

The Evolution of International Environmental Law

COMPREHENSION • VOCABULARY • DISCUSSION

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Reading Passage

Read the passage carefully. Each paragraph is labelled with a letter for easy reference.

- A** International environmental law has undergone significant evolution since its inception in the mid-20th century. Initially, environmental issues were largely addressed through national laws and regulations, which often lacked the necessary scope to tackle the growing global challenges. However, with the increasing recognition of environmental degradation as a pressing global concern, international treaties began to emerge as a vital mechanism for cooperation. One of the pivotal moments in this evolution was the 1972 United Nations Conference on the Human Environment held in Stockholm. This landmark conference laid the groundwork for future international environmental cooperation by bringing together nations to discuss shared environmental challenges. It not only highlighted the urgent need for collective action but also established fundamental principles that would guide subsequent treaties and agreements, emphasizing the importance of a unified approach to global environmental challenges.
- B** In the decades that followed, various international agreements were established, addressing diverse issues such as climate change, biodiversity, and pollution. The 1992 Earth Summit in Rio de Janeiro marked another significant milestone, leading to the creation of the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) and the Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD). These agreements aimed to foster international collaboration in tackling environmental challenges and set the stage for future negotiations. Furthermore, the Kyoto Protocol, adopted in 1997, represented a binding commitment by industrialized nations to reduce greenhouse gas emissions, underscoring the importance of accountability in international environmental law. The commitment of nations to these agreements reflected a growing understanding that environmental issues transcend borders and require cooperative solutions, as no single nation can effectively address these challenges alone.

C

Today, international environmental law continues to evolve in response to emerging challenges and the complexities of a rapidly changing world. The Paris Agreement of 2015 exemplifies this ongoing development, as it seeks to unite countries in the fight against climate change through nationally determined contributions. This framework not only encourages nations to set their own targets for reducing emissions but also emphasizes the importance of transparency and accountability in achieving these goals. Additionally, increasing emphasis is being placed on the role of non-state actors, including corporations and civil society, in shaping environmental policy and practices. These stakeholders are becoming increasingly influential in driving environmental initiatives and holding governments accountable for their commitments. As the global community faces unprecedented environmental crises, such as climate change and biodiversity loss, the future of international environmental law will likely hinge on the ability to adapt and innovate. Ensuring that legal frameworks remain effective and relevant in an ever-changing world is crucial. The interplay between legal obligations and voluntary initiatives from diverse stakeholders will be essential in addressing the multifaceted nature of contemporary environmental challenges, as collaboration and shared responsibility become more critical than ever. The ongoing dialogue among nations, organizations, and individuals will play a vital role in shaping the future of international environmental law.

Vocabulary Glossary

Key words and phrases from the passage. Study them before attempting the exercise below.

WORD / PHRASE	DEFINITION	EXAMPLE SENTENCE
inception	the beginning of something	<i>The company has grown a lot since its inception.</i>
degradation	when something becomes worse or is damaged	<i>Environmental degradation is a concern for many governments.</i>
pivotal	very important for the success or development of something	<i>The invention of the internet was pivotal for communication.</i>
accountability	responsibility for actions or decisions	<i>The manager took accountability for the team's mistakes.</i>
transcend	to go beyond or rise above a limit	<i>Her kindness transcends cultural differences.</i>
stakeholders	people or groups who are involved in or affected by something	<i>All stakeholders need to agree on the new plan.</i>
exemplifies	to show or be an example of something	<i>Her hard work exemplifies dedication.</i>
binding	forcing someone to do something because it is a rule or agreement	<i>The contract is legally binding.</i>

Vocabulary Exercise — Fill in the Blank

Use one word or phrase from the glossary above to complete each sentence. Each item is used only once. Answers are on the final page.

1. The _____ of the project was delayed due to budget issues.
2. The report shows the _____ of our natural resources over the past decade.
3. The discovery of penicillin was a _____ moment in medicine.
4. The new law will increase _____ for companies polluting the rivers.
5. Love has the power to _____ all boundaries.
6. We need input from all _____ to finalize the policy.

Comprehension Questions

These questions are different from the online practice test. Choose the best answer (A, B, C, or D). Answers and explanations are on the final page.

Question 1

What was a major outcome of the 1972 United Nations Conference on the Human Environment?

