



Beyond Stewardship: Toward a Relational Ecological Responsibility through Hadith

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Abstract

The accelerating ecological crisis has intensified the need to reconsider how human responsibility toward the more-than-human world is ethically conceived. Environmental stewardship provides an important framework by transforming human power over creation into obligations of care, protection, and restraint. Yet when stewardship is understood predominantly through management, human beings may remain positioned as the principal agents of responsibility, while nonhuman beings appear primarily as objects of protection. This study examines how selected Prophetic traditions construct the moral significance of human–nonhuman relationships and how these configurations can extend ecological responsibility beyond stewardship. Employing qualitative textual research and thematic-relational analysis, the study examines three groups of Prophetic traditions: the hadith of a thirsty dog, the hadith of a confined cat, and the hadith concerning planting and cultivation. The analysis focuses on the relational structures through which human agency becomes morally significant, rather than merely identifying general environmental values. The findings identify three interconnected dimensions of relational ecological responsibility. First, **care** emerges as responsiveness to nonhuman vulnerability, as illustrated by the human response to the thirsty dog. Second, **accountability** emerges when human agency produces or intensifies another creature's vulnerability and harm, as demonstrated by the confinement and deprivation of the cat. Third, **benefit** emerges when human action creates conditions through which both human and nonhuman beings can receive positive effects, as illustrated by the planting tradition. These dimensions indicate that ecological responsibility involves not only protecting creation or preventing harm, but also responding to vulnerability, answering for the consequences of human agency, and creating conditions through which other forms of life can benefit. The study therefore proposes **relational ecological responsibility** as a conceptual extension rather than a rejection of stewardship. It shifts the ethical focus from responsibility directed toward nature toward responsibility constituted within relationships with other beings, offering a conceptual bridge between Hadith Studies and contemporary Islamic ecological ethics.

Keywords: Hadith, Ecological Ethics, Environmental Stewardship, Relationality, Nonhuman Vulnerability, Care, Accountability



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Introduction

The accelerating degradation of ecological systems has increasingly challenged the adequacy of ethical frameworks through which human relationships with the more-than-human world are understood. Climate change, biodiversity loss, land-system transformation, and other forms of ecological disruption are not merely environmental problems in a technical sense; they also raise fundamental questions about human responsibility, agency, and the moral significance of nonhuman life. Recent Earth-system research indicates that six of nine planetary boundaries have already been transgressed, suggesting that human activities are altering the conditions that sustain life on a planetary scale.¹ Such conditions make the question of ecological responsibility increasingly urgent: not only what humans should do to protect the environment, but also how human action should be morally evaluated in relation to other forms of life.

Environmental stewardship has emerged as one of the important frameworks for addressing this question. Stewardship generally refers to the responsibility to care for, protect, restore, and sustainably use the natural environment. A systematic scoping review of the stewardship literature demonstrates that the concept encompasses a wide range of environmental practices and actors, while retaining a central concern with human responsibility for ecological conditions and the continuity of natural resources.² Stewardship is therefore normatively significant because it transforms human capacity to alter the environment from a mere power of utilization into an obligation of care and restraint. It would consequently be misleading to dismiss stewardship simply as an anthropocentric or managerial concept. Indeed, philosophical defences of environmental stewardship have demonstrated that the concept can provide a defensible account of morally responsible conduct toward the environment.³

Within Islamic environmental thought, the normative orientation of stewardship resonates with concepts such as *khalīfah* and *amānah*. Human beings are understood as occupying a distinctive position within creation, but that position need not imply unrestricted ownership or domination. Contemporary Islamic environmental scholarship has used the concept of *khalīfah* to challenge exploitative interpretations of human centrality and to emphasize responsibility, restraint, and the preservation of ecological order.⁴ At the same time, recent Muslim

¹ Katherine Richardson et al., "Earth beyond Six of Nine Planetary Boundaries," *Science Advances* 9, no. 37 (2023): eadh2458, <https://doi.org/10.1126/sciadv.adh2458>.

² Lynette J McLeod, "Environmental Stewardship: A Systematic Scoping Review," *PLOS ONE* 19, no. 5 (2024): e0284255, <https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0284255>.

³ Jennifer Welchman, "A Defence of Environmental Stewardship," *Environmental Values* 21, no. 3 (2012): 297–316, <https://doi.org/10.3197/096327112X13400390125975>.

⁴ Kurniawan Dwi Saputra and Septiana Dwiputri Maharani, "Makna Peran Manusia Sebagai Khalifah Dan Paradigma Teosentrisme Dalam Etika Lingkungan Islam," *Kalimah: Jurnal Studi Agama Dan Pemikiran Islam* 21, no. 1 (2023): 1–24, <https://doi.org/10.21111/klm.v21i1.9118>.

environmental ethics has expanded beyond questions of human responsibility toward nature to include multispecies perspectives, the rights of nature, and environmental justice.⁵ ⁶These developments indicate that Islamic environmental ethics already contains conceptual resources for moving from domination toward responsibility. The question that remains insufficiently developed, however, concerns the relational structure through which such responsibility becomes morally meaningful.

The limitation is therefore not necessarily located in stewardship itself, but in the possibility of treating stewardship as the endpoint of ecological responsibility. When ecological responsibility is framed primarily through the language of caretaking, management, or trusteeship, human beings remain the principal agents of responsibility, while nonhuman beings may appear primarily as objects toward which responsibility is directed. Such a framework remains ethically valuable, particularly in establishing obligations of protection and restraint, but it leaves open a further question: is ecological responsibility constituted only by what humans do for nature, or can it also emerge through the relationships that humans establish with other beings?

This question has become increasingly important within contemporary environmental ethics. More-than-human and multispecies approaches have shifted attention from environmental management toward relationships, interdependence, vulnerability, encounters, and shared ecological conditions. Tschakert, for example, develops multispecies justice through a relational space of proximity, empathy, encounters, and responsibility across human and nonhuman beings.⁶ Similarly, more-than-human approaches to care emphasize that ecological transformation involves renegotiating relationships between humans and the environments in which they are embedded rather than simply increasing human control over ecological processes.⁷ These approaches do not necessarily require the abandonment of human responsibility. Rather, they invite a reconsideration of the conditions through which responsibility emerges.

Vulnerability provides one important conceptual entry point into this reconsideration. Contemporary animal ethics has increasingly examined vulnerability as a morally significant condition because it draws attention to beings whose circumstances make them particularly

⁵ Anna M Gade, "Muslim Environmentalisms and Environmental Ethics: Theory and Practice for Rights and Justice," *The Muslim World* 113 (2023): 242–59, <https://doi.org/10.1111/muwo.12474>.

⁶ Petra Tschakert, "More-than-Human Solidarity and Multispecies Justice in the Climate Crisis," *Environmental Politics* 31, no. 2 (2022): 277–96, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09644016.2020.1853448>.

⁷ Madison Seymour and Sean Connelly, "Regenerative Agriculture and a More-than-Human Ethic of Care: A Relational Approach to Understanding Transformation," *Agriculture and Human Values* 40, no. 1 (2023): 231–44, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10460-022-10350-1>.

susceptible to deprivation or harm.⁸ Huth further demonstrates that questions of animal vulnerability cannot be separated entirely from relations and encounters through which vulnerability becomes recognized and morally significant.⁹ Care ethics similarly understands care as a situated responsiveness to the needs of others rather than merely the application of abstract moral rules.¹⁰ These perspectives provide useful analytical vocabulary for examining situations in which human action encounters nonhuman vulnerability, affects the conditions under which another being lives, or creates possibilities for another being to benefit.

Such theoretical developments are particularly relevant to Islamic animal and environmental ethics, but they also reveal an important limitation in existing discussions. Scholarship on animal ethics in Islam has already demonstrated the richness of Qur'anic and Prophetic teachings concerning the treatment, welfare, and moral status of animals. Tlili's review, for instance, shows that Islamic animal ethics encompasses questions of human exceptionalism, dominion, domestication, animal rights, and the moral significance of nonhuman creatures.¹¹ Indonesian Hadith scholarship has likewise examined Prophetic traditions as resources for ecological awareness and environmental ethics. Recent studies identify values such as environmental preservation, prevention of harm, and fair treatment of living beings within the hadith corpus.¹² Other Hadith research has examined the Prophetic tradition on planting and cultivation, showing that its benefits can extend beyond the immediate human actor and contribute to longer-term food availability.¹³

These studies establish an important foundation, but the dominant analytical tendency remains oriented toward identifying ethical values, prescriptions, or environmental principles contained within the Prophetic traditions. The hadith concerning animals may consequently be interpreted as evidence for compassion, kindness, animal welfare, or the prohibition of cruelty, while the hadith concerning planting may be interpreted as encouragement for environmental

⁸ Angela K Martin, "Animal Vulnerability and Its Ethical Implications: An Exploration," *Journal of Applied Philosophy* 38, no. 2 (2021): 196–216, <https://doi.org/10.1111/japp.12390>.

⁹ Martin Huth, "How to Recognize Animals' Vulnerability: Questioning the Orthodoxies of Moral Individualism and Relationalism in Animal Ethics," *Animals* 10, no. 2 (2020): 235, <https://doi.org/10.3390/ani10020235>.

¹⁰ Birte Wrage, "Caring Animals and Care Ethics," *Biology & Philosophy* 37 (2022): 18, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10539-022-09857-y>.

