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Ecological Ethics in the *Jātaka* Tales: A Buddhist Narrative Approach to Environmental Thought

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Abstract

This article examines ecological ethics in selected Jātaka tales through a Buddhist narrative approach to environmental thought. It addresses a gap in Buddhist environmental studies: doctrinal interpretations of interdependence, compassion, and non-harming are often prioritized over narrative forms that shape ethical imagination and ecological consciousness. This study employs qualitative and thematic analysis of five Jātaka tales: Ruru, Nigrodha-Miga, Mahā-Mora, Vattaka, and Kumbha - using E. B. Cowell's translation as the primary source. The analysis draws on Buddhist environmental philosophy and the works of contemporary scholars such as Joanna Macy, Mary Evelyn Tucker, Stephanie Kaza, and David R. Loy. The findings show that the selected narratives consistently articulate ecological ethics through recurring principles: interspecies compassion, ethical leadership, foresight and restraint, cooperative interdependence, and critique of greed. Across the texts, environmental disruption is linked to moral and cognitive failure, while ecological stability emerges through virtuous relational conduct. The study argues that the Jātaka tales construct a relational ecological worldview where sustainability is inseparable from ethical transformation. They function as narrative frameworks for ecological consciousness, demonstrating that environmental thought in the Buddhist tradition is fundamentally ethical, relational, and pedagogical.

Keywords: *Jātaka Tales; Buddhist Environmental Ethics; Interdependence; Compassion; Ecological Consciousness; Narrative Ethics.*

Introduction

The *Jātaka* collection comprises narratives of the Buddha's previous births in human and non-human forms. It has long been regarded as a central vehicle for transmitting ethical, social, and cosmological values within Buddhist traditions across South and Southeast Asia. As rendered in E. B. Cowell's translation, *The Jātaka or Stories of the Buddha's Former Births*, these narratives consistently situate moral action within complex ecological settings such as forests, rivers, and multispecies habitats, thereby embedding ethical reflection within a more-than-human world. Far from treating nature as a passive backdrop, early Buddhist narrative literature constructs it as an

active moral field in which human and non-human lives are interdependently constituted. Lambert Schmithausen has interpreted early Buddhist textual traditions as exhibiting nuanced sensitivity to the ethical dimensions of human engagement with the natural world, even if not articulated in explicitly modern ecological terminology. (1-67)

In recent decades, Buddhist environmental philosophy has emerged as a significant interdisciplinary field, with scholars such as Joanna Macy, Mary Evelyn Tucker, Stephanie Kaza, and David R. Loy foregrounding the ecological implications of core Buddhist doctrines. Concepts such as dependent origination (*paṭicca samuppāda*), non-harming (*ahiṃsā*), and compassion (*karuṇā*) have been interpreted as offering a relational ontology capable of challenging anthropocentric and exploitative paradigms. Despite these significant contributions, existing scholarship remains largely oriented toward doctrinal exposition and philosophical abstraction, often overlooking the narrative modes through which ecological ethics are culturally embodied, transmitted, and experientially formed.

This imbalance indicates a critical gap in the field. While Buddhist ethical principles are widely discussed in environmental discourse, comparatively little attention has been given to narrative literature as a site where ecological consciousness is constructed through story, imagery, and moral encounter. The *Jātaka* tales, in particular, remain underexamined as structured ethical ecologies, despite their sustained engagement with human-animal relations, ecological settings, and moral decision-making under environmental constraints. Existing studies tend to reference these narratives illustratively rather than subjecting them to sustained thematic and comparative analysis.

Addressing this gap, this study examines five selected *Jātaka* narratives: *Ruru Jātaka* (No. 482), *Nigrodha-Miga Jātaka* (No. 12), *Mahā-Mora Jātaka* (No. 491), *Vattaka Jātaka* (No. 35), and *Kumbha Jātaka* (No. 512), chosen for their distinct and complementary ecological ethical configurations. Rather than treating these texts as isolated moral parables, the study reads them as a coherent narrative system through which Buddhist ecological ethics are articulated across five interrelated domains: compassion, ethical leadership, foresight and restraint, cooperative interdependence, and critique of greed.

