As the title suggests, this thesis is an attempt to study the views of John Passmore outlined in his book “Man’s Responsibility For Nature” (1974). It consists of the following chapters:

Chapter I- Introduction
Chapter II-Man’s Responsibility for Nature: A Summary
Chapter III- The Ethical Question
Chapter IV- The Religious Approach
Chapter V- Passmore On Animal Rights
Chapter VI- Conclusion

I give a brief exposition of the present ecological crisis in my introductory chapter, highlighting the scope and extent of the study undertaken here.

The second chapter gives a brief summary of John Passmore’s book, Man’s Responsibility for Nature, that serves as a text in the process of this study. The book has three parts. The first part begins with two chapters which are essentially historical and in which Passmore sets out to describe those Western traditions which tend to encourage and those which might serve to curb man’s ecological destructiveness. He gives two interpretations of the Old Testament view about man’s dominion: the first, that he is an absolute despot or ruler who takes care of the living beings God made subject to him only in so far as he profits from doing so, and, the second, like the Platonist shepherd who takes care of the living things over which he rules for their own sake.

Passmore then turns to four major ecological problems- Pollution, Conservation, Preservation and Multiplication. For him, pollution is simply the process of putting matter in wrong places in quantities that are too large and solving them means reducing the flow of substances or processes, which are wrong. A successful attack on pollution
involves not only the solution of problems, scientific and technological but also moral, political, economic and administrative.

Conservation refers to the saving of resources for future use. The fundamental moral question raised in conservation is the issue whether we ought to pay any attention to the needs of posterity. The saving of species and wilderness from damage or destruction accounts to preservation. Multiplication, as an ecological problem, discusses the question as to how we can determine whether our population growth is too rapid and what moral objections there are to the attempts made to control it.

The last part of Passmore's book is a confrontation between the ecological problems and the western traditions where he poses questions like, what the west has to reject and what to retain, if it has any prospect of solving the problems, which confront it. The focus, however, is not to explore in detail the ecological problems as such but rather to study the philosophical and ethical issues generated by them.

In the third chapter centres around the changes brought about in the scope and application of ethics. I set out with the classical understanding of ethics and switch over to the development of extension ethics and then come back to Passmore's understanding of a 'new ethic'. The term ethics derived from the Greek word ethos (character) refers to the philosophical science that deals with the rightness and wrongness of human actions. Going by its etymological meaning as habit, conduct, customs and usages, ethics has been understood in terms of what we are or what we do or what we are disposed to be or do in relation to other people, to ourselves or to God. Environmental philosophers are now proposing a critique of traditional Western moral thought, which it is alleged, is deficient for providing a satisfactory ethic of obligation and concern for the nonhuman world. They claim that this concern needs to be extended, in particular, toward 'nonhuman individuals, wilderness areas, and across time and species'.
Dissatisfied that the traditional ethical system is in no way good to look into the environmental crisis, Aldo Leopold went out of line and proposed a new ethic (his land ethic). This new ethic, he felt, would recognize an enlarged moral community extending to the entire biosphere and all the creatures interacting therein. The need for a wider perspective prompted Arnae Naess to advocate the platform of Deep ecology. He insisted on a proper appreciation of nature that will lead to the recognition that 'equal right to live and blossom is an intuitively clear and obvious value axiom'. The need to avoid environmental myopia also prompted Richard Routley to present to the World Congress the case for a new, environmental ethic, in which values in nature and the case for their preservation would be recognized. He argues that "the dominant Western ethical tradition" excludes an environmental ethic in principle—thereby, requiring us to develop one on a non-traditional basis. These theories aim primarily at extending ethical concerns beyond traditional limits—human life, health, and welfare—to include a large number of entities and collections of entities—for example, species and ecosystems that have not been given moral consideration previously.

However, Passmore, arguing that normal western ethics is entirely adequate mounted an anthropocentric counterattack to address the contemporary environmental malaise—since he felt that the human actions that directly degradethe environment, indirectly harm human beings. He accepts that there are serious ecological problems—problems of pollution, conservation, preservation and multiplication and that changes are required but he asserts that, there is no need for the rejection of the basic ethical value systems of western civilization. What is needed, he says, is a more steadfast commitment to a 'perfectly familiar ethic'. He argues that ethics have always taught us that greed is evil and there is no need of a new ethic to teach us so.