¹¹ Sarra Tlili, "Animal Ethics in Islam: A Review Article," *Religions* 9, no. 9 (2018): 269, <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel9090269>.

¹² Sulaiman Muhammad Amir et al., "Environmental Ethics in the Hadith: Building Ecological Awareness in the Era of Global Warming," *Diroyah: Jurnal Studi Ilmu Hadis* 9, no. 2 (2025), <https://doi.org/10.15575/diroyah.v9i2.39470>.

¹³ Muhammad Ali, "Bercocok Tanam Dalam Perspektif Hadis: Analisis Tekstual Dan Kontekstual," *Tahdis: Jurnal Kajian Ilmu Al-Hadis* 10, no. 1 (2019): 1–27, <https://doi.org/10.24252/tahdis.v10i1.9841>.

preservation or agricultural activity. Such interpretations are important, but they leave a further analytical possibility insufficiently explored: what relational structures within these narratives make human ecological action morally significant? The issue is therefore not simply whether the hadith teaches compassion, prohibits cruelty, or encourages planting, but how encounters with nonhuman beings, human interventions, and the benefits generated through human action constitute different forms of ecological responsibility.

This study addresses that question through a thematic reading of selected Prophetic traditions. Rather than treating contemporary environmental theory as evidence for what the hadith must mean, the study uses contemporary concepts as analytical resources for clarifying ethical configurations that can be identified within the narratives themselves. Three traditions are particularly significant. The first concerns a woman who gives water to a thirsty dog and receives divine forgiveness. The second concerns a woman who confines a cat, withholds food and water, and is punished. The third concerns planting, in which birds, human beings, and animals consume what has been cultivated and the act is counted as charity. Read together, these traditions reveal three different configurations of human ecological agency: responding to vulnerability, bearing consequences for human intervention, and creating conditions through which other beings can benefit.

On this basis, the study proposes relational ecological responsibility as an analytical formulation for rereading ecological responsibility through Hadith. The concept does not replace stewardship, nor does it claim that the Prophetic traditions explicitly articulate contemporary theories of multispecies justice, more-than-human care, or ecological flourishing. Rather, it extends the ethical question posed by stewardship. If stewardship asks how human beings ought to care for and manage creation, relational ecological responsibility asks how the moral significance of human action is constituted through relationships with other beings. The analysis consequently develops three dimensions: care, understood as responsiveness to nonhuman vulnerability; accountability, understood as answerability for the consequences of human agency; and benefit, understood as the creation of conditions through which human and nonhuman beings may benefit.

The study therefore seeks to make two related contributions. First, it contributes to Hadith Studies by moving beyond the identification of general ecological values toward an analysis of the relational configurations through which human action becomes morally significant in encounters with nonhuman beings. Second, it contributes to contemporary Islamic environmental ethics by proposing a conceptual extension of stewardship that retains human responsibility while shifting attention from management toward relationship. The argument is deliberately modest: the study does not claim that the Prophetic traditions constitute a systematic environmental theory in the modern sense. Its claim is that, when read thematically and

relationally, these traditions provide a textual basis for reconstructing ecological responsibility through vulnerability, agency, consequence, and benefit.

Accordingly, this study asks How do selected Prophetic traditions construct the moral significance of human relationships with nonhuman beings, and how can these configurations contribute to a relational conception of ecological responsibility beyond stewardship? Through qualitative library research and thematic analysis of selected hadith, the study develops the argument from stewardship to relationality and then examines care, accountability, and benefit as three dimensions of relational ecological responsibility. The resulting framework seeks to reconfigure ecological responsibility not as responsibility directed merely toward nature, but as responsibility constituted through relationships with other forms of life.

Method

This study employs a qualitative textual research design based on library sources, combining thematic and relational analysis of selected Prophetic traditions. The method is intended to examine how human–nonhuman relationships are morally configured within the hadith narratives and how these configurations contribute to a relational conception of ecological responsibility. Rather than measuring ecological behavior or testing causal hypotheses, the study interprets textual meanings, human actions, relational conditions, consequences, and moral evaluations. The contemporary literature is therefore used to provide theoretical and conceptual context, while the selected hadith constitute the primary textual material.

The primary corpus consists of three groups of Prophetic traditions selected purposively for their analytical complementarity. The first concerns a thirsty dog, transmitted in *Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī* and *Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim*, where human action responds to nonhuman vulnerability. The second concerns a confined cat, likewise transmitted in both collections, where human intervention restricts an animal's conditions of life and results in harm. The third concerns planting, transmitted in both collections, where birds, human beings, and animals benefit from what has been cultivated. The traditions were selected not simply because they address animals or the environment, but because they represent three distinguishable configurations of human ecological agency: responsiveness to vulnerability, accountability for harmful consequences, and the creation of conditions for benefit.

The selection is purposive rather than exhaustive. The aim is not to construct a comprehensive corpus of Prophetic traditions concerning animals, plants, or environmental ethics, but to examine relational patterns through texts that provide sufficient analytical variation. The three traditions are consequently treated as complementary cases: the dog tradition presents vulnerability encountered by a human actor, the cat tradition presents vulnerability intensified through human intervention, and the planting tradition presents positive effects generated through human action. This structure allows the analysis to move beyond identifying isolated ethical values toward examining different forms of human agency in relation to nonhuman life.

The textual analysis proceeds in three interconnected stages. First, the selected traditions are established through their canonical textual witnesses, with attention to relevant wording,

narrative context, and parallel transmissions where available. Because the principal reports are transmitted in *Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī* and *Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim*, this study does not undertake a new comprehensive *takhrīj* or independent isnād criticism. Relevant parallel narrations are nevertheless consulted where they clarify the ethical configuration of a tradition. Existing Indonesian Hadith scholarship employing *takhrīj* and thematic *fiqh al-ḥadīth* is used as secondary scholarly context rather than as a substitute for direct engagement with the primary texts.

Second, the traditions are examined through thematic analysis. Thematic analysis is appropriate because it provides a flexible means of identifying and interpreting patterned meanings in qualitative textual material.¹⁴ In this study, the analytical focus is placed not merely on explicit environmental terminology but on actions, conditions, relationships, consequences, and moral evaluations represented within the narratives. Initial codes include vulnerability, encounter, confinement, deprivation, human agency, dependence, harm, benefit, consumption, and moral consequence. These codes are subsequently compared across the three traditions to identify recurring and contrasting ethical configurations. The procedure combines inductive attention to the textual material with theoretically informed interpretation, consistent with qualitative content-analysis approaches that allow inductive and deductive procedures to be combined according to the research purpose.¹⁵

Contemporary ecological ethics is used as an analytical resource rather than a hermeneutical authority. Concepts such as *vulnerability*, *care*, *relationality*, *multispecies justice*, and *more-than-human care* are therefore not presented as historical terminology of the Prophet or as concepts explicitly articulated by the hadith corpus. Instead, they provide conceptual vocabulary for interpreting relational patterns identified in the texts. This methodological boundary is important to avoid retrospectively imposing contemporary ecological theories onto premodern traditions. The interpretation begins with the textual configurations themselves and subsequently places them in dialogue with contemporary ethical scholarship.

Third, the three traditions are compared across cases. The dog tradition is examined in relation to vulnerability and responsive action; the cat tradition in relation to human control, dependency, harm, and answerability; and the planting tradition in relation to production, reception, and the extension of benefit. This comparison enables the three dimensions to be analytically distinguished while also revealing their complementarity.

The final stage is conceptual synthesis. The patterns identified through thematic and comparative analysis are formulated as care, accountability, and benefit. These are not treated as categories explicitly named by the hadith corpus but as analytical abstractions derived from the relational structures depicted in the selected traditions. *Care* refers to responsiveness when nonhuman vulnerability becomes morally salient; *accountability* refers to answerability when human agency produces or intensifies vulnerability and harm; and *benefit* refers to the creation of conditions through which other beings can receive positive effects from human action. Their

¹⁴ Virginia Braun and Victoria Clarke, "Using Thematic Analysis in Psychology," *Qualitative Research in Psychology* 3, no. 2 (2006): 77–101, <https://doi.org/10.1191/1478088706qp063oa>.

¹⁵ Satu Elo and Helvi Kyngäs, "The Qualitative Content Analysis Process," *Journal of Advanced Nursing* 62, no. 1 (2008): 107–15, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1365-2648.2007.04569.x>.

synthesis provides the conceptual basis for relational ecological responsibility, defined in this study as a form of ecological responsibility in which human action is evaluated through its responsiveness to nonhuman vulnerability, its accountability for consequences, and its capacity to create conditions of benefit across human and nonhuman life.

Methodological rigor is maintained by distinguishing three levels of analysis: textual evidence, analytical interpretation, and conceptual contribution. Claims concerning what the hadith explicitly states are grounded in the primary traditions. Interpretations concerning vulnerability, care, accountability, and benefit represent analytical readings of the relationships depicted in those traditions. The formulation of *relational ecological responsibility* constitutes the study's conceptual contribution rather than a claim that the Prophetic traditions themselves articulated a modern ecological theory. This distinction helps ensure that contemporary theoretical categories are not mistaken for direct hadith terminology or doctrine.