The guiding research questions are therefore analytical rather than merely descriptive: How do these narratives construct relationships between human and non-human beings within specific ecological environments? What ethical principles emerge through these constructions? And how do these narratives' configurations contribute to contemporary rethinking of environmental ethics beyond doctrinal interpretation?

Methodologically, the study employs qualitative textual and thematic analysis grounded in close reading of Cowell's translation, supplemented by interpretive engagement with Buddhist environmental philosophy. The narratives are approached not as static moral parables but as dynamic ethical environments in which meaning emerges through the interaction of character, action, and ecological setting. This interdisciplinary approach situates the study at the intersection of Buddhist studies, environmental humanities, and narrative ethics.

This article argues that the *Jātaka* narratives collectively articulate a relational ecological ethic in which environmental stability is inseparable from moral and cognitive transformation. Across the selected texts, ecological disruption consistently emerges from ethical failures such as greed, ignorance, and disunity, while ecological balance is restored through compassion, restraint, foresight, cooperation, and ethical leadership. Importantly, this study does not claim that these narratives offer direct solutions to contemporary environmental crises. Rather, it argues that they cultivate an ethical imagination rooted in interdependence and relational awareness, offering enduring conceptual resources for rethinking sustainability in a time of ecological instability.

By foregrounding the narrative dimension of Buddhist environmental thought, this article expands the methodological scope of Buddhist environmental humanities. It demonstrates that ecological ethics in the *Jātaka* tradition is not merely doctrinal or philosophical, but is fundamentally shaped through narrative form, relational experience, and ethical pedagogy.

Compassion and Ecological Responsibility in the *Ruru Jātaka*

The *Ruru Jātaka* (No. 482) offers a sustained exploration of compassion (*karuṇā*) as an ethical principle that extends beyond the human domain. It reconfigures ecological responsibility in relational terms. In this narrative, the Bodhisattva appears as a golden deer whose existence is deeply embedded within a riverine and forest ecosystem. As depicted in *The Jātaka or Stories of the Buddha's Former Births*, the deer's ethical disposition is established at the outset through an immediate, unconditioned response to suffering. Upon hearing the cries of a drowning man, he declares his intention to save him without hesitation (Cowell 162). This spontaneous intervention, undertaken before any knowledge of the man's character, frames compassion not as a reciprocal obligation but as an intrinsic ethical orientation grounded in shared vulnerability.

The Bodhisattva's compassion extends beyond the act of rescue into sustained care: he shelters the man, provides nourishment, and guides him safely out of the forest. This generosity is accompanied by a cautionary appeal, in which the deer requests that his location not be disclosed out of greed, thereby acknowledging the moral instability of human desire (Cowell 162). Compassion in this context is not sentimental or naive; rather, it is exercised with an acute awareness of the ethical risks embedded in interspecies relations.

The man's eventual betrayal, motivated by greed, brings the narrative's ethical tension into focus. When confronted by the king, the Bodhisattva responds not with retaliation but with moral articulation, emphasizing the asymmetry between care and harm and the ethical failure embedded in ingratitude (Cowell 164). The accompanying Pāli verse reinforces this moral inversion between the preservation of life and the violation of dhamma:

> *Na maṃ tvaṃ jīvitā mocesi, ahaṃ pana taṃ maraṇā mocayiṃ; dhammaṃ careyyāsi, mā pāpaṃ akāsi.*"
> ("You did not save me from death; rather, I saved you from death. You should live by the Dhamma; do not commit evil.") (Cowell 410)

This verse crystallizes the ethical reversal at the heart of the narrative: the beneficiary of compassion becomes the agent of betrayal, transforming the episode into a universal moral injunction grounded in dhamma rather than reciprocity.