- A. It established a new environmental agency.
- B. It laid the groundwork for future cooperation among nations.
- C. It resulted in immediate reduction of emissions worldwide.
- D. It focused solely on national environmental laws.

Question 2

According to the passage, what is one reason international environmental law continues to evolve?

- A. To maintain the status quo.
- B. To address emerging challenges and complexities.
- C. To limit the influence of non-state actors.
- D. To reduce the number of international treaties.

Question 3

Which agreement is mentioned as emphasizing transparency and accountability?

- A. The Kyoto Protocol
- B. The Stockholm Conference
- C. The Paris Agreement
- D. The Convention on Biological Diversity

Question 4

What role do non-state actors play in international environmental law according to the passage?

- A. They create international treaties.
- B. They have no influence on environmental policy.
- C. They are increasingly influential in driving initiatives.
- D. They are responsible for enforcing laws.

Question 5

What is highlighted as a critical factor for the future of international environmental law?

- A. Reducing the number of agreements.
- B. Increasing economic growth.
- C. Adapting and innovating legal frameworks.
- D. Focusing only on national solutions.

Discussion & Writing Prompts

Each prompt references a specific detail from the passage above. Use for classroom discussion or a short written response (150–200 words).

1. The passage discusses the 1972 United Nations Conference on the Human Environment as a pivotal moment. Do you think such conferences are effective in bringing about real change, and why?

2. Paragraph B mentions the Kyoto Protocol's binding commitments for reducing emissions. How effective do you think binding agreements are in ensuring countries meet their environmental goals?

3. According to the passage, the Paris Agreement emphasizes transparency and accountability. In your opinion, how important are these elements in achieving international environmental objectives?

Answer Key

COMPREHENSION QUESTIONS

Q1 B

Q2 B

Q3 C

Q4 C

Q5 C

VOCABULARY EXERCISE

FIB1 inception

FIB2 degradation

FIB3 pivotal

FIB4 accountability

FIB5 transcend

FIB6 stakeholders

Comprehension Question Explanations

Why the correct answer is right — and why each wrong option is incorrect.

1. What was a major outcome of the 1972 United Nations Conference on the Human Environment?

✓ B — It laid the groundwork for future cooperation among nations.

The passage states that the conference laid the groundwork for future international cooperation.

✗ A — It established a new environmental agency.

The passage does not mention the creation of a new agency.

✗ C — It resulted in immediate reduction of emissions worldwide.

Immediate emission reduction was not a direct outcome of the conference.

✗ D — It focused solely on national environmental laws.

The conference emphasized international cooperation, not just national laws.

2. According to the passage, what is one reason international environmental law continues to evolve?

✓ B — To address emerging challenges and complexities.

The passage explains that international law evolves to address new challenges and complexities.

✗ A — To maintain the status quo.

The passage suggests evolution is necessary for progress, not maintaining the status quo.

✗ C — To limit the influence of non-state actors.

The passage highlights the growing influence of non-state actors, not their limitation.

✗ D — To reduce the number of international treaties.

The passage does not mention reducing the number of treaties.

3. Which agreement is mentioned as emphasizing transparency and accountability?

✓ C — The Paris Agreement

The passage states that the Paris Agreement emphasizes transparency and accountability.

✗ A — The Kyoto Protocol

The Kyoto Protocol focuses on reducing emissions, not specifically on transparency.

✗ B — The Stockholm Conference

The Stockholm Conference is not tied to transparency in the passage.

✗ D — The Convention on Biological Diversity

The Convention on Biological Diversity is not mentioned in this context.

4. What role do non-state actors play in international environmental law according to the passage?

✓ C — They are increasingly influential in driving initiatives.

The passage notes that non-state actors are becoming more influential in driving initiatives.

✗ A — They create international treaties.

Non-state actors do not create treaties, which is typically a state function.

✗ B — They have no influence on environmental policy.

The passage explicitly states that they are influential.

✗ D — They are responsible for enforcing laws.

Enforcement of laws is typically a governmental role.

5. What is highlighted as a critical factor for the future of international environmental law?

✓ C — Adapting and innovating legal frameworks.

The passage emphasizes that adapting and innovating is crucial for the future of the law.

✗ A — Reducing the number of agreements.

The passage does not focus on reducing agreements.

✗ B — Increasing economic growth.

Economic growth is not discussed as a critical factor in this context.

✗ D — Focusing only on national solutions.

The passage highlights the importance of international, not just national, solutions.

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