**Environment Vocabulary**

Topic vocabulary for the IELTS exam

*Important*

- Do not try and learn this list of environment vocabulary.
- Identify the vocabulary you find useful for answering practise questions about the environment.
- Record these in your vocabulary notebook and practise using them regularly.

**Set 1: Environment - Key definitions**

**environment** – the natural world, as a whole or in a particular geographical area, especially as affected by human activity.
- Picking up litter is a simple way to help protect the **environment**.

**environmental** – relating to the natural world and concerning the impact of human activity on its condition.
- A survey revealed a number of **environmental** issues concerning the development of the land for housing, most notably, that it was the habitat of a rare breed of frog.

**environmentalist** – a person who chooses a lifestyle that is designed to minimise their impact on the natural environment and who campaigns for environmental issues.
- Plans to build a new road alongside the lake drew fierce oppositions from **environmentalists**.

**environmentally-friendly** – not harmful to the environment.
- There are many **environmentally-friendly** cleaning products on the market that don’t contain chemicals that damage the environment.

**natural environment** – the natural world as opposed to, for example, a working environment.
- When the injured seal had been nursed back to health in the rescue centre, it was returned to its **natural environment**.

**environmental hazard** – a substance or an event which has the potential to threaten the surrounding natural environment.
- The illegal storage of toxic waste presents a significant **environmental hazard**.

**environmental disaster** – a catastrophic event affecting the environment due to human activity.
- When the oil tanker ran aground, it caused an **environmental disaster** from which it took the local wildlife many years to recover.

**conservation** – the protection of plants, animals and natural resources, usually by planned human action.
- It was Dimitri’s dream to get a job in **conservation**.

**conservationist** – a person who takes action to protect the environment from damage caused by humans.
- **Conservationists** are working hard to protect the breeding grounds of sea turtles.
**conservation programme** – an organised plan to protect a specific natural area or aspect of the natural environment.
- Next year I’m planning to volunteer on a conservation programme in Spain which researches dolphins.

**Collocations:**
- **wildlife conservation** – the protection of wildlife.
- **nature conservation** – work that protects natural resources including wildlife, rivers, forests and other natural landscapes.
- **energy conservation** – the effort made to use less energy.

**Set 2: The natural world – wildlife, plant life & habitats**

**wildlife** – animals that live in the wild in natural conditions. Birds, fish and insects are often included in the definition.
- Every evening, a wide variety of wildlife came to the waterhole to drink.

**local wildlife** – the wildlife to be found in a particular area.
- The children did a school project on their local wildlife.

**native wildlife** – wildlife that naturally lives in a particular area and is not there as a result of human intervention.
When cats were introduced to the island, they hunted the native wildlife and cause a rapid decline in many species.

**creature** – any living thing that can move independently.
There are some fascinating creatures living in the deep ocean that we know hardly anything about.

**fauna** – the animals of a particular region or habitat.
- The group of scientists lived in tents while studying the fauna of the remote mountain region.

**flora** – the plants of a particular region or habitat.
- Much of the native flora of Australia isn’t found naturally anywhere else in the world.

**vegetation** – the collective name for all the plants growing in a particular place or area.
- Tropical regions are known for their dense vegetation.

**species** – a group of animals or plants that have similar characteristics and can reproduce together.
- Lions are a species of wild cat.

**Collocations:**
- **endangered species** – a species that is in serious danger of extinction.
- **threatened species** – a species that is likely to become endangered in the near future.
- **rare species** – an uncommon or scarce species.
- **protected species** – a species which it is forbidden to harm by law.
- **extinct species** – a species of which there are no more alive.
**ecosystem** – all the living things in an environment and the complex relationship between each of them and that environment.

- Coral reefs have a delicately balanced **ecosystem** which can be seriously damaged by overfishing.

  **Collocations:**
  - **delicately balanced ecosystem** – an ecosystem where the loss of a key species, or several significant species, can seriously affect it.
  - **fragile ecosystem** – an ecosystem that does not adapt easily to change and is easily destroyed by human or physical impact.