This episode can be productively read through Val Plumwood's critique of anthropocentrism. Plumwood identifies "backgrounding" as a structure of human-centered thought in which the contributions of non-human others are rendered invisible (Plumwood 115). The man's betrayal exemplifies this logic: despite his dependence on the deer for survival, he fails to recognize this relational debt, reducing the Bodhisattva to an exploitable object. This epistemological failure aligns with Plumwood's account of moral and cognitive denial as central to ecological domination (Plumwood 118).

The narrative's transformative moment occurs through the king's ethical awakening. Initially driven by desire, the king's encounter with the speaking Bodhisattva disrupts the subject-object hierarchy underlying the hunt. Recognizing the deer as a moral agent, the king renounces violence and extends protection not only to the Bodhisattva but to the wider forest community (Cowell 165–66). This shift marks a movement from extractive to ethical governance, where ecological responsibility emerges through transformed perception.

The ecological vision of the tale is reinforced by the Bodhisattva's role as leader of a herd, guiding them toward sustainable access to water and pasture. The forest and river function not as passive settings but as active participants in a relational moral economy shaped by interdependence.

This relational ontology resonates with Thích Nhat Hạnh's concept of "interbeing," which emphasizes that existence arises only through mutual dependence. As he writes, "to be is to inter-be" (Hạnh 5). From this perspective, the betrayal in the *Jātaka* represents not only ethical failure but a failure to perceive relational reality itself. Conversely, the Bodhisattva's compassion embodies an awareness of interconnected existence that grounds ethical action (Hạnh 22). 999

The *Ruru Jātaka* thus functions not merely as a moral narrative but as an articulation of ecological ethics grounded in relational awareness. It demonstrates that environmental responsibility arises from compassion and recognition of interdependence, while ecological failure stems from denial of interdependence.

Ethical Leadership and Forest Protection in the *Nigrodha-Miga Jātaka*

The *Nigrodha-Miga Jātaka* dramatizes ethical leadership as a foundational to ecological protection. It situates environmental responsibility squarely within governance and moral authority. The narrative contrasts two leadership modes through the Bodhisattva-deer Nigrodha and Sakha (Branch Deer), whose herds live under the constant threat of royal hunting. Nigrodha's leadership prioritizes the protection of living beings, non-harming (*ahimsā*), and wisdom as the basis of collective welfare. This moral vision is expressed in the narrative through a guiding ethical principle attributed to his leadership: "Protection of beings is the highest good; non-harming is great wealth; wisdom that arises leads all toward welfare" (Cowell 74).

This principle is tested not in abstract reflection but within a political economy structured by violence. To mitigate indiscriminate slaughter, Nigrodha negotiates an arrangement whereby each herd must send one deer per day to the hunters (Cowell 74). While this agreement appears to regulate suffering, it simultaneously institutionalizes violence by transforming arbitrary killing into a normalized system of managed sacrifice. The narrative thus exposes the ethical limits of pragmatic compromise, where collective survival is secured through the routinization of harm.

The ethical crisis intensifies when the sacrificial lot falls upon a pregnant doe from Sakha's herd. Her plea for exemption until after childbirth is rejected in the name of procedural equality (Cowell 40). Sakha's leadership reflects a rigid, rule-bound governance that privileges formal consistency over moral discernment and contextual responsibility. By contrast, Nigrodha responds with compassion that transcends systemic logic, offering himself in place of the vulnerable doe and proceeding to the site of execution, where he lays his head upon the block (Cowell 40). This act constitutes not passive submission but a deliberate ethical rupture that exposes the violence embedded within the governing structure itself.

The king's response marks a decisive transformation. Moved by the Bodhisattva's action, he abandons the hunt and also progressively extends protection outward, from the immediate individuals involved to all deer within the royal domain, and ultimately to all forms of animal life under his authority (Cowell 40). This expansion of moral concern signals a shift from dominative sovereignty to ethical stewardship, reconstituting the forest as a protected ecological community governed by non-harming (*ahiṃsā*).