Trustworthiness is further supported through cross-checking the primary textual witnesses, consulting relevant parallel narrations, comparing interpretations with existing Hadith scholarship, and maintaining transparency in the movement from textual features to analytical categories and conceptual synthesis. Such transparency is particularly important in qualitative thematic analysis, where credibility depends on the systematic and traceable relationship between data, coding, interpretation, and resulting themes.¹⁶

Accordingly, the methodological procedure moves from textual identification and contextualization, through thematic-relational analysis and cross-textual comparison, to conceptual synthesis. This approach preserves the textual specificity of Hadith while enabling a critical dialogue with contemporary ecological ethics. It thereby addresses not only what humans are instructed to do toward the natural world, but also how relationships with nonhuman beings become morally significant within the selected Prophetic traditions.

From Stewardship to Relationality: Reframing the Human–Creature Relationship

Environmental stewardship has emerged as an important framework for conceptualizing the ethical relationship between humans and the environment. In the environmental literature, stewardship encompasses both a normative orientation and a range of practices aimed at protecting, restoring, managing, and sustaining ecological conditions. A systematic scoping review of environmental stewardship literature shows that the concept generally refers to human responsibility for caring for the planet and sustaining the natural resources necessary for life.¹⁷ Stewardship therefore represents an important ethical shift: human capacity to influence the environment is understood not merely as a power to utilize nature but also as a basis for assuming responsibility for its care and continuity.

Within Islamic environmental ethics, this orientation has important affinities with the concepts of *khalifah* and *amānah*. Human beings are not understood simply as absolute owners of the natural world but as beings entrusted with responsibilities concerning creation. The

¹⁶ Lorelli S Nowell et al., "Thematic Analysis: Striving to Meet the Trustworthiness Criteria," *International Journal of Qualitative Methods* 16 (2017), <https://doi.org/10.1177/1609406917733847>.

¹⁷ McLeod, "Environmental Stewardship: A Systematic Scoping Review."

concept of khalifah has consequently been employed to challenge environmental paradigms that place human interests at the center and legitimize the unrestricted exploitation of nature. From a theocentric perspective, the distinctive position of human beings does not necessarily authorize ecological domination; rather, it can be understood as establishing ethical limits on the exercise of human power over creation.¹⁸ Islamic stewardship, therefore, should not be equated automatically with anthropocentrism. Its normative orientation can instead function to transform human power over the environment into an obligation of care and restraint.

This distinction is important because a critique of stewardship can easily result in conceptual simplification. Stewardship is not inherently synonymous with domination or anthropocentrism. Within environmental ethics, it can remain a defensible framework precisely because it converts human capacity to affect the environment into a moral responsibility for its protection and continuity.¹⁹ Nevertheless, a particular normative structure can still be identified within stewardship. Ecological responsibility generally begins with humans as the agents who are expected to care for, manage, monitor, and sustain the environment. Even when domination and exploitation are rejected, human beings may remain positioned as the primary moral agents, while nonhuman beings appear primarily as recipients of protection, benefit, or the consequences of human action.

The issue, therefore, is not whether stewardship is right or wrong, but how the relationship between humans and nonhuman beings is constructed within this framework. When humans are positioned as caretakers, trustees, or managers of creation, ecological responsibility tends to be organized through the direction of human action toward what is being cared for. Humans become the starting point of responsibility, while nature becomes the object toward which that responsibility is directed. This formulation is ethically significant, but it also raises a further conceptual question: should ecological responsibility operate only toward nature, or can it also be constituted through relationships with other beings?

This question becomes particularly relevant when stewardship is considered alongside contemporary approaches that emphasize human embeddedness within more-than-human worlds. Recent scholarship has broadened ecological ethics beyond resource management by drawing attention to care, interdependence, relationality, and the participation of diverse forms of life in shared ecological conditions.²⁰ Such developments reveal a productive tension within stewardship: human beings are understood as responsible for ecological conditions, yet they are simultaneously situated within ecological networks that exceed human control. The development of stewardship therefore need not require its rejection; it can instead invite a stronger consideration of the relationships through which ecological responsibility is enacted.

¹⁸ Saputra and Maharani, "Makna Peran Manusia Sebagai Khalifah Dan Paradigma Teosentrisme Dalam Etika Lingkungan Islam."

¹⁹ Welchman, "A Defence of Environmental Stewardship."

²⁰ Anna M Gade, *Muslim Environmentalisms: Religious and Social Foundations* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2019), <https://doi.org/10.7312/gade19104>. Seymour and Connelly, "Regenerative Agriculture and a More-than-Human Ethic of Care: A Relational Approach to Understanding Transformation."

This relational dimension has become particularly visible in more-than-human and multispecies ethics. Contemporary environmental thought increasingly examines not only what humans should do for other beings but also the relationships through which humans and nonhuman beings inhabit shared worlds. Relationality, vulnerability, solidarity, and multispecies justice consequently provide important conceptual resources for reconsidering ecological responsibility. More-than-human approaches, for example, emphasize encounters, shared vulnerabilities, and forms of responsibility that emerge within relationships between human and nonhuman beings.²¹ The human subject is thus not necessarily conceived as standing outside the ecological world and subsequently assigned the task of protecting it, but as embedded within a wider field of interdependence.

This shift is also relevant to developments in Islamic environmental ethics. Critiques of anthropocentrism have opened possibilities for understanding human beings not as the absolute center of life but as participants within a broader order of creation. In the Indonesian context, theocentric approaches have been employed to reinterpret the human position in terms of responsibility rather than domination.²² At the same time, contemporary Muslim environmental ethics has increasingly engaged questions of multispecies relations, the rights of nature, and environmental justice.²³ These developments indicate that conceptual resources for moving from domination toward responsibility are already present within Islamic environmental thought. What requires further development is the relational structure through which that responsibility can be understood.

Accordingly, relationality is not proposed as a replacement for stewardship but as an extension of its ethical orientation. While stewardship emphasizes what humans should do for creation, a relational approach asks how ecological responsibility is constituted through relationships with other beings. Humans are therefore understood not only as caretakers or trustees but also as participants within creation, while nonhuman beings are not merely objects of protection. Their vulnerability, dependence, presence, and benefit become conditions through which the moral significance of human action can be discerned. *Beyond Stewardship* thus refers to moving from a predominantly managerial understanding of responsibility toward one that is relationally constituted.

This perspective provides the basis for rereading the selected Prophetic traditions. The hadith of the thirsty dog illustrates care in response to nonhuman vulnerability; the hadith of the confined cat illustrates accountability for harm produced through human action; and the planting hadith illustrates benefit extending from human action to birds, animals, and other people. These patterns provide the basis for formulating relational ecological responsibility as an ecological responsibility constituted through relationships with other beings, particularly through responsiveness to vulnerability, accountability for consequences, and the creation of conditions

²¹ Tschakert, "More-than-Human Solidarity and Multispecies Justice in the Climate Crisis."

²² Saputra and Maharani, "Makna Peran Manusia Sebagai Khalifah Dan Paradigma Teosentrisme Dalam Etika Lingkungan Islam."

²³ Gade, "Muslim Environmentalisms and Environmental Ethics: Theory and Practice for Rights and Justice."

for shared benefit. In this sense, stewardship remains a foundational normative framework, while relationality offers an analytical perspective for examining how ecological responsibility takes moral form within human–nonhuman relationships.

Care: Responding to Nonhuman Vulnerability

The first dimension of relational ecological responsibility becomes visible in the way human action responds to the vulnerability of nonhuman beings. In this perspective, care is understood not merely as an expression of compassion or kindness toward animals, but as a moral response that emerges when the condition of another being requires attention and action. This understanding is consistent with developments in care ethics that place vulnerability at the center of caring relationships. Vulnerability does not merely indicate a passive condition; it also reveals forms of dependence and the possibility that the actions of others may affect the well-being and survival of a vulnerable being.²⁴ Care can therefore be understood as a moral practice that begins with attentiveness to the condition of another and is expressed through a concrete response to that condition.

This structure can be identified in the Prophetic tradition narrated by Abū Hurayrah concerning a woman who gave water to a thirsty dog. The narration describes a woman who encountered a dog suffering from severe thirst beside a well. Rather than passing by its condition, she took action to obtain water and give it to the animal. The act was subsequently associated with God's forgiveness. The relevant narration is transmitted in *Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī*.

عَنْ أَبِي هُرَيْرَةَ رَضِيَ اللَّهُ عَنْهُ عَنْ رَسُولِ اللَّهِ صَلَّى اللَّهُ عَلَيْهِ وَسَلَّمَ قَالَ غَفَرَ لِمَرْأَةٍ مُوسِمَةً مَرَّتْ بِكَلْبٍ عَلَى رَأْسِ رَكِيٍّ يَلْهَثُ قَالَ كَادَ يَقْتُلُهُ الْعَطَشُ فَنَزَعَتْ حَفَهَا فَأَوْثَقَتْهُ بِخِمَارِهَا فَنَزَعَتْ لَهُ مِنَ الْمَاءِ فَغَفَرَ لَهَا بِذَلِكَ²⁵

The narration presents a sequence that is significant for the argument developed in this study. The moral event begins with an encounter: the woman passes by a dog. The encounter then reveals a condition of vulnerability: the dog is suffering from thirst to the point of nearly dying, expressed in the phrase *kāda yaqtuluhu al-‘aṭash*. This condition does not remain merely an observation but is followed by a concrete action to address the creature's need. Water is obtained and given to the dog, and the action receives a moral consequence in the form of divine forgiveness.

