'Gulma' (shrubs), demonstrating sophisticated observational capacity.

The interdependence between Vrikshayurveda and human health (Manushya Ayurveda) reflects a holistic worldview recognizing that human well-being cannot be separated from the health of the plant kingdom. Medicinal plants formed a central focus, with the science of plant life serving as preparatory study for those entering Ayurvedic medical training. The Himalayan region, since Vedic times, has been celebrated as a repository of medicinal plants, their preservation ensured through sacred status and sustainable harvesting practices. This interconnection reveals an ecological consciousness that understood biodiversity conservation not as an abstract ideal but as essential infrastructure for community health and resilience.

The integration of sacred groves and Vrikshayurveda represents an environmental philosophy where protection and cultivation, reverence and knowledge, spirituality and practicality merged into coherent ecological practice. Sacred groves provided the sanctuaries where biodiversity could flourish undisturbed, while Vrikshayurveda furnished the knowledge for propagating and sustaining plant life in cultivated landscapes. Together, they embody what modern conservation recognizes as essential: protected areas complemented by sustainable landscape management, cultural values reinforcing scientific understanding and community participation ensuring long-term stewardship. As humanity confronts unprecedented biodiversity loss and climate disruption, these ancient traditions offer not merely historical curiosity but practical wisdom for reimagining our relationship with the natural world.

#### **Interconnectedness: Vedic systems ecology**

The Vedic worldview presents one of the most sophisticated and holistic understandings of ecological interconnectedness that humanity has produced, anticipating by millennia the systems thinking that modern ecology has only recently begun to articulate. At the heart of this vision lies the recognition that all existence forms an integrated, dynamic and mutually

dependent whole where nothing exists in isolation. The Rigveda expresses this fundamental insight through the concept of *Rta*, the cosmic order that governs and harmonizes the movements of celestial bodies, the succession of seasons, the rhythms of life and death and the moral fabric of human society. This order is not imposed externally but emerges from the intrinsic relationships connecting all phenomena, creating a universe characterized by balance, reciprocity, and interdependence rather than fragmentation and separation. The celebrated Purusha Sukta of the Rigveda provides perhaps the most powerful metaphor for this interconnected worldview, describing the entire cosmos as the body of the cosmic being Purusha. In this vision, the sun emerges from Purusha's eye, the moon from his mind, the wind from his breath and the four social orders from his different limbs. This imagery transforms the universe from a collection of discrete objects into a living organism whose parts are intrinsically connected and mutually sustaining.

The Vedic systems perspective extends to recognizing the complex feedback loops and regulatory mechanisms that maintain ecological balance. The hymns repeatedly celebrate the interdependence of atmospheric, terrestrial, and hydrological processes. This reciprocal relationship, expressed through the concept of 'Paraspara Sambhava' (mutual arising), acknowledges that humanity depends on natural systems that are themselves influenced by human actions. When Vedic seers invoked abundant rains, they simultaneously acknowledged dependence on forces beyond human control and affirmed the possibility of harmonious interaction with these forces through respectful conduct. The ecological implications of this interconnected worldview manifest in practical approaches to resource use and environmental management. The Vedic systems view resonates remarkably with contemporary ecological understanding of ecosystems as complex adaptive networks characterized by interdependence, feedback loops and emergent properties. The recovery of this ancient systems perspective offers vital resources for addressing contemporary environmental crises rooted in fragmentation, reductionism and the illusion of human separation from nature. As humanity confronts climate change, biodiversity loss and widespread ecosystem degradation, the ancient vision of cosmic interconnectedness offers practical wisdom that sustain all life.

#### **Vedas and rituals in climate action and conservation tools**

The Vedas and their associated rituals embody one of the most sophisticated systems of knowledge preservation and ecological consciousness ever devised, functioning as powerful conservation tools with profound relevance to contemporary climate action. The elaborate preservation infrastructure demonstrates that ancient society recognized knowledge itself as a resource requiring active conservation, treating sacred texts with

the same reverence afforded to natural ecosystems. Vedic rituals functioned as practical tools for environmental stewardship and climate adaptation. The Agnihotra ritual, an ancient fire ceremony practiced by sages, was understood to possess multiple purposes including healing nature through reciprocal relationship (Pathade and Abhang, 2014). The underlying principle recognizes that human actions influence environmental conditions through subtle mechanisms, with spiritual purity and ethical conduct contributing to ecological balance.

The philosophical foundation underpinning these practices lies in concepts such as *Rta* (cosmic order), *Satya* (truth) and *Dharma* (righteous duty), which establish ethical frameworks governing human environmental actions. The Vedic science of ecology addresses eco-spiritualism from the perspective of cosmological and ontological unity of nature, recognizing that every life on earth constitutes one family as expressed in the Mahā-Upaniṣad's vision of '*Vasudhaiva Kuṭumbakam*' which transforms environmental conservation from optional activity into sacred obligation, with rituals serving as tangible expressions of humanity's embeddedness within natural systems. Traditional cosmic knowledge systems, focusing on relationality and spirituality connected to climate change, offer frameworks for developing non-violent climate solutions rooted in consciousness-based contexts. As humanity confronts accelerating climate disruption, the Vedic approach reminds that effective climate action requires not only technological innovation but also cultural values, ethical frameworks and spiritual practices that reconnect human communities with the natural systems sustaining all life. The United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (UNSDG) Target 13 (Climate Action) and Target 15 (Life on Land) *via* sacred ecology well promulgate the traditional approach.

## CONCLUSION

The Vedas, humanity's oldest sacred texts encode an ecological worldview that reveres nature as divine manifestation. Also, it is positioning humans as stewards rather than masters of a sacred, interconnected cosmos. At its core lies *Rta*, the cosmic order governing seasons, ecosystems and moral conduct. Disruption through greed or excess invites imbalance, mirroring modern feedback loops in climate systems and biodiversity loss. Hymns personify Earth as *Prithvi Mata* (Mother Earth) in Atharvaveda's *Prithvi Sukta* (12.1), with 63 verses praising her mountains, forests, rivers and minerals while urging reciprocity. Water, sanctified as *Apah* (life nectar), flows through Vedic consciousness. In the Anthropocene, Vedic wisdom counters crises. *Rta* guides emissions restraint and circular economies; *Prithvi Sukta* fuels reforestation; Ahimsa bolsters renewables, veganism and wildlife corridors. Modern revivals align with UNSDGs (Targets 13 and 15). The Vedic ecological worldview, as explored throughout this paper, offers a profound and timely blueprint for

addressing the environmental crises of the Anthropocene. The Vedas articulate the relationship through reverence for Prithvi as divine mother, whose fertility demands reciprocal care rather than exploitation and through sanctification of waters as life-giving forces whose pollution constitutes sacrilege. The traditions of sacred groves and the science of Vrikshayurveda demonstrate how spiritual sanction and systematic knowledge combined to preserve biodiversity and sustain plant life across millennia, creating protected enclaves that functioned as living gene banks and climate refugia. The vision of interconnectedness expressed through Purusha Sukta and Vasudhaiva Kuṭumbakam anticipates modern systems ecology, recognizing that all existence forms an integrated web where harm to any element reverberates universally. As humanity confronts climate disruption and biodiversity loss, these ancient insights offer practical wisdom. Also, from all this, true sustainability emerges not from technological innovation alone but from cultural values, ethical frameworks and spiritual practices that honour the sacred reciprocity binding humanity with the natural world. The Vedas remind that healing the fractured web requires reverence, simplicity and recognition that all life on earth are children of Mother Earth, not masters of her domain.

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