This transformation resonates with Mary Evelyn Tucker's articulation of moral ecology, which emphasizes that environmental well-being is inseparable from ethical vision and responsible governance. (Tucker para 4) From this perspective, ecological systems are sustained not only through regulation and policy but through the moral imagination of those who hold authority over them. The narrative also aligns with Joanna Macy's concept of the "Great Turning," which describes a civilizational shift from systems of domination and exploitation toward life-sustaining and relational modes of existence. (Macy and Johnstone) While the *Jātaka* does not articulate these ideas in theoretical language, it enacts a comparable movement through narrative form.

Importantly, the *Nigrodha-Miga Jātaka* also offers an internal critique of partial or compromised solutions. The initial arrangement between the deer herds, though pragmatic, is ethically unstable because it normalizes systematic violence as a condition of survival. Nigrodha's intervention disrupts this structure not through force but through the assertion of a higher ethical principle that refuses to instrumentalize vulnerable life. Leadership, in this sense, is not defined by the efficient management of harm but by the capacity to transform the moral and structural conditions that produce it.

The *Nigrodha-Miga Jātaka* thus articulates a model of ecological ethics grounded in compassionate leadership, moral courage, and systemic transformation. It presents the forest not as a passive resource but as a living moral community whose preservation depends on governing

with ethical integrity. By dramatizing the shift from regulated violence to universal protection, the narrative anticipates central concerns of contemporary environmental thought: the need to align political authority with principles of interdependence, restraint, and non-harming.

Self-Sacrifice, Foresight, and Ecological Balance in the *Maha-Mora Jātaka*

The *Mahā-Mora Jātaka* (No. 491) develops an ecological ethic centered on foresight, restraint, and the regulation of desire, presenting the Bodhisattva as a golden peacock whose survival depends upon acute awareness of his environmental conditions. Unlike the *Ruru* and *Nigrodha* narratives, where ethical emphasis falls primarily on compassion and leadership, this tale foregrounds epistemological vigilance - the capacity to perceive danger within seemingly stable environments. As noted in *The Jātaka or Stories of the Buddha's Former Births*, the Bodhisattva recites a protective verse at sunrise, acknowledging both illumination and vulnerability within the forest ecosystem (Cowell 27). This daily practice reflects disciplined attentiveness, where awareness itself becomes a condition of survival.

This cultivated vigilance may be understood as ecological mindfulness: a sustained awareness of embeddedness within a relational field structured by both interdependence and risk. The peacock's beauty, while aesthetically valued, simultaneously renders him vulnerable to predation, illustrating how visibility within an ecosystem generates exposure to harm. The narrative thus challenges any idealized conception of nature, instead presenting it as a field shaped by desire, competition, and asymmetrical power relations.

The ethical tension intensifies when a human queen, upon hearing of the peacock's radiant form, develops an intense desire to possess him. This introduces *taṇhā* (craving) as the initiating force of ecological disruption. Her desire is translated into royal command, prompting the king to dispatch hunters into the forest (Cowell 28). The narrative traces a clear movement from individual craving to institutionalized violence, demonstrating how unregulated desire can mobilize political authority toward extractive action. In this respect, the tale anticipates Buddhist environmental critiques of consumption, such as those articulated by Stephanie Kaza, who links craving and dissatisfaction to ecological degradation (Kaza 120).

The hunters' strategy further complicates the ethical landscape by introducing technique and calculation into the process of capture. They carefully observe the peacock's habits and construct a concealed snare, "hidden under leaves, that the radiant bird might not discern it" (Cowell 28). This episode signals a shift from direct violence to technologically mediated control, where knowledge becomes instrumental in enabling exploitation. While not equivalent to modern industrial systems, the narrative nonetheless recognizes how skill and intelligence, when subordinated to desire, intensify ecological harm.

The Bodhisattva's escape is grounded in disciplined perception rather than chance. He carefully examines the environment, detects irregularities, and refuses the bait. This moment foregrounds wisdom (*paā*) as an active, discerning capacity that resists immediate gratification.