**Mother Nature** – nature or weather considered as a force that controls all living things.

- It’s far better to try and work with **Mother Nature** than again it.

**diverse** – varied and very different from one another.

- They were able to grow a **diverse** range of crops in the rich, fertile soil.

**biodiversity** – the variety of animal and plant life found in a particular place.

It is important to preserve **biodiversity** in order to protect our ecosystems.

  **Collocation:**
  - **loss of biodiversity** – when species become extinct in an area and there is no longer such a great variety of species.

**ecology** – the relationship between animals, plants, people and their environment in a particular area, or the study of this.

- Ben studied the **coastal ecology** of Lundy Island in his final year at university.

**habitat** – the natural home or environment of an animal, plant or other organism.

- The loss of their natural **habitat** through deforestation is a serious threat to the orang utan in Borneo.

**to inhabit** – to live in a certain place.

- The rainforest is **inhabited** by many different species of monkey.

**natural surroundings** – the habitat in which a species would naturally live.

- The best thing about going on safari is seeing the animals in their **natural surroundings** rather than caged up in a zoo.

**to adapt** – to change or adjust in response to new conditions.

- With the loss of large areas of countryside to housing development, foxes have had to **adapt** to living in towns.

**to evolve** – change or develop gradually.

- Scientists now believe that humans **evolved** from apes.

**evolution** – the process by which living things slowly change and develop over a long period of time.

- The theory of **evolution** states that all life on Earth today evolved over millions of years from simple organisms.

**to thrive** – to grow and develop well or quickly.

- The leopard seal is well adapted to the cold and **thrives** in the fish-rich waters of the Arctic.

**marine** – related to or found in the sea.

- Marine wildlife is badly affected by the amount of waste plastic in our oceans.
nocturnal – active at night.
- Almost all species of bats are **nocturnal**, preferring to hunt or search for food at night rather than during the day.

migrate – to move from one region or habitat to another, usually when the season changes.
- Many birds **migrate** south to warmer climates in the winter.

extinction – being completely destroyed so that it no longer exists.
- The dodo, a flightless bird once found in Mauritius, was hunted to **extinction** by 1681.

dying out – to become increasingly less common, almost to the point of extinction.
- Tigers are in serious danger of **dying out** in the wild.

**Set 3: The natural world – resource & environment**

**climate** – the general weather conditions usually found in a particular place.
- Egypt has a hot, dry **climate** with very little rainfall.

**climate change** – a change in global or regional temperature patterns.
- **Climate change** has led to the melting of the polar ice caps.

  **Collocation:**
  - **combat climate change** – to stop or reverse the effects of climate change.
    - It is only by countries working together to **combat climate change** that we will save our planet.

**natural resources** – materials or substances that exist in nature, such as coal, oil, and timber, and can be used by people.
- The success of humans as a species has been largely due to their ability to exploit the Earth's **natural resources**.

  **Collocation:**
  - **rich in natural resources** – having a lot of natural resources.
    - It is believed that Antarctica is rich in **natural resources** but many fear an ecological disaster if mining is allowed to go ahead.

**fossil fuels** – a fuel, such as coal, oil and gas, that is formed in the earth from dead plants and animals.
- **Fossil fuels** give off large amounts of carbon when burned which is damaging to the atmosphere.

**atmosphere** – the layer of gases surrounding the Earth or any other planet.
- Asteroids usually burn up when they enter the Earth’s **atmosphere**.

**ozone layer** – a layer of the colourless gas ozone that exists high above the Earth’s surface and which prevents harmful ultraviolet light from the sun from reaching the Earth.
- Without the **ozone layer**, it would be very difficult for anything to survive on Earth.

**carbon dioxide** – a gas formed when carbon is burned, or when people or animals breathe out.
- Trees absorb **carbon dioxide** and release oxygen which helps to keep our atmosphere healthy.

**carbon monoxide** – a poisonous gas formed by the burning of carbon, especially in the form of car fuel.
- You can't smell **carbon monoxide** which makes it a deadly killer, so it's important to install a carbon monoxide alarm near your gas boiler.
**greenhouse gas** – a gas in the atmosphere, such as carbon dioxide, that absorbs radiation and gives off heat.  
- **Greenhouse gases** contribute to the problem of global warming.  
**greenhouse effect** – the gradual warming of the surface of the Earth due to greenhouse gases being trapped in the atmosphere above the Earth.  
- The **greenhouse effect** is believed by many to be responsible for climate change.