He argues that the alternative proposed by some of the proponents of 'new ethic' is not only not needed—it is essentially irrational, intellectually incoherent, mystical and even dangerous. It involves abandoning the hard won western tradition of
critical investigation, a rejection of science, and civilization and a reversion to 'attitudes and modes of thought the west painfully shook off'. In short, it involves a return to the intellectual and cultural Dark Ages.

Any change in attitudes to our natural surroundings, which stood the chance of widespread acceptance, he argued, would have to resonate and have some continuity with the very tradition, which had legitimized our destructive practices. In Passmore words:

"It is one thing to suggest that Western societies must learn to be more prudent in their attitude to technological innovation, less wasteful of natural resources, more conscious of their dependence on the biosphere. It is quite another thing to suggest that they can solve their ecological problems only if they abandon the analytical, critical approach which has been their peculiar glory and go in search of a new ethics, a new metaphysics, a new religion"

This draws me to the discussion of the fourth chapter, the religious approach, which contains a discussion on the religious understanding of nature and it includes, in passing, a survey of a few major religions and indigenous religions. Religions provide a framework for changing out attitudes. Our religions teach us that the land, rivers, mountains, minerals, oceans, and other species should be held in trust for God, but can be used for the general welfare of humanity. As the historian Lynn White observed,

"What people do about their ecology depends on what they think about themselves in relation to things around them. Human ecology is deeply conditioned by beliefs about our nature and destiny—that is, by religion."

On the question as to whether 'we ought to pay any attention for the needs of posterity', Passmore argues that 'men do not need religion to justify their concern for the future'. That concern, he says, arises out of their character as loving human beings.
"Religion, indeed, tell its adherents—whether in the accents of the East or of the West—to set such concern aside; 'to take no thought for the morrow'. In short, the faithful cannot hope by recourse to Revelation, Christian or Muslim, to solve the problems which now confront them”.

I have shown that religion has a part to play too in tackling with the environmental crisis. The threat of global ecological collapse need not lead us to abandon our religions or our religious traditions. Rather it could be a major stimulus to their revitalization. For many, an important component of the current environmental crisis is spiritual and ethical. What we need, therefore, is to reaffirm our religious teachings. Each religion and culture has something to offer for the promotion of conservation and environmental protection. From each religion, several injunctions or exhortations can be brought out to form a code for environmentally sound and sustainable development. For example, in some religions and cultures, humanity has been entrusted with nature. No religion says that we have the right to destroy our habitat and creation; as a matter of fact, no religion sanctions environmental destruction. On the contrary, penalties and admonitions are mentioned for those who do so.

To cite a few, the Hindus accept the whole creation as the unfolding of the supreme one into many. According to Atharvaveda, the Earth is not for human beings alone, but for other creatures as well. The following stanza from the Isavasya-upanishad is outstanding testimony to the best idealistic concept of ecological harmony in Hindu religion:

The universe is the creation of Supreme Power
Meant for the benefit of all;
Individual species must therefore learn to enjoy
its benefits by forming a part of the system in close relationship with other species;
Let not any one species encroach upon the other’s right.

(Isavasya-upanishad 1-2)
Islam permits the use of the natural environment, but this utilization should not involve unnecessary destruction. Humans are not the owners, but the maintainers of the due balance and measure which God provided for them and for the animals that live with them. The Qu'ran, in a suggestive and meaningful verse (Qu'ran 47:15), says:

A picture of the Garden is promised
to those who are safeguarded (against evil).
Therein are rivers of water unpolluted
and rivers of milk whose flavor changeth not,
and rivers of wine, delicious to the drinkers,
and rivers to clear run honey.
Therein for them are all kinds of fruits
with protection from their Evolver, Nourisher and Sustainer.