In this sense, the narrative aligns with David R. Loy's argument that ecological crisis arises not only from external systems but from cognitive patterns shaped by craving and misperception (Loy 151-159.

Following his escape, the Bodhisattva addresses the hunters, articulating a principle of universal vulnerability by emphasizing that all beings value life and seek to avoid suffering (Cowell 29). This assertion challenges anthropocentric assumptions that legitimize violence against non-human life. The hunters, moved by this encounter, report the incident to the king, whose response marks a shift in governance. Renouncing the hunt, he extends protection to the peacock and, by implication, to the broader ecological environment. As in the *Nigrodha-Miga Jātaka*, ethical transformation at the level of perception leads to transformation in political action.

The ecological implications of the narrative are twofold. First, it demonstrates that environmental disruption originates in mental conditions, particularly craving and inattentiveness - that precede material exploitation. Second, it suggests that ecological balance depends upon the cultivation of foresight and restraint at both individual and institutional levels. While the tale does not articulate a formal conservation model, its emphasis on protecting a vulnerable yet ecologically significant being anticipates principles underlying modern environmental thought, particularly species protection as a pathway to habitat preservation.

Ultimately, the *Maha-Mora Jātaka* articulates an ecological ethic grounded in the transformation of perception. By dramatizing the consequences of desire and the ethical force of restraint, it presents environmental responsibility as inseparable from cognitive discipline. In doing so, the narrative extends the moral architecture of the *Jātaka* collection, suggesting that sustainable coexistence requires not only compassion and ethical leadership but also sustained attentiveness to the psychological and perceptual conditions that shape human engagement with the natural world.

Cooperation, Interdependence, and Collective Resilience in the *Vattaka Jātaka*

The *Vattaka Jātaka* (No. 35) presents a concise yet conceptually rich account of cooperation as a condition of survival, foregrounding the relationship between interdependence and collective resilience. In this narrative, the Bodhisattva appears as the leader of a flock of quails, small and vulnerable beings subjected to the recurring threat of capture by human hunters. As recorded in *The Jātaka or Stories of the Buddha's Former Births*, the Bodhisattva offers a simple yet strategically profound instruction: when trapped beneath a net, the quails must act "with one mind" (*eka-cittena*) and rise together in unison to lift it (Cowell 84).

This directive translates an ethical principle into coordinated collective action. While it would be reductive to equate this directly with the doctrinal formulation of dependent origination (*paṭicca-samuppada*), the narrative nevertheless expresses a relational logic: the survival of each individual is inseparable from the cooperation of the whole. The quails' initial success demonstrates that collective agency can reconfigure asymmetrical power relations: despite their individual vulnerability, their synchronized effort renders the hunter's technology temporarily

ineffective (Cowell 85). Interdependence here functions not as abstract metaphysics but as a practical condition of ecological and social resilience.

The narrative's critical insight emerges through its structural reversal. The stability of this cooperative system proves fragile, undermined not by external escalation but by internal fragmentation. Minor disputes, trivial accusations, and emerging irritations gradually erode the unity required for collective action (Cowell 86). Once the principle of acting "with one mind" collapses, the flock becomes fully vulnerable again, and the hunter captures them without resistance. Significantly, the external condition, the net, remains unchanged; the decisive factor is the breakdown of internal cohesion.

This reversal highlights a key ecological principle: resilience is not a fixed property but an emergent quality produced through sustained relational coordination. The *Vattaka Jātaka* thus anticipates contemporary ecological and systems thinking, which emphasizes that the stability of networks depends more on relational integrity than on the strength of individual components. Vulnerability, in this sense, is often internally generated, arising from fragmentation rather than external force alone.