Several textual details are particularly important here. The description of the dog as *yalhathu*—panting—and the statement *kāda yaqtuluhu al-‘aṭash*—“thirst was almost killing it”—present the creature's condition as one of acute physical vulnerability. The vulnerability is therefore not an abstract category imposed upon the narration from outside. It is observable within the narrative itself through the description of the animal's bodily condition. Contemporary

²⁴ Daniel Engster, “Care Ethics, Dependency, and Vulnerability,” *Ethics and Social Welfare* 13, no. 2 (2019): 100–114, <https://doi.org/10.1080/17496535.2018.1533029>.

²⁵ Abu Abdillah Muhammad bin Ismail bin Ibrahim bin Mughirah al-Bukhari, *Shahih Bukhari* (Beirut: Dar Ibnu Katsir, 1992).

theories of vulnerability can consequently be employed as an analytical vocabulary for articulating a condition that is already represented in the Prophetic narrative.²⁶

The woman's response is equally important. The narration does not merely state that she felt compassion for the dog. It describes a sequence of concrete actions: she removes her *khuff*, secures it with her *khimār*, draws water, and gives it to the dog. The response therefore directly addresses the source of the creature's immediate vulnerability. Care, in this reading, is not simply an internal attitude or emotional disposition; it becomes visible through an action that responds to the concrete need of another being.

This point can be further developed through the concept of *response-ability* in contemporary care ethics. Care is understood not simply as the application of an abstract moral rule but as a situated capacity to respond to the ethical demands emerging from particular circumstances.²⁷ The woman's action in the hadith can therefore be understood as a situated response to the condition of a vulnerable creature. What makes the action morally significant is not merely that it is beneficial, but that it emerges in response to a specific condition encountered by the human actor.

The structure of the hadith consequently reveals a relational movement in which an encounter with the dog makes its vulnerability visible, prompts a responsive action, and ultimately acquires moral significance through the woman's act of care. The nonhuman creature is therefore not merely a passive object appearing in the background of a human moral story. Its condition becomes part of the situation through which human moral action is constituted. The dog's thirst generates the circumstance within which the woman's response becomes ethically meaningful.

Care, in this sense, is constituted through the relationship that emerges in the encounter between a human being and another creature in a particular condition. The relationship is asymmetrical because the woman possesses the capacity to obtain water while the dog is dependent upon assistance. Yet this asymmetry does not diminish the moral significance of the animal. Rather, it makes the human capacity to respond ethically significant: the possession of greater capacity creates the possibility of alleviating another being's vulnerability. The moral significance of care therefore lies not simply in the act of providing water, but in the way human capacity becomes responsive to the vulnerability of another being within a concrete relational encounter.

An ecological ethic of care provides a useful theoretical framework for understanding this relationship. Care ethics has been extended beyond exclusively human relations to include nonhuman animals and the environment, emphasizing attentiveness and responsiveness within concrete relationships.²⁸ From this perspective, the hadith need not be identified as an early

²⁶ Huth, "How to Recognize Animals' Vulnerability: Questioning the Orthodoxies of Moral Individualism and Relationalism in Animal Ethics."

²⁷ Susi Geiger et al., "Vulnerability and Response-Ability in the Pandemic Marketplace: Developing an Ethic of Care for Provisioning in Crisis," *Journal of Business Ethics* 192, no. 3 (2024): 441–59, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10551-023-05541-7>.

²⁸ Deane Curtin, "Toward an Ecological Ethic of Care," *Hypatia* 6, no. 1 (1991): 60–74, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1527-2001.1991.tb00209.x>.

formulation of contemporary ecological care ethics. Contemporary theory instead functions as an analytical lens that makes visible the relational structure already present in the Prophetic narrative.

The interpretation can also be situated within contemporary discussions of *more-than-human ethics*. Ethical relationships need not be restricted to relations among human beings; encounters with nonhuman beings can also generate questions of responsibility, vulnerability, solidarity, and care.²⁹ The hadith concerning the thirsty dog should not be equated directly with contemporary theories of multispecies justice. Nevertheless, it provides a textual basis for examining how a nonhuman creature's condition can enter the sphere of human moral responsibility.

This reading moves beyond the general conclusion that the hadith teaches kindness toward animals. Previous Hadith studies have established that Prophetic traditions can function as sources for ecological ethics and environmental awareness. Khasani, for example, identifies compassion toward living beings as one of the ecological values that can be derived through thematic analysis of Prophetic traditions.³⁰ The present study takes a different analytical direction. Rather than merely identifying compassion as an ecological value, it examines the relational mechanism through which human action acquires moral significance in response to nonhuman vulnerability.

The connection between the woman's action and divine forgiveness is particularly significant. The hadith explicitly associates an action directed toward a nonhuman creature with a religious consequence for the human actor. The animal's condition therefore becomes part of the sequence through which the human actor receives moral evaluation. The moral significance of the event cannot consequently be restricted to human-to-human relations. A human action toward a nonhuman being can also become religiously consequential.

Care should therefore not be reduced to charity in the narrow sense. Charity may emphasize the virtue of the giver, whereas the relational interpretation developed here directs attention to the condition of the recipient and the response generated by that condition. The ethical significance of the woman's action lies not only in her willingness to perform a good deed but also in her responsiveness to the concrete need of another living being.

On this basis, care can be formulated as the first dimension of relational ecological responsibility. The structure identified in the hadith consists of an encounter with a nonhuman being, the manifestation of vulnerability, attentiveness to that condition, a concrete response to the creature's need, and a moral consequence associated with the action. Ecological responsibility can therefore emerge not only from the human position as steward or manager of creation, but also from concrete encounters in which the condition of another being becomes morally relevant.

Within this framework, care does not replace stewardship. Stewardship continues to provide a normative foundation for human responsibility toward creation. The hadith, however,

²⁹ Tschakert, "More-than-Human Solidarity and Multispecies Justice in the Climate Crisis."

³⁰ Fahim Khasani, "Ecological Ethics of the Prophet: A Hadith-Based Framework for Islamic Environmental Thought," *Journal of Modern Islamic Studies and Civilization* 3, no. 3 (2025): 310–23, <https://doi.org/10.59653/jmisc.v3i03.1845>.

reveals a more concrete and relational form of responsibility: responsibility becomes activated through responsiveness to the vulnerability of another living being. Ecological responsibility consequently extends from an obligation to protect toward a capacity to respond. The first analytical finding can therefore be formulated as follows: care is constituted through responsiveness to nonhuman vulnerability. This finding provides the basis for examining the second dimension of relational ecological responsibility, namely accountability, in which human agency and its consequences for nonhuman beings become central to moral evaluation.

Accountability: When Human Action Produces Nonhuman Vulnerability

The second dimension of relational ecological responsibility emerges when the relationship between humans and nonhuman beings involves not only a need for care but also an obligation to account for the consequences of human action. If the previous section examined care as a response to vulnerability encountered in another creature, accountability addresses a different question: what becomes morally significant when human action affects, intensifies, or produces the vulnerability of another being? This distinction is important because ecological responsibility cannot be reduced to compassion or protective action. It must also include responsibility for the consequences generated through human agency.

The ethical treatment of animals is already recognized within Islamic moral discourse as an important dimension of human conduct toward creation. Contemporary scholarship on Islamic animal ethics has shown that the Qur'an and Prophetic traditions contain a range of teachings concerning compassion, treatment, welfare, and human obligations toward nonhuman animals.³¹ Such scholarship also indicates that Islamic animal ethics should not be restricted to questions of permissible slaughter or instrumental use, but can be examined more broadly through the moral relationship established between human beings and nonhuman animals.³² Within this broader framework, the Prophetic tradition concerning the confinement of a cat provides a particularly clear example of how human action can become the basis of moral accountability.

Abū Hurayrah reported that the Prophet Muhammad Saw said:

عَنْ نَافِعٍ عَنْ عَبْدِ اللَّهِ أَنَّ رَسُولَ اللَّهِ صَلَّى اللَّهُ عَلَيْهِ وَسَلَّمَ قَالَ عَذِّبْتُ امْرَأَةً فِي هِرَّةٍ سَجَنَتْهَا حَتَّى مَاتَتْ فَدَخَلَتْ فِيهَا النَّارُ لَأِ هِيَ أَطْعَمَتْهَا وَسَقَتْهَا إِذْ هِيَ حَبَسَتْهَا وَلَا هِيَ تَرَكَتْهَا تَأْكُلُ مِنْ خَشَاشِ الْأَرْضِ³³

The narration describes a woman who confined a cat until it died. During the period of confinement, the cat was neither fed nor given water, nor was it released so that it could obtain food independently. The woman's treatment of the animal was subsequently associated with punishment in the hereafter. The narrative therefore presents a configuration that differs

³¹ Tlili, "Animal Ethics in Islam: A Review Article."

³² Mohamed Mukhtar and Mary-Justine Todd, "An Islamic Framework for Animal Ethics: Widening the Conversation to Include Islamic Ethical Vegetarianism," *Critical Research on Religion* 11, no. 3 (2023): 263–80, <https://doi.org/10.1177/20503032231174209>.

³³ Abu al-Husain Muslim bi Hajjaj bin Muslim al-Qusyairi an-Naisaburi, *Shahih Muslim* (Beirut: Dar al-Kutub al-Ilmiyah, 1992).

significantly from the hadith of the thirsty dog examined in the previous section. In the story of the dog, a human being encounters a creature that is already vulnerable and responds by alleviating its suffering. In the story of the cat, human action becomes part of the condition through which the animal's vulnerability is produced and sustained.

This hadith has already been examined within Indonesian Hadith Studies. Andi Alda Khairul Ummah's thematic study of traditions concerning cats concludes that confining a cat without providing food or water constitutes mistreatment and connects the animal's death with the punishment described in the narration.³⁴ Muhammad Faizhil Akbar similarly examines the tradition through *takhrīj* and *sharḥ al-ḥadīth*, identifying the narration as evidence of the obligation to care for cats and the prohibition against depriving them of food and water.³⁵ These studies establish an important interpretive foundation: the Prophetic tradition clearly establishes a moral prohibition against treatment that causes an animal to suffer through confinement and deprivation.

The present study does not seek to replace this interpretation. Instead, it asks a further question concerning the structure of the relationship represented in the hadith: how does human control over another creature generate moral accountability? The issue is therefore not merely that the woman mistreated a cat, but that her actions altered the conditions under which the animal could survive. The hadith presents a relationship in which human agency becomes causally relevant to nonhuman vulnerability.

This point becomes particularly visible in the verb *sajanathā*, “she confined it.” Confinement changes the conditions of the animal's existence. Once confined, the cat cannot freely move to obtain food. This restriction is reinforced by the subsequent description that the woman neither fed nor gave it water and did not release it to eat from what was available on the earth. The narrative consequently depicts more than an abstract prohibition against cruelty. It describes a relationship in which human control restricts another creature's ability to satisfy its own basic needs.

The ethical significance of this relationship can be clarified through the concept of vulnerability. Vulnerability is not simply a condition that exists independently of human relations. It can also be shaped by social structures, practices, and particular relationships with animals. Huth, for example, places vulnerability and its recognition at the center of animal ethics while emphasizing that relationships and direct encounters can influence how vulnerability is perceived and how animals are treated.³⁶ In the present hadith, the cat's vulnerability is not merely encountered by the human actor; it is intensified through the restriction imposed upon the animal.

³⁴ Andi Alda Khairul Ummah, “Keistimewaan Kucing; Kajian Tematik Hadis,” *Tahdis: Jurnal Kajian Ilmu Al-Hadis* 9, no. 1 (2020): 88–102, <https://doi.org/10.24252/tahdis.v9i1.12480>.

³⁵ Muhammad Faizhil Akbar, “Keutamaan Memelihara Kucing Dalam Perspektif Islam: Studi Takhrīj Dan Syarah Hadis,” *Jurnal Riset Agama* 1, no. 2 (2021): 449–57, <https://doi.org/10.15575/jra.v1i2.14762>.

³⁶ Huth, “How to Recognize Animals’ Vulnerability: Questioning the Orthodoxies of Moral Individualism and Relationalism in Animal Ethics.”

The relationship between confinement and dependency is central to the ethical significance of the narration. By confining the cat, the woman assumes control over its movement and, consequently, its access to resources necessary for survival. The animal's dependence is therefore not presented as an independent condition but as one intensified through human intervention. Once such intervention restricts an animal's ability to meet its basic needs, control over its living conditions also entails responsibility for the consequences that follow.

This distinction becomes clearer when the narration is considered alongside another Prophetic tradition in which human action encounters a vulnerable animal. In the account of the thirsty dog, vulnerability is encountered and prompts a responsive act of assistance. The cat narration presents a different configuration: vulnerability is shaped and sustained through human intervention, while the resources necessary for survival are withheld. The ethical difference lies therefore not simply in the presence of suffering, but in the position of human agency in relation to that suffering. In one case, human action alleviates vulnerability; in the other, human action contributes to the conditions that sustain it.

The transition from care to accountability can thus be understood through the changing role of human agency. Care is expressed through attentiveness and response to the vulnerability of another being. Accountability emerges when human agency becomes causally relevant to that being's condition and when the consequences of intervention become morally attributable to the agent. In the cat narration, the woman exercises control over the animal while also possessing the capacity to provide food, water, or freedom of movement. Accountability therefore emerges from the relationship between agency, consequence, and answerability.

The significance of causation becomes especially clear in this context. The cat's death is not presented as an event wholly independent of human intervention. The animal is confined, deprived of food and water, and prevented from obtaining food independently. The narrative thus establishes a sequence connecting human conduct with nonhuman harm. Contemporary animal ethics likewise emphasizes that questions of causation, responsibility, negligence, harm, and duty of care are relevant to human relationships with nonhuman animals.³⁷ When human action is causally connected to another creature's suffering, the moral question shifts from general benevolence toward answerability for consequences.

Accountability should not be understood simply as punishment. The punishment described in the hadith is the religious consequence of the woman's conduct, while accountability is used here to explain why her conduct becomes morally answerable. It concerns the relationship between an agent, an action, its consequences, and the obligation to answer for them. The hadith also shows that accountability may arise through both action and omission. The woman's agency appears in the confinement of the cat and in withholding food and water, while her failure to release it further intensifies the animal's vulnerability. The moral problem therefore lies not only in direct harm but also in restricting the conditions necessary for another creature to survive.

³⁷ Matti Häyry, "Causation, Responsibility, and Harm: How the Discursive Shift from Law and Ethics to Social Justice Sealed the Plight of Nonhuman Animals," *Cambridge Quarterly of Healthcare Ethics* 29, no. 2 (2020): 246–67, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S096318011900104X>.

This distinction is important for ecological responsibility because harm may result not only from direct acts of destruction but also from actions or omissions that create or intensify dependency and vulnerability. The hadith thus presents responsibility as extending to what humans fail to do when their own intervention has affected the conditions of another being's life.

This reading is consistent with broader discussions of Islamic animal ethics. A review of Islamic scholarship on animal ethics demonstrates that the treatment of animals has been addressed through questions of human exceptionalism, dominion, domestication, animal rights, and the moral status of nonhuman creatures.³⁸ Meanwhile, scholarship on Islamic animal welfare emphasizes the importance of Qur'anic and Prophetic teachings for shaping human treatment of animals and preventing cruelty. Such discussions provide the broader ethical context within which the hadith of the confined cat can be read. Yet the present analysis moves beyond identifying a general obligation to treat animals well by examining how human intervention itself generates a relation of dependency and therefore a corresponding obligation.

This relational dimension can also be connected to philosophical discussions of responsibility toward nonhuman animals. Atterton's engagement with Levinasian ethics, for example, demonstrates how encounters with nonhuman animals can challenge approaches that restrict moral responsibility to human interests.³⁹ The relevance of this perspective here lies not in importing Levinasian philosophy into the hadith, but in reinforcing the idea that the presence and suffering of a nonhuman being can become ethically significant within a human–animal encounter.

The same relational structure can be observed from another direction in environmental ethics. Human interventions in nature can create new moral obligations precisely because such interventions alter the conditions affecting other beings. O'Brien's discussion of interventions in nature shows how human actions that affect the conditions of nonhuman life can generate secondary moral duties.⁴⁰ Although his discussion concerns a different environmental context, the underlying analytical principle is relevant here: when human agency alters the conditions of another being's existence, the consequences of that intervention may generate additional responsibilities.

The religious consequence of the hadith further clarifies the relationship between human agency and nonhuman suffering. The woman's conduct toward a cat becomes a basis for divine judgment.⁴¹ The moral field of the narration therefore extends beyond human-to-human relations: the suffering and death of a nonhuman creature become relevant to the evaluation of human conduct before God. The moral significance of human action is thus not exhausted by its effects on other human beings.

³⁸ Tlili, "Animal Ethics in Islam: A Review Article."

³⁹ Peter Atterton, "Levinas and Our Moral Responsibility Toward Other Animals," *Inquiry* 54, no. 6 (2011): 633–49, <https://doi.org/10.1080/0020174X.2011.628186>.

⁴⁰ Gary David O'Brien, "Beneficence, Non-Identity, and Responsibility: How Identity-Affecting Interventions in Nature Can Generate Secondary Moral Duties," *Philosophia* 50 (2022): 887–98, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11406-021-00419-2>.

⁴¹ al-Bukhari, *Shahih Bukhari*.

This point is crucial for rethinking stewardship. While stewardship establishes human responsibility toward creation, the hadith shows that human power over other beings also entails accountability for the conditions produced through that power. The human being is therefore not merely a manager entrusted with creation, but an agent situated within relationships in which intervention can generate dependency, vulnerability, deprivation, and harm.

Accountability can be understood through three interconnected elements: agency, consequence, and answerability. Agency refers to the capacity to alter the conditions of another creature's life; consequence concerns the effects of such intervention on its basic needs and survival; and answerability refers to the moral evaluation that follows. In the cat hadith, confinement represents human agency, deprivation and death its consequences, and divine punishment the resulting moral judgment.

This also distinguishes accountability from care. Care concerns responsiveness to vulnerability, whereas accountability concerns answerability for the consequences of human agency. The two are complementary: care responds to vulnerability, while accountability answers for vulnerability shaped through human action.

The contribution of the present analysis does not lie in claiming that previous Hadith studies overlooked the ethical significance of the cat narration. Previous studies have already established the prohibition against harmful confinement and the obligation to provide appropriate care.⁴² The contribution instead lies in identifying a relational sequence within the narration in which human control produces dependency, dependency intensifies vulnerability, vulnerability results in harm, and harm establishes a condition of moral answerability. This reading connects the specific ethical problem of animal mistreatment with the broader question of ecological responsibility

Accountability thus represents an extension of stewardship.⁴³ If stewardship establishes an obligation to care for creation, accountability requires recognition that human interventions can alter the conditions in which other beings live. Humans are therefore not only responsible for protecting creation but also answerable for vulnerability and harm generated through their actions or omissions. Ecological responsibility consequently depends not only on responsible intentions but also on attention to the consequences of human intervention.

The second analytical finding of this study can therefore be formulated as follows: accountability is constituted through the relationship between human agency, nonhuman vulnerability, and the consequences of human action. The hadith of the confined cat demonstrates that when human beings create, intensify, or sustain another creature's vulnerability, they become morally answerable for the consequences. Ecological responsibility consequently extends beyond protecting creation toward accountability for the conditions produced through human action. This finding provides the basis for examining the third dimension of relational ecological responsibility, namely benefit, where the analysis shifts from responding to vulnerability and preventing harm toward the generation and circulation of benefits across human and nonhuman life.

⁴² Ummah, "Keistimewaan Kucing; Kajian Tematik Hadis."

⁴³ McLeod, "Environmental Stewardship: A Systematic Scoping Review."

Benefit: Extending Moral Value across Species

The third dimension of relational ecological responsibility concerns the capacity of human action to generate benefits that extend beyond the human actor. Whereas the preceding section examined accountability in relation to vulnerability produced or intensified through human intervention, this section addresses a different ethical possibility: human action can create conditions through which other beings may also benefit. Benefit, therefore, is not understood merely as the usefulness of nature for human interests, but as the extension of positive effects through relationships between humans and nonhuman beings.

This dimension is clearly illustrated in the Prophetic tradition concerning planting and cultivation. Anas ibn Mālik reported that the Prophet Muhammad Saw said

عَنْ أَنَسٍ قَالَ قَالَ رَسُولُ اللَّهِ صَلَّى اللَّهُ عَلَيْهِ وَسَلَّمَ مَا مِنْ مُسْلِمٍ يَغْرِسُ غَرْسًا أَوْ يَزْرَعُ زَرْعًا فَيَأْكُلُ مِنْهُ طَيْرٌ أَوْ إِنْسَانٌ أَوْ بَهِيمَةٌ إِلَّا كَانَ لَهُ بِهِ صَدَقَةٌ⁴⁴

Whenever a Muslim plants a tree or cultivates a crop, and a bird, a human being, or an animal eats from it, it is counted as charity for him.”⁴⁴ The hadith is transmitted in *Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī* and *Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim*. A related narration from Jābir further states that whatever is eaten from a planted crop by humans, animals, birds, or wild creatures is counted as charity for the person who planted it.⁴⁵ The significance of these narrations lies not merely in encouraging cultivation, but in connecting the moral value of planting with the benefits subsequently received by other beings.

The ethical structure of this hadith differs from the two traditions discussed previously. In the hadith concerning the thirsty dog, human action responds to nonhuman vulnerability. In the hadith concerning the confined cat, human action creates grounds for accountability. In the planting hadith, by contrast, human action generates a resource that benefits different forms of life, giving the action moral value.

The wording of the hadith is particularly significant. The Prophet does not restrict the beneficiaries of the planted crop to human beings. The narration explicitly identifies *ṭayr* (bird), *insān* (human being), and *bahīmah* (animal). These categories appear within the same grammatical structure as possible consumers of the crop, and each instance of consumption is connected to the *ṣadaqah* of the person who planted it. The moral significance of planting, therefore, is not exhausted by human consumption.

This does not mean that the hadith establishes an equality between humans and animals in every moral or theological respect. Such a conclusion would exceed the available textual evidence. What can be more precisely inferred is that benefit received by nonhuman beings can become part of the moral value of human action. A bird or an animal does not have to receive the benefit as a derivative of human economic interests for the act of planting to acquire religious value. This textual feature makes the hadith particularly relevant to a relational understanding of ecological responsibility.

⁴⁴ Muslim ibn al-Hajjaj al-Naysaburi, *Sahih Muslim*, vol. 1 (Beirut: Dar al-Fikr, 1992).

⁴⁵ an-Naisaburi, *Shahih Muslim*.

The moral significance of planting thus extends beyond the immediate intention of the human actor. A person may plant a tree for food, shade, livelihood, agricultural production, or other human purposes. Yet the hadith expands the moral significance of the act to include what happens when other beings consume what has been produced. The benefits received by nonhuman beings become part of the moral economy of the action. Its value is therefore not exhausted by the actor's intention or by the benefits received by the actor himself.

This reading provides an important distinction from a purely utilitarian conception of environmental benefit. If nature is valued only according to what it provides for human interests, a tree becomes significant primarily because it supplies food, shade, timber, economic value, or ecological services to human communities. The hadith permits a broader reading. The fact that birds or animals benefit from a planted tree is itself sufficient to contribute to the moral value of the act. Nonhuman beings thus enter the moral structure of human action without first having to be translated into human economic interests.

The relational character of benefit can be further illuminated through contemporary more-than-human approaches. Relational accounts of ecological care emphasize that environmental conditions are produced through relationships and interdependencies among human and nonhuman beings rather than through a simple separation between society and nature. In this perspective, more-than-human care provides a way of understanding socio-ecological transformation through relationships rather than through control alone.⁴⁶ Such an approach is useful here because the planting hadith draws attention to precisely such a relationship: human cultivation produces conditions through which other beings can access and benefit from ecological resources.

Recent discussions of more-than-human care further identify relationality between humans and nonhumans, reciprocity, and the possibility of fostering flourishing for many as important dimensions of ecological relationships.⁴⁷ These concepts should not be attributed directly to the hadith. Rather, they provide contemporary analytical vocabulary for articulating an ethical possibility already made visible by the Prophetic tradition: human practices can contribute to conditions in which the lives of other beings are sustained and benefited.

This relational dimension also distinguishes *benefit* from *care*. Care responds to an already visible condition of vulnerability, whereas benefit does not necessarily presuppose suffering or vulnerability. Planting is a productive act that creates conditions from which other beings may benefit. Its ethical significance therefore lies in the positive possibilities generated through human action. Benefit is also distinct from *accountability*, which becomes especially important when human agency produces or intensifies vulnerability or harm. Benefit instead concerns the constructive effects of human action. The planting hadith thus shows that ecological

⁴⁶ Seymour and Connelly, "Regenerative Agriculture and a More-than-Human Ethic of Care: A Relational Approach to Understanding Transformation."

⁴⁷ Adriana Ressorio C., David Ludwig, and Charbel El-Hani, "The Conceptual Potential of 'More-than-Human Care': A Reflection with an Artisanal Fishing Village in Brazil," *GEO: Geography and Environment* 11, no. 2 (2024): e00159, <https://doi.org/10.1002/geo2.159>.

responsibility involves not only preventing harm and responding to vulnerability, but also creating conditions through which other beings can live and benefit.

The Jābir narration reinforces this interpretation. It states that what is eaten from a planted crop by humans, birds, animals, or wild creatures is counted as charity for the person who planted it.⁴⁸ The wording is significant because it prevents moral value from being tied exclusively to human possession or consumption. Consumption by other beings does not diminish the moral value of the planter's action. Rather, such benefit becomes part of the reason why the action acquires the value of *ṣadaqah*.

Benefit can therefore be understood relationally rather than merely distributively. The ethical significance lies in the relationship between production and reception: humans cultivate or produce, while other beings receive and benefit from what has been cultivated. Human action thus creates material conditions through which resources become available in response to the needs of other beings.

This also clarifies the relationship between human and nonhuman agency. Humans initiate planting, but the ecological processes that follow exceed human control. Birds and animals interact with plants according to their own needs and capacities. Human moral agency therefore lies not in producing the entire network of benefit, but in participating in the creation of conditions through which such benefits become possible.

This perspective extends stewardship beyond a purely managerial model. Ecological action need not be evaluated solely by the extent to which humans control, protect, or maintain resources. The planting hadith suggests that ethical value can also arise from making resources available to others. Ecological responsibility thus involves creating conditions in which life can be sustained beyond the human actor.

Contemporary literature on multispecies ethics provides a useful conceptual vocabulary for this dimension. Tschakert places multispecies justice within a relational space connecting humans and nonhumans through encounters, responsibility, vulnerability, and forms of more-than-human togetherness.⁴⁹ The hadith should not be equated with contemporary multispecies justice theory. Nevertheless, the two can be placed in analytical dialogue concerning how human practices affect the conditions of life of other beings. The planting hadith contributes a constructive dimension to this discussion: human practices can generate benefits that cross species boundaries.

This constructive dimension is also relevant to the question of ecological flourishing. The hadith does not use the contemporary language of *flourishing*, nor does it explicitly formulate a theory of *multispecies flourishing*. Contemporary scholarship, however, uses concepts such as flourishing, coexistence, and multispecies livelihoods to describe conditions in which humans

⁴⁸ an-Naisaburi, *Shahih Muslim*.

⁴⁹ Tschakert, "More-than-Human Solidarity and Multispecies Justice in the Climate Crisis."

and nonhuman beings can sustain their forms of life.⁵⁰ These concepts can therefore function as analytical vocabulary, provided that they are not presented as direct terminology of the hadith.

The broader field of Islamic environmental and animal ethics further supports the significance of this reading. Contemporary scholarship increasingly examines Islamic environmental ethics through questions of multispecies relations, animal welfare, justice, and the moral status of nonhuman beings.⁵¹ The planting hadith contributes to this discussion through a relatively simple but significant ethical structure: a human practice acquires moral value not only because it benefits human communities, but also because its products can become available to other forms of life.

Hadith scholarship in Indonesia has likewise recognized the ecological significance of the Prophetic traditions concerning planting. Taufiq Hidayat Karim's study of *ḥadīth ghars al-ashjār* employs *takhrīj* and thematic *fiqh al-ḥadīth* and concludes that the examined hadith is authentic and relevant to encouraging greening and environmental preservation.⁵² More recent Indonesian research has also examined Prophetic recommendations concerning planting trees in relation to ecological sustainability.⁵³ These studies are important because they demonstrate that planting traditions have already entered Indonesian discussions of Hadith and environmental ethics. The present analysis, however, asks a more specific question: what relational structure makes this ecological practice morally significant?

The ethical significance of planting therefore extends beyond the act of production itself. The hadith identifies birds, human beings, and animals as beneficiaries of what is produced through planting.⁵⁴ This broader distribution of benefit is also reflected in Indonesian Hadith Studies, where the planting tradition has been understood as emphasizing not only human food provision but also benefits that may reach others and contribute to longer-term conditions of food availability.⁵⁵ The hadith thus connects human agency with benefits received beyond the immediate human actor. Ecological responsibility, in this sense, includes not only preventing harm and responding to vulnerability but also creating conditions through which other beings can benefit.

This formulation also prevents *benefit* from becoming another anthropocentric category. If benefit is defined solely according to what humans receive from ecological management, the ethical framework would remain centered on human interests. The relevant question is therefore not only what nature provides for humans, but also what human action makes possible for other

⁵⁰ Bastian Thomsen, "Multispecies Livelihoods: A Posthumanist Approach to Wildlife Ecotourism That Promotes Animal Ethics," *Journal of Sustainable Tourism* 31, no. 5 (2023): 1195–1213, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09669582.2021.1942893>.

⁵¹ Tlili, "Animal Ethics in Islam: A Review Article."

⁵² Taufiq Hidayat Karim, "Takhrīj Ḥadīth Ghars Al-Ashjār: Tracing the Greening Spirit Roots in Sunnah Nabawiyyah," *Al-Bukhari: Jurnal Ilmu Hadis* 4, no. 1 (2021), <https://doi.org/10.32505/al-bukhari.v4i1.2213>.

⁵³ Abd. Latif, Zainal Arifin, and Roul koiron Al-Bary, "Anjuran Menanam Pohon; Telaah Hadis Dan Relevansinya Bagi Ekologi Modern," *Jurnal Media Akademik (JMA)* 3, no. 11 (2025).

⁵⁴ al-Bukhari, *Shahih Bukhari*.

⁵⁵ Ali, "Bercocok Tanam Dalam Perspektif Hadis: Analisis Tekstual Dan Kontekstual."

beings. The planting hadith shifts the direction of the relationship: humans are not only recipients of ecological benefits but can also become producers of conditions through which other forms of life benefit. This reading is consistent with contemporary Muslim environmental ethics that increasingly considers multispecies relations and the ethical significance of nonhuman life.⁵⁶

At the same time, the hadith does not require the exclusion of human benefit. The text explicitly mentions *insān* alongside *ṭayr* and *bahīmah*. Human benefit therefore remains within the moral field of the narration, but it is not presented as its only beneficiary. The ethical horizon is expanded from benefit received by humans alone toward benefits that may extend across species. In this respect, the planting tradition can be read as establishing an inclusive structure of benefit without requiring an equivalence between human and nonhuman beings.

This constitutes an important refinement of stewardship. Stewardship establishes human responsibility toward creation, whereas a relational interpretation asks what kinds of relationships are produced through the exercise of that responsibility. The planting hadith presents one such relationship: human action generates a resource that becomes available to different forms of life. The significance of planting therefore lies not only in resource production or management but also in the conditions it creates for others. Indonesian scholarship on planting and environmental preservation similarly connects the Prophetic traditions with ecological preservation and the responsible use of environmental resources.⁵⁷

The three dimensions developed in this study can be distinguished as follows: care concerns responsiveness to nonhuman vulnerability; accountability concerns answerability when human agency produces or intensifies vulnerability and harm; and benefit concerns the creation of conditions through which other beings can receive positive effects from human action. These are not separate virtues but interconnected moral directions through which human agency acquires significance in relationships with nonhuman beings.

The third analytical finding is that benefit is constituted when human action creates conditions through which both human and nonhuman beings can benefit. The planting hadith demonstrates that the moral value of ecological action can extend beyond the human actor, as its benefits may be received by birds, animals, and human beings. Ecological responsibility therefore encompasses not only responsiveness to vulnerability and accountability for harm but also the constructive creation of conditions through which benefits extend across species.

Taken together, care, accountability, and benefit provide a relational framework for ecological responsibility. They position ecological responsibility not merely as a human obligation to manage creation, but as a responsibility constituted through the quality and consequences of relationships between human beings and the wider community of life.

Relational Ecological Responsibility: Beyond Stewardship

⁵⁶ Gade, "Muslim Environmentalisms and Environmental Ethics: Theory and Practice for Rights and Justice."

⁵⁷ Muhammad Ali, "Pelestarian Lingkungan Menurut Perspektif Hadis Nabi Saw," *Tafsere* 3, no. 1 (2015).

The preceding analysis identifies three interconnected dimensions through which ecological responsibility can be reconsidered in the Prophetic tradition: care, accountability, and benefit. Although each dimension emerges from a different hadith and represents a distinct ethical configuration, together they reveal a broader structure of human–nonhuman responsibility. Ecological responsibility is therefore not constituted solely by what human beings are required to do for the protection of the natural world. It is also constituted by how human actions respond to nonhuman vulnerability, how they bear consequences for other beings, and how they create conditions through which other forms of life can benefit.

The first dimension, care, establishes responsiveness to nonhuman vulnerability. The hadith concerning the thirsty dog presents a nonhuman being in a condition of acute need, followed by a human response to that condition. The moral significance of the action therefore lies not merely in the provision of water, but in the responsiveness of human action to the vulnerability encountered. Contemporary animal ethics likewise identifies vulnerability as ethically significant because it draws attention to beings whose conditions make them particularly susceptible to being deprived of what they are due.⁵⁸ Care thus introduces attentiveness into ecological responsibility: the condition of another being becomes morally relevant to human action.

The second dimension, accountability, introduces the consequences of human agency. The hadith concerning the confined cat demonstrates that responsibility also emerges when human action creates or intensifies the vulnerability of another being. Confinement, deprivation, and death establish a connection between human agency and moral consequence. Accountability therefore asks not only whether humans act, but what their actions produce for other beings. Human power over nonhuman life becomes ethically significant because it can generate conditions of dependency, deprivation, and harm.

The third dimension, benefit, introduces a constructive orientation. The hadith concerning planting demonstrates that human action can create conditions through which other beings receive nourishment and benefit. The moral value of planting is therefore not exhausted by human intention or human consumption. It extends to birds, animals, and human beings that may benefit from what has been cultivated. Benefit expands ecological responsibility from responding to vulnerability and answering for harm toward creating conditions that enable other forms of life to benefit.

These three dimensions can consequently be formulated through three complementary ethical movements: care responds to vulnerability; accountability answers for consequences; and benefit enables the good of others. The distinction is important because ecological responsibility cannot be reduced to a single moral orientation. Care addresses vulnerability that has become morally salient; accountability addresses consequences generated through human agency; and benefit directs attention toward the positive conditions that human action can make possible for other beings. Taken together, they provide a more comprehensive account of how human ecological agency acquires moral significance. The three dimensions can be summarized as follows:

⁵⁸ Martin, “Animal Vulnerability and Its Ethical Implications: An Exploration.”

Table 1. Dimensions of Relational Ecological Responsibility

Dimension	Ethical Condition	Human Response	Relational Outcome
Care	Nonhuman vulnerability	Responsive action	Vulnerability is alleviated
Accountability	Human-generated vulnerability or harm	Answerability for consequences	Harm becomes morally attributable
Benefit	Possibility of positive ecological effects	Creation of enabling conditions	Benefits become available across species

The three dimensions also reveal a shift in the location of ecological responsibility. Environmental stewardship is commonly understood as a broad responsibility to care for, protect, restore, and sustainably use the natural environment. Contemporary scholarship treats stewardship both as a normative orientation and as a framework for practical environmental action.⁵⁹ Its normative strength therefore lies in transforming unrestricted exploitation into an obligation of care, restraint, and responsible action.

Nevertheless, stewardship can become conceptually limited when the relationship between humans and the more-than-human world is framed primarily in terms of management. This does not mean that stewardship is necessarily anthropocentric or that the concept should be rejected. Indeed, philosophical defences of environmental stewardship demonstrate that it can provide a morally defensible account of human conduct toward the environment.⁶⁰ The problem, therefore, is not stewardship as such, but the possibility of treating stewardship as the endpoint of ecological responsibility.

The present study consequently proposes a shift from stewardship to relational ecological responsibility. This shift does not reject the obligation to care for creation. Rather, it asks how that obligation is constituted through relationships between human beings and other forms of life. The distinction can be expressed simply: stewardship transforms domination into responsibility; relationality transforms responsibility into relationship.