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**Set 4: Environmental issues**

**erosion** – the gradual wearing-away of something by the natural forces of the wind, rain and water.  
- Crop rotation is important to ensure the soil isn’t left bare and subject to **erosion** by the wind and rain.

Collocations:
- **coastal erosion** – damage to the coastline caused mainly by waves.
- **soil erosion** – removal of the upper layer of the soil, mainly by water or wind.
- **wind erosion** – a process where soil or rocks are worn away by the wind.

**deforestation** – the cutting down or burning of all the trees in an area.  
- **Deforestation** results in the loss of habitat for millions of species, leads to soil erosion and, according to scientists, is a major cause of climate change.

**land clearance** – the process of removing vegetation to create new areas of land suitable for farming.  
- **Land clearance** leaves the soil bare and at risk of serious erosion.

**logging** – to cut down trees for their timber.  
- Uncontrolled **logging** is destroying vast areas of our precious rainforests.

**pollution** – damage to water, air or land by harmful substances and waste materials.  
- In some cities, the air **pollution** is so bad that people have to wear face masks when they go out.

**to pollute** – to contaminate water, air or land with harmful substances and waste materials.  
- In many countries, heavy industry continues to seriously **pollute** the environment.

**emissions** – the production and discharge of something, especially gas.  
- Many countries are reluctant to reduce toxic **emissions** as the huge expense involved can affect the rate of economic growth.

**carbon footprint** – the amount of carbon dioxide released into the atmosphere as a result of the activities of a particular individual or organization.  
- I have reduced my **carbon footprint** by cycling to work instead of driving.

**global warming** – a gradual increase in world temperatures caused by polluting gases, such as carbon dioxide, which are collecting in the air around the Earth and preventing heat from escaping into space.  
- It’s not too late to reverse the effects of **global warming** but we must act right now.

Collocations:
- **to fight / to combat / to tackle global warming** – take action to reverse the effects or promote the issue of global warming.
- **contribute to global warming** – to add to the problem of global warming.
- **the effects of global warming** – the environmental changes caused by global warming such as climate change.
**disposable products** – items that are intended to be thrown away after use, generally after just one or a few uses.
- When I was young, things were made to last a long time and be used over and over again, but now we live in a world of **disposable products** and have a huge waste problem.

**dumping ground** – a place where things that are not wanted are left.
- If we continue treating our oceans as a **dumping ground**, it will eventually become too polluted to sustain life.

**acid rain** – rain rainfall made so acidic by atmospheric pollution caused by burning fossil fuels that it causes environmental harm, especially to forests and lakes.
- In Poland, large areas of forest have been destroyed by **acid rain**.

**to contaminate** – to make something poisonous as a result of adding waste or chemicals.
- Pesticide and fertilisers used on the field can **contaminate** rivers and kill all the fish.

**degradation** – the process in which the quality of something is damaged or destroyed.
- Soil **degradation** due to over-farming means that many farmers have had to move to the cities in search of work.

**depletion** – the reduction in the number or quality of something.
- Over-fishing has led to the **depletion** of the ocean’s fish stocks.

**fumes** – strong, unpleasant and sometimes dangerous gas or smoke.
- Car exhaust **fumes** are a major contributor to air pollution.

**smog** – a mixture of smoke, gases, and chemicals, especially in cities, that makes the atmosphere difficult to breathe and harmful for health.
- Some days the **smog** is so bad that people are forced to stay indoors.

**air quality** – the extent to which the air is free of pollution.
- When the company was forced to install filters in their factories chimneys, the **air quality** in the area improved considerably.

**poisonous** – having chemical properties that can cause harm or kill.
- Hundreds of people became seriously ill when **poisonous** chemicals from the nearby factory seeped into the water system.