The narrative can be productively read alongside Joanna Macy's notion of "active hope," which emphasizes collective engagement and relational responsibility in responding to systemic crises. (Macy and Johnstone 45) While the *Jātaka* does not articulate this framework in theoretical terms, the Bodhisattva's leadership embodies a comparable insight: survival depends not on individual escape or isolated agency but on the cultivation and maintenance of shared purpose and coordinated action.

At the same time, the story introduces a critical tension that complicates idealized notions of unity. The collapse of the quails' strategy demonstrates that cooperation is inherently fragile and must be continuously sustained through ethical attentiveness, discipline, and mutual regard. The narrative thus resists any simplistic celebration of harmony, instead presenting it as an ongoing ethical achievement that remains vulnerable to neglect, egoistic disruption, and minor internal conflict.

The *Vattaka Jātaka,* therefore, offers a nuanced account of ecological resilience grounded in collective ethics. It suggests that in the face of persistent external threats, the determining factor is not merely the magnitude of danger but the quality of internal relations within a community. By linking survival to coordinated action and collapse to internal division, the narrative provides a powerful framework for understanding both the potential and fragility of cooperative responses to ecological crisis.

Moral Restraint, Greed, and Sustainable Resource Use in the *Kumbha Jātaka*

The *Kumbha Jātaka* (No. 512) presents a compelling narrative of resource ethics, foregrounding the relationship between moral restraint and ecological sustainability. In this tale, the Bodhisattva appears as an ascetic who provides a drought-stricken community with a miraculous water-pot (*kumbha*). This vessel yields sustenance in accordance with the ethical

disposition of its users. As recorded in *The Jātaka or Stories of the Buddha's Former Births*, the pot initially functions within a moral framework of disciplined use: the villagers take only what is necessary and approach the resource with reverence (Cowell 112). Its regenerative capacity is thus not merely a material property but is conditioned by patterns of mindful engagement and ethical conduct.

This early phase of balance illustrates a model of sustainability grounded in restraint (*appamāda*) and collective responsibility. The resource remains abundant because it is embedded within a moral economy that regulates consumption through shared norms, reciprocal trust, and awareness of limits. However, this equilibrium proves fragile. The turning point arises not from external scarcity but from an internal transformation in attitude, as one villager begins to appropriate more than his share, motivated by greed (*lobha*) and anticipatory fear of future lack. This shift from sufficiency to accumulation marks a decisive ethical rupture in the communal order.

The narrative emphasizes the immediacy and inevitability of consequence: the moment excess is taken; the pot's generative capacity ceases (Cowell 113). This abrupt collapse functions as a symbolic articulation of ecological limits, suggesting that regenerative systems are not independent of human conduct but responsive to it. The "virtue" of the resource, its capacity to sustain life, is shown to depend fundamentally on restraint rather than inherent abundance. Once the ethical condition governing use is violated, the system itself becomes unsustainable.

The Bodhisattva's subsequent admonition identifies greed as the central destabilizing force, urging the community toward renewed mindfulness, moderation, and ethical awareness (Cowell 114). In this framing, greed (*lobha*) is not merely an individual moral failing but a systemic threat, capable of dismantling the relational conditions that sustain collective survival. The narrative thus repositions ecological crisis as fundamentally ethical in origin, arising from distortions in perception, desire, and responsibility rather than from material scarcity alone.

The consequences extend beyond the immediate loss of the miraculous pot. The narrative describes a broader ecological breakdown, wells drying, fields failing, and famine spreading across the community (Cowell 115). This indicates that the disruption of a central resource triggers cascading effects across the wider environmental system. This progression reflects a deeply relational understanding of ecology, where imbalance in one domain reverberates throughout the whole. While it would be methodologically reductive to equate this directly with doctrinal formulations of dependent origination (*paṭicca-samuppada*), the narrative nevertheless expresses a comparable logic of interconnected causality at the level of ecological process.

The tale invites productive comparison with modern environmental thought, particularly Garrett Hardin's formulation of the "tragedy of the commons," which describes how individually rational actions can lead to collective depletion. (Hardin 1244) However, the *Kumbha Jātaka* anticipates this problem within a distinctly moral-psychological framework, emphasizing not only structural conditions but also the erosion of restraint and communal ethical norms. Similarly,

Stephanie Kaza's emphasis on mindful sufficiency provides a useful interpretive lens for understanding the narrative's insistence on regulated consumption grounded in awareness and ethical discipline. (Kaza 120) The critique also resonates with David R. Loy's analysis of systemic greed, wherein patterns of overconsumption become normalized and reinforced through both psychological and institutional mechanisms (Loy 151, 158).

At the same time, the narrative resists purely structural or deterministic explanations by repeatedly returning to the question of ethical agency. The collapse of the system is neither inevitable nor externally imposed; it emerges from a failure to sustain the moral discipline required for collective well-being. Sustainability, therefore, is not presented as a technical problem of resource management alone but as a practice of ethical self-regulation. It depends upon the cultivation of restraint, trust, and adherence to shared limits within a moral community.

The *Kumbha Jātaka* thus articulates a comprehensive model of ecological responsibility grounded in restraint, interdependence, and ethical awareness. By linking resource abundance directly to moral conduct, the narrative challenges assumptions of unlimited extraction and underscores the fragility of ecological systems dependent upon human behavior. It concludes the broader trajectory of the *Jātaka* collection examined in this study by demonstrating that environmental crises are not only failures of governance or perception but also failures of ethical self-regulation, where uncontrolled desire directly precipitates ecological collapse.

Synthesis and Comparative Analysis

A comparative reading of the five selected *Jātaka* narratives - *Ruru, Nigrodha-Miga, Maha-Mora, Vattaka,* and *Kumbha* - reveals not merely a collection of moral exempla but a coherent ethical ecology in which environmental thought is articulated through interrelated virtues. Read together, these narratives construct a layered Buddhist environmental framework in which ecological stability is shown to depend upon the cultivation of specific moral, cognitive, and relational dispositions.

At a foundational level, the *Ruru* and *Nigrodha-Miga Jātakas* establish compassion (*karuṇā*) as the ethical ground of ecological relation. In these narratives, compassion is not confined to affective empathy but operates as a transformative principle capable of restructuring both interspecies relations and political authority. The *Ruru Jātaka* extends compassion across species boundaries through radical acts of care that disrupt conventional hierarchies between human and non-human beings, while the *Nigrodha-Miga Jātaka* demonstrates its institutional expression through the transformation of a hunting landscape into a protected ecological domain. Together, these narratives suggest that ecological order begins with the expansion of moral concern beyond anthropocentric limits into a broader relational field of life.

The *Mahā-Mora* and *Vattaka Jātakas* shift the analytical emphasis from compassion to cognition and collective practice. The *Mahā-Mora Jātaka* foregrounds foresight (*paññā*) and restraint as forms of ecological intelligence, suggesting that survival depends upon disciplined

perception, attentiveness, and the regulation of desire. The *Vattaka Jātaka* extends this insight into the domain of collective action, presenting interdependence as a practical condition of survival. However, it also exposes the fragility of such systems, demonstrating that ecological resilience is sustained not only through cooperation but through the continuous maintenance of trust, coordination, and shared intention within a community.

The *Kumbha Jātaka* introduces a structural counterpoint by identifying greed (*lobha*) as the primary force of ecological breakdown. Unlike the other narratives, which emphasize constructive ethical capacities, this tale traces the destructive trajectory of moral failure, showing how the erosion of restraint leads to the collapse of both artificial and natural systems. In this sense, it reframes sustainability not as a technical condition or resource problem but as an ethical achievement dependent upon collective discipline and self-regulation.

Taken together, these narratives articulate a fivefold ecological ethic structured around compassion, ethical leadership, foresight, cooperation, and restraint. Importantly, these virtues are not independent moral categories but interdependent dimensions of a single relational ontology. Within this framework, ecological crisis does not arise solely from external environmental constraints but from failures in perception, ethical orientation, and relational awareness. Conversely, ecological stability emerges when moral cultivation aligns human action with the interdependent structure of existence.