The shift from responsibility *for* the environment toward responsibility *within* relationships is significant. In a predominantly managerial framework, the central question is whether humans manage natural resources responsibly. A relational framework asks instead what happens within the relationships constituted through human ecological action. Human beings may encounter the vulnerability of another being, produce conditions that intensify or alleviate that vulnerability, or create conditions from which other beings can benefit. Responsibility is therefore not external to ecological relationships. It emerges from the ways in which human beings are situated within and act upon those relationships.

Contemporary environmental ethics provides useful conceptual resources for articulating this shift. Gade's discussion of Muslim environmentalisms is particularly relevant because it brings multispecies perspectives, rights of nature, environmental justice, and relational

⁵⁹ McLeod, "Environmental Stewardship: A Systematic Scoping Review."

⁶⁰ Welchman, "A Defence of Environmental Stewardship."

approaches into contemporary Islamic environmental discourse.⁶¹ Such a framework helps demonstrate that Islamic environmental ethics need not remain confined to a human–nature binary in which humans are exclusively positioned as managers and nature as the object of management. At the same time, the present study does not translate the Prophetic traditions directly into contemporary multispecies theory. Rather, contemporary theory functions as an analytical vocabulary through which relational possibilities already visible in the hadith material can be clarified.

A relational understanding of ecological responsibility also resonates with more-than-human approaches to care, particularly those that emphasize interdependence and the transformation of human–nonhuman relationships.⁶² Yet the present argument requires a more precise account of why relationships become ethically significant. Huth's analysis of animal vulnerability is useful at this point because it treats vulnerability not simply as an intrinsic condition but as something whose ethical significance becomes visible through relations and encounters.⁶³ Vulnerability thus provides an important bridge between the concrete situations represented in the Prophetic traditions and the broader claim that ecological responsibility is relationally constituted.

This distinction is especially important for understanding the first dimension of the framework. Care does not arise merely because an animal exists; it becomes morally salient when vulnerability is encountered and human responsiveness becomes possible. Care ethics similarly emphasizes the intentional meeting of another's needs and understands responsibility in terms of responsiveness within particular relationships.⁶⁴ The hadith of the thirsty dog can therefore be read not simply as an example of kindness toward an animal, but as a configuration in which encounter with vulnerability generates a responsive moral action.

The second dimension is accountability. While care concerns responsiveness to vulnerability, accountability concerns the consequences of human agency when vulnerability is produced or intensified through human action. The confinement of the cat is significant because vulnerability is not merely encountered but generated through human control. The moral problem therefore lies not only in the harm itself but in the human agency connected to the conditions that produced it. Care and accountability are thus distinct: care responds to conditions of need, whereas accountability concerns answerability for the consequences of one's actions.

The third dimension, benefit, extends the framework beyond harm prevention. The planting hadith demonstrates that human action can acquire moral value through the positive effects it makes possible for other beings. Ecological responsibility is therefore not limited to avoiding harm but also includes cultivating, provisioning, restoring, or creating conditions through which other beings can benefit. The claim remains deliberately modest: the hadith does

⁶¹ Gade, "Muslim Environmentalisms and Environmental Ethics: Theory and Practice for Rights and Justice."

⁶² Susi Seymour and Stephen Connelly, "Relational Care in More-than-Human Worlds," *Agriculture and Human Values* 40, no. 1 (2023): 231–44, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10460-022-10350-1>.

⁶³ Huth, "How to Recognize Animals' Vulnerability: Questioning the Orthodoxies of Moral Individualism and Relationalism in Animal Ethics."

⁶⁴ Wrage, "Caring Animals and Care Ethics."

not formulate a theory of multispecies flourishing; rather, it demonstrates that benefits received by nonhuman beings can contribute to the moral value of human action.

The three dimensions can thus be understood through three directions of human ecological agency: humans can respond, cause, and enable. They respond when confronted with vulnerability; they can cause harm through actions that generate deprivation or dependency; and they can enable benefit by creating conditions through which other beings can sustain themselves. Ecological responsibility must therefore attend to all three possibilities. The moral evaluation of human action cannot be based solely on intention, because the ethical significance of action also lies in what it produces within relationships with other forms of life.

Relationality in this framework does not imply that humans and nonhumans are identical, nor does it require the elimination of distinctions between species. The argument is more specific. Human and nonhuman beings exist within relationships in which human actions can affect the vulnerability, conditions of life, and possibilities for benefit of other beings. These effects generate ethical significance. Relationality therefore concerns the moral consequences of being situated within relationships, rather than an assertion of ontological sameness.

This point is important because contemporary Islamic discussions of animal ethics do not necessarily converge on a single understanding of the moral status of animals. Recent scholarship on Sunni Qur'anic commentary, for example, demonstrates that interpretations of animals as *umam* have often emphasized external similarities between humans and animals while giving less attention to their psychological, social, or spiritual complexity.⁶⁵ This finding cautions against retrospectively imposing a contemporary multispecies ontology upon the Prophetic traditions. The present argument therefore makes a narrower claim: the hadith corpus contains relational moral configurations in which the condition and fate of nonhuman beings become relevant to the evaluation of human conduct.

Responsibility can consequently be understood as emerging from the character and consequences of relationships. Encounter with vulnerability calls for care; human causation of harm generates accountability; and the capacity to create beneficial conditions generates responsibility for enabling benefit. Responsibility is therefore not merely imposed upon ecological relationships from outside. It can emerge from the ways in which human beings are situated within and act upon those relationships.

This formulation also allows the concept of relational ecological responsibility to remain distinct from conventional environmental stewardship. Stewardship primarily establishes a normative orientation concerning how humans ought to care for and manage the natural environment. Relational ecological responsibility retains this normative concern but changes the analytical focus. It asks not only whether humans have fulfilled their duties as stewards, but how their actions affect and constitute relationships with other beings.

The concept of relational ecological responsibility can therefore be defined as a form of ecological responsibility in which human action is evaluated through its responsiveness to nonhuman vulnerability, its accountability for consequences, and its capacity to create conditions

⁶⁵ Ismail Lala, "They Are Just like Us: Animal Ethics in the Sunni Qur'anic Commentary Tradition," *Critical Research on Religion*, 2026, <https://doi.org/10.1177/20503032261416047>.

of benefit across human and nonhuman life. This definition preserves the normative concern expressed by stewardship while extending its ethical scope. The human being remains responsible, but responsibility is no longer understood merely as the exercise of authority or management over creation. It becomes a mode of participation within relationships characterized by vulnerability, dependence, consequence, and benefit.

This formulation also clarifies the specific contribution of Hadith to contemporary ecological ethics. The Prophetic traditions examined in this study do not constitute a systematic environmental theory in the modern sense, nor do they explicitly employ concepts such as *multispecies justice*, *more-than-human care*, or *ecological flourishing*. Their contribution lies instead in the concrete moral configurations through which relationships with nonhuman beings become relevant to the evaluation of human action. The hadith of the dog makes nonhuman vulnerability morally visible; the hadith of the cat makes human-generated harm morally accountable; and the hadith of planting makes nonhuman benefit part of the moral value of human action.

The significance of these traditions becomes clearer when read together. Each highlights a distinct dimension of human ecological agency: *care* responds to nonhuman vulnerability, *accountability* addresses harm produced or intensified by human action, and *benefit* concerns the creation of conditions through which other beings can live and benefit. Taken together, they extend ecological responsibility from responsibility *for* nature toward responsibility *within* relationships with other forms of life.

Moving beyond stewardship should therefore be understood as a conceptual extension rather than a rejection. Stewardship establishes the normative obligation to care for creation, while relationality directs attention to how human actions affect and constitute relationships with other beings. Relational ecological responsibility thus retains the normative concern of stewardship while extending it beyond a predominantly managerial framework toward participation in relationships characterized by vulnerability, consequence, and benefit.

Taken together, these dimensions suggest that relational ecological responsibility emerges when human ecological agency responds to nonhuman vulnerability, assumes accountability for its consequences, and creates conditions through which human and nonhuman beings can benefit. This formulation provides a conceptual bridge between Hadith Studies and contemporary ecological ethics, shifting the ethical question from how humans manage creation toward what kinds of relationships with other forms of life are constituted through human action.

Conclusion

This study has examined how selected Prophetic traditions construct the moral significance of human–nonhuman relationships and how they can extend ecological responsibility beyond stewardship. A thematic-relational reading of the traditions concerning the thirsty dog, the confined cat, and planting identifies three interconnected dimensions: care, accountability, and benefit. Care is constituted through responsiveness to nonhuman vulnerability; accountability through answerability for vulnerability and harm produced or intensified by human agency; and benefit through creating conditions in which human and nonhuman beings can receive positive effects.

Taken together, these dimensions suggest that ecological responsibility is not limited to managing, protecting, or preserving creation. It is also constituted through the relationships generated by human action. Relational ecological responsibility therefore extends stewardship without rejecting its normative value. It retains the human obligation to care for creation while shifting attention from responsibility *toward* nature to responsibility constituted *within relationships* with other beings.

The study contributes to Hadith Studies by moving beyond the identification of general ecological values toward the relational configurations through which human action becomes morally significant. It also contributes to Islamic ecological ethics by offering a conceptual framework centered on vulnerability, agency, consequence, and benefit. The argument remains limited to the selected traditions and does not claim that they constitute a systematic modern environmental theory. Further research may examine a broader range of Prophetic traditions and explore how relational ecological responsibility can be developed in dialogue with contemporary ecological practices.

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