

The Environment



With reference to sociological theories and research, explain why global environmental problems cannot be properly understood or tackled without sociological knowledge.

This question asks you directly to justify the inclusion of the discipline of sociology within academic and policy debates on global environmental problems.



In this sense, the question appears to helpfully narrow the range of possible answers you might give. However, the danger is that you may be tempted to try and cover too many theories and/or too much evidence, which dilutes the overall effectiveness of your answer. A successful answer will focus on a limited number of theories and include empirical research that clearly demonstrates how sociology produces relevant and useful evidence for academics, environment policy-makers and the general public.

The first thing to establish is that there really are some environmental problems and issues that are genuinely global in scale. This means selecting two, at most three, problems and showing why they are seen as global environmental problems. What is it that makes them so? Why can they no longer be thought of as national or regional problems? What has changed? It is a safe bet that most answers will discuss global warming as *the* global issue *par excellence* and this is sensible given the prominence it enjoys in the chapter (pp. 177-85). However, you could also discuss resource depletion, acid rain, genetic modification or ozone depletion (pp. 163-76) to illustrate the global character of some environmental issues.

In the second part of the answer, you will need to explore sociological theories and studies that have important things to say about the social causes and consequences of global environmental problems. You could choose the sociology of consumer culture, Beck's risk society thesis, the treadmill of production perspective, ecological modernization theory or the sociology of development (within sustainable development) (all discussed in pp. 186-198). Clearly it is not possible to discuss all of these, but the point is to ensure that the theories you select are connected to the global problems you discussed in part one. It will be important to explain how the selected theories help us to understand why global problems have developed and what their social consequences may be.

It is possible to leave matters there as the key aspects of the question have been addressed. However, **ambitious answers** will take seriously the invitation to consider what sociology has to offer those seeking to effectively tackle global environmental problems. This element is aimed at those interested in policy solutions. One obvious place to start is with ideas of sustainable development, which have led to innumerable concrete initiatives at all levels and a discussion of some of these and their origins in sociological research studies and theories would work well. Many of these are scattered across the whole chapter. Another possibility is to consider the policy options advocated by ecological modernizers. The choice here is similarly broad and answers might focus on the general policy platform presented by ecological modernization theory, or delve deeper into some specific suggestions and initiatives in particular areas of policy, such as transport or food production.



The important thing to remember though is that the emphasis throughout should be on discussing and demonstrating ways in which sociology, as an academic discipline, is absolutely necessary for effective future studies of global environmental problems and their resolution.