What emerges from this comparative analysis is a distinctly narrative mode of ecological reasoning. The *Jātaka* collection does not construct abstract environmental theory in propositional form; rather, it produces ethical knowledge through embodied narratives in which moral transformation and ecological balance are inseparably intertwined. This indicates that Buddhist environmental thought operates not only at the level of doctrine but also through narrative imagination, where ecological ethics is experienced, enacted, and internalized through story.

Conclusion

The analysis of the selected *Jātaka* narratives - *Ruru, Nigrodha-Miga, Maha-Mora, Vattaka,* and *Kumbha*, demonstrates that Buddhist literary traditions encode a coherent ecological ethic in which environmental stability is inseparable from moral and cognitive transformation. Across these narratives, ecological disruption consistently arises from ethical and epistemic failures such as greed, ignorance, desire, and disunity, while ecological balance is restored through compassion (*karuṇā*), restraint (*appamāda*), foresight (*paññā*), cooperation, and ethical leadership.

Rather than functioning as isolated moral parables, these narratives collectively articulate a relational ecological framework in which human and non-human life are co-constituted through ethically significant interactions situated within specific ecological contexts. In addressing the research questions, the study demonstrates three findings. First, the selected texts consistently construct human–non-human relations as fundamentally interdependent. Second, they embed ecological meaning within ethical decision-making processes. Third, they develop narrative forms of ecological understanding that move beyond purely doctrinal abstraction.

The fivefold ethical framework identified across these tales—compassion, ethical leadership, foresight, cooperation, and restraint—does not present these virtues as independent moral categories. Rather, they function as interdependent dimensions of a single relational ontology. The *Ruru* and *Nigrodha-Miga Jātakas* establish compassion as the ethical ground of ecological relation, extending moral concern across species boundaries and transforming political authority toward stewardship. The *Mahā-Mora* and *Vattaka Jātakas* shift emphasis to cognition and collective practice, demonstrating that foresight, restraint, and cooperation are essential forms of ecological intelligence. The *Kumbha Jātaka* offers a structural counterpoint by identifying greed as the primary force of ecological breakdown, reframing sustainability as an ethical achievement rather than a technical problem.

The contribution of this article lies in demonstrating that Buddhist environmental ethics is not only a matter of philosophical exposition but also powerfully expressed through narrative form. By employing a narrative-ethical reading of the *Jātaka* collection, the study expands the methodological scope of Buddhist environmental humanities and foregrounds literature as a site where ecological consciousness is shaped, rehearsed, and transmitted. The *Jātaka* tales function as what the abstract termed "pedagogical" frameworks: they do not simply describe ethical principles but enact them through story, inviting readers into a relational ecological worldview.

This study has several limitations that suggest directions for future research. First, the analysis is confined to five tales from Cowell's translation; a larger corpus, including tales from vernacular *Jātaka* traditions in Thai, Burmese, or Sinhala, might reveal additional ethical configurations. Second, the study does not systematically examine gender or caste dynamics within the narratives, dimensions that could complicate the universalist claims of compassion and interdependence. Third, the reception of these narratives among contemporary Buddhist communities remains unexamined; empirical research on how Jātaka tales shape environmental attitudes today would complement the textual analysis offered here.

Ultimately, the Jātaka narratives suggest that ecological sustainability is not merely a technical or managerial challenge but a transformation of perception, desire, and relational awareness. In this sense, they offer a sustained ethical vision in which responsibility toward the natural world emerges from the cultivation of interdependence, restraint, and compassionate understanding. To read the *Jātakas* ecologically, therefore, is not to extract timeless principles but to enter a narrative world where ethics and environment are forever intertwined. In an era of deepening ecological crisis, these ancient stories remind us that the roots of environmental destruction lie not only in faulty systems but also in faulty hearts, and the transformation begins with the stories we tell.

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