Similarly, the East Asian traditions of Confucianism and Taoism, share a worldview that might be described as 'organic, vitalistic and holistic'. Nature is regarded as possessing worth or value 'for its own sake', and human interference should be minimal, if not nil in Taoist thinking. We cannot approach nature as a thing to be mastered but as a partner in a relationship. The goal is doing nothing contrary to nature. Confucianism emphasizes the inter-relationship of the 'human order' and the 'natural order' and strives for a balanced reciprocal ideal. The seamless interconnection between the divine, human, and natural worlds that characterizes these traditions has been described as an anthropo-cosmic worldview. There is a cosmology of a continuity of creation stressing the dynamic movements of nature through the seasons and the agricultural cycles.

In a similar vein, native religions or tribal religions de-center the human beings from the scheme of things called nature. They believe that spiritual forces permeate the things they see around them—stones, trees, rivers, etc. They live peacefully and even at
times, appeasing among these inspired beings as part of the wisdom of life. The religious views at the basis of indigenous life-ways involve respect for the sources of food, clothing, and shelter that nature provides. Gratitude to the creator and to the spiritual forces in creation is at the heart of most indigenous traditions.

Many writers have attributed the origin of caring about nature to Mysticism. Mysticism is commonly defined as the doctrine or belief that through contemplation and love man can achieve a direct and immediate consciousness of God or of divine truth without the use of reason or of the ordinary senses. It is a method of realization of the Ultimate Reality. In nature mysticism, everything is seen and worshipped as divine.

Passmore admits that although 'nature-mysticism, with its veneration of nature as sacred or divine, is incompatible with the central, Christian or scientific, Western tradition, it had nevertheless had a continuing importance'. Mysticism, he continues, has helped in establishing the value of contemplative enjoyment of nature and has insisted on the unifying links between human life, on the one hand, and the life of nature on the other. He brands mysticism as 'rubbish' that needs to be removed if we are to address environmental issues rationally and practically.

"Mystical contemplation will not reveal to the chemist the origins of the Los Angeles smog nor enable the engineer to design an effective device for reducing its intensity.... Mystical contemplation will not clean our stream or feed our peoples'.

In Christianity, there is a common thread of thought found both in the Old Testament and New Testament concerning the concept of nature and the rules governing our responsibility. Although Genesis 1:26 and 28 have been interpreted as giving dominion and absolute control over nature, there are places where responsibility has been clearly defined. For example, Genesis 2:15 says:
And the Lord God took the man and put him into the Garden to dress it and keep it.

The word ‘dress’ has been interpreted as a duty of man to manage, and the word ‘keep’ has been interpreted as the second duty to protect from harm. Further the scripture also clearly establishes God as the sole owner, while humanity is actively responsible for the care of the world: “The earth is the Lord’s, and everything in it, the world, and all who live in it” (Psalm 24:1), and “Every animal in the forest is mine, and the cattle on a thousand hills” (Psalm 50:10).

The New Testament provides instruction of stewardship and the consequences of not carrying out the stewardship role in accordance with spiritual teachings. The key instruction is that we must be faithful to use and put to work that which God has entrusted to us (Luke 19:13, Mark 25:15). But this is done with the sole purpose to honour God and glorify His gift of creation (I Corinthians 4:2, I Corinthians 6:20). We are accountable for the stewardship role in Christianity. Thus the Christian religious tradition has established a working and harmonious relationship between humanity and environment, which encourages respect for nature.

The Christian view and attitude has been blamed for the ecological crises. In the year 1966, the historian Lynn White addressed the American Association for the Advancement of Science on ‘The Historical Roots of our Ecological Crisis’ and laid the blame squarely at the feet of Christianity’. Although several scholars have exposed weaknesses of White’s position, elements of his argument still prevail in discussions about the environment and Christianity. For White, Christianity accepted this biblical view of creation, fostering the attitude that human beings transcend nature and may exploit it. He argues that this attitude has shaped the development of modern Western science and technology, which have posed threats to our environment. Passmore has based a number of arguments and defenses on this accusation and as such I have dealt with this at length in this chapter itself.
In the fifth chapter, I dwell a little on the origin and the development of the animal rights debate. Traditional discussions on rights have usually been confined to the rights of humans but an area that has gained considerable momentum in the recent years in the field of ethics is the ‘animal rights’ debate or simply the debate about human beings’ treatment of animals. Tom Regan in his The Case for Animal Rights most eloquently articulated the view that ‘animals have rights’. He explicitly rejects rationality as the basis for the right to life and argues that the right to life is based upon inherent value. For Regan, only beings with inherent values have rights. In order to possess moral rights, he argues, an individual must not be merely sentient but also a “subject-of-a-life. Gary Francione also advocated the extension of moral consideration beyond the human community. He argues that we have a moral intuition that “it is wrong to inflict unnecessary suffering on animals”, yet our actions fall well short of our moral wisdom.

For Passmore, the core concept of morality, such as the concept of rights, do not apply to something called nature. Animals and plants either individually or collectively, do not recognize mutual obligation, do not participate in moral community. Nature should be respected not because it has rights, or has inherent worth, interests or a good of its own, but because such an attitude of respect is consistent with living a rational, moral, and humane life. By destroying aspects of nature we risk our health and the health of our future generations, and also debase ourselves by being destructive, cruel or simply insensitive. He argues at length the attitudes that have influenced man’s relationship with nature, to be concluded with the same and simple view that ‘animals do not have rights’.

Passmore’s view that rights cannot be applied to what is not human speaks for itself that it makes sense to speak of rights only on the context of human beings or human society. This argument that the concept of rights derive exclusively from human society presumably rests on a social contract account of rights. Here I have shown that
Passmore's account of animal rights fits well into the 'Social contract theory' or 'contractualism', a theory, which has been 'unfriendly towards animals'.

Passmore however admits a change of attitude over the last century and a half, where men has begun to recognize that they ought not unnecessarily to inflict pain on animals. This means that they recognize at least one point at which the relationships with nature are governed by moral principles. But he insists that 'what has happened over the last century and a half in the West is not that animals have been given more power, more freedom, or anything else which might be accounted as a right'. Rather what has happened, in his opinion, is that men have lost rights: they no longer have the same power over animals; they no longer treat them as they choose. He further adds, 'but that men have lost rights over them does nothing to convert animals into bearers of rights'.

These observations, he says, were 'in passing', 'straws in the wind', 'personal reactions of unusual sensibility.' Yet it would not be appropriate to interpret them as mere expressions of individual over-sensibility. I have shown the developments in the animal rights movements over the years despite Passmore's argument that the attitudinal change in man's treatment of animals is just 'in passing'.

In the concluding chapter, while summarizing the result of this study, I attempt a critique of Passmore's thesis of Man's Responsibility for Nature. This book, despite its title, is not primarily concerned with philosophical discussion of man's responsibility 'for' nature (as opposed to his obligations to other humans), but rather with some philosophical aspects of a set of contemporary problems, which can be loosely classified as 'environmental' (or perhaps, less accurately ' ecological'). The notion of 'Responsibility' is nowhere explicitly analyzed therein. Does it then make sense to speak of taking responsibility for nature, or being responsible for nature, or to appeal to nature as any basis for justifying environmental responsibilities? Passmore thinks that
our primary, essentially our only, responsibilities are to humans and directly only for humans, and not directly to or for nature at all. Nature only enters as the indirect object of the responsibilities. Thus Passmore’s position is that of ‘to ourselves’ or ‘for ourselves’ and not ‘for nature’.

Summing up, Passmore’s thesis as a whole does not offer a concrete model for sustainable development. Passmore in dismissing religion as a basis for rectifying the environmental problems, fails to grasp the significance of different religions in their treatment of nature. Thus in essence, Passmore’s thinking does not bring much difference to what has already been man’s essential attitude concerning nature. His thesis, emphasizing on the virtues of western science and its advances, instead gives a somewhat subtle blessing to the existing human-centered relationships with nature with it’s component exploitation and destruction. To put it simply, the status quo has been upheld by Passmore’s thesis of ‘Man’s Responsibility for Nature’.