The Question of Environmental Accountability for Resource Extraction

Across the globe, nations rely on natural resources for food, electricity, manufacturing, construction, and countless other needs. However, the process of resource extraction often causes harm to the surrounding environment. This begs the question of who the accountability for environmental damage should be placed on - the government, the extraction company, or the consumer? Various problems include environmental degradation, damage to ecosystems, atmospheric pollution, and toxic chemicals in food and water supplies. How much environmental damage should be permissible in the extraction process? What laws and regulations should be in place for industries to minimize environmental damage? Should there be penalties in place for those who cause damage to the environment?

Resource extraction causes both environmental degradation and environmental pollution. Industries are responsible for approximately 39% of the greenhouse gases emitted. Extraction of non-renewable resources such as fossil fuels and minerals poses a large problem, with crude oil and natural gas exploration contributing to 60% of the total environmental impact. Biotic resource extraction including agriculture, wood harvesting, animal grazing, and to a smaller extent, hunting and biotic harvesting for pharmaceutical reasons have also had effects on the environment. Fish capture is the major aquatic resource extraction by humans resulting in over 93 million tons of fish being produced in 2005, with the majorities of extraction taking place in the ocean (FAO 2009). While biotic resource harvestingdone at sustainable levels does not necessarily cause harm, over extraction can cause deforestation and soil erosion from over wood harvesting, soil nutrient depletion from agriculture and the collapse of fish stock from over fishing in certain areas. However the extraction itself may not be the biggest cause of environmental impact. Agriculture, while the harvesting itself may not cause a huge impact, uses 70% of global fresh water consumption (Hoekstra and Chapagain 2008; Koehler 2009) and according to the FAO database, also uses approximately 38% of the world's total land area. Toxic emissions are also a problem. Most toxic substances released from human actions are from the electrical, pulp, utilities, metal, and mining industries. This also has an adverse effect on the environment and the ecosystems in the immediate areas of these industries.

There are two major points to address on this topic. The first is: "How can we balance environmental damage from different industries"? Should all industries be accountable to the same standard? Or should more vital industries be allowed higher 'damage quotas'? And if the latter is true, how do we assess the 'necessity' of a particular industry? It is clear that different industries serve different roles in society, but it is still difficult to create an unbiased hierarchy while pleasing the majority of the parties involved. The second point is: "Should different nations have different allowances based

on their development status"? It could be argued that developed nations have already exploited their rights and privileges, and it is unfair punishment for developing nations if they are not given the same opportunity. At the same time, this allows some 'developing' countries like India and China, who lead the world in extraction and export of many resources, to continue to damage the environment without consequence. The better way perhaps is to monitor environmental damage from nation to nation and vary consequences accordingly, however this is difficult due to a lack of networks and standards in place at present. Either way, researching and developing more environmentally friendly methods of resource extraction and more efficient reclamation techniques are vital components of any solution.

Major countries and regions involved include China, Russia, the Middle East, and USA with regards to fossil fuels, African nations with regards to mining, Canada and Brazil with logging. Many other nations with various renewable and non-renewable resource concerns. Delegates should be aware of their countries' policies in regards to the environment, the major transnational corporations operating within their borders, and any issues regarding those companies' practices with the environment.

Useful sources of information would include the UNEP page of the United Nations website, your nation's government website, CIA world fact book, and the website of many larger international resource extraction companies.

Several Links include:

http://www.unep.fr/shared/publications/pdf/DTIx1262xPA-PriorityProductsAndMaterials_Report.pdf

UNEP Website: http://www.unep.org/

BP: http://www.bp.com/subsection.do?categoryId=3312&contentId=7066862

Wood Harvesting in Brazil:
www.wto.org/english/forums_e/ngo.../ccc_cert_forest_brazil_e.doc

CIA World Factbook: https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/

I do not suggest the use of Wikipedia as not all of their sources are valid.