**toxic** – poisonous.
- The dumping of **toxic** waste in the ocean is totally unacceptable and must be stopped.

**threat** – something or someone that is a risk or a danger.
- The greatest **threat** to the environment comes from the actions of human beings.

**to endanger** – to expose something to harm or destruction.
- Organised poaching is **endangering** the survival of the African rhino.

**poaching** – the illegal hunting or capturing of wild animals.
- Elephant’s valuable tusks make them a target for **poaching**.

**drought** – a long period when there is little or no rain.
- The severe **drought** meant that the crops failed for the second year running and many people faced starvation.

**flooding** – when an area of land that is normally dry is covered with water.
- We have been told to expect more violent storms and frequent **flooding** as a result of global warming.

**flash floods** – a sudden, local flood caused by very heavy rainfall.
- The **flash flood** washed a whole village from the hillside, killing dozens of people.
Set 5: Protecting the environment

to protect – keep safe from harm, injury or damage.
- Many charities have been set up around the world for the purpose of protecting endangered species.

to preserve – to keep something as it is
If we don’t take steps to preserve the environment, we will lose some important natural habitats in the very near future.

Collocation:
• wildlife preservation – the practice of protecting wild plant and animal species and their habitats.

to recycle – to collect waste materials and process them to create new materials and products that can be used again.
- We can dramatically reduce the amount of rubbish we send to landfill sites by recycling our waste plastic.

biodegradable – able to decompose naturally without harming or polluting the environment.
- I always try to buy products with biodegradable packaging.

carbon-neutral – replacing the same amount of carbon dioxide as we produce through actions such as planting trees.
- Becoming carbon-neutral is something for both individuals and industries to work towards.

sustainable – involving methods that do not use up or destroy natural resources.
- With advances in technology, it is hoped that we will eventually be able to replace fossil fuels with sustainable energy sources.

sustainability – the idea that we should meet our own needs in ways that do not damage the environment and that do not use resources that cannot be replaced.
- It is encouraging to see an increasing number of companies making a commitment to environmental sustainability.

renewable energy – energy from a source that is not depleted when used.
- Where I live, both solar power and wind power are important sources of renewable energy.

solar power – power obtained by harnessing the energy of the sun's rays.
- Hussan fitted solar panels to his roof last year and is now able to produce all the energy he needs to run his home from solar power.

energy-efficient – using only as much energy as is needed without any waste.
- When I buy a new appliance, I look for one that is energy-efficient as it will be cheaper to run and be more environmentally-friendly.

wind turbine – a tall structure with blades that are blown round by the wind and produce power to make electricity.
- Many farmers in my area have installed wind turbines to provide the electricity they need.

wind farm – a group of wind turbines.
- We were horrified when they got permission to build a wind farm in our beautiful countryside, but we’re used to it now and understand how important it is to generate renewable energy.
**clean energy** – energy produced from renewable energy resources and which doesn’t produce emissions that contribute to global warming.
- Scientists predict that **clean energy** could reliably and affordably provide up to 80 per cent of U.S. electricity by 2050.

**organic farming** – farming without the use of synthetic chemicals.
- Concern for the environment is leading to changes in agricultural methods and especially to a greater interest in **organic farming**.

**afforestation** – the action of planting trees on an area of land in order to make a forest.
- **Afforestation** is vital if we are to reduce the carbon-dioxide levels in the atmosphere.

**to go green** – to choose an environmentally-friendly lifestyle.
- In an attempt to **go green**, my family is recycling everything we can and we no longer buy bottled water.

**on foot** – to walk rather than use a form of transport.
- When the weather is fine, I go to work **on foot** rather than catching the bus.

**safeguard** – take action to protect something from harm or damage.
- It is the responsibility of all of us to **safeguard** the environment for future generations.

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**Set 6: Other useful words**

**urban** – relating to, or characteristic of a town or city.
- In the UK, foxes thrive in **urban** areas and can often be seen on the streets at night.

**rural** – in, relating to, or characteristic of the countryside rather than the town.
- I was born in a small village and still prefer to live in a **rural** area.

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**IELTS-Style Practise Questions**

For IELTS-style environment-related practise questions and sample answers visit: