Environment as a Socio-cultural Phenomenon

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Abstract. The paper focuses on the environment as a socio-cultural phenomenon. The emphasis is made on identifying environmental trends. The study of the environment in this paradigm allows us to rethink the phenomenon axiologically, which changes the attitude towards the environment, sometimes in a radical way. The main research methods were the analysis of secondary data of applied research and an expert survey of specialists from three bordering states – Russia, Kazakhstan, and Mongolia. These methods ensure the full implementation of the research purpose. The following provisions present the main results: (1) the environment is perceived as a universal and regional value affecting the spiritual life of a person and society and ensuring their spiritual security; (2) management decisions in the environment should be associated with the understanding of this phenomenon as a socio-cultural one, which increases the degree of responsibility and importance of the environment for the continuity of generations of cultural carriers. The study justifies the need for a paradigm change in understanding the environment as a socio-cultural phenomenon.

Keywords: Environment · Nature · Culture · Human value · Border territory · Cultural heritage

1. Introduction
Traditionally, the environment is considered by different natural sciences, which have developed their approaches to studying this phenomenon. As the study object, the environment allows various scientific branches to obtain new knowledge that is of value for the economic development of states and particular territories. It also helps to solve issues related to ecology, security, population dynamics, the use of natural resources, etc. Finally, the environment, becoming the center of interdisciplinary research, opens up prospects for a global understanding of the phenomenon. The environment is a comprehensive concept; it can include many different elements. Probably, everything that surrounds a person, the world in its entirety, can be called the environment. The reality in which a person lives can also be attributed to the environment. This reality is filled with codes, symbols, and signs. A person needs to decipher these elements, understand, and accept the values and norms. In its global understanding, the environment is a complex of attributes of collective and individual activities of a person and natural objects. In the local understanding, it is a socio-cultural phenomenon defining stable (sometimes stereotypical) connections between a person and the world.

Any socio-cultural phenomenon should be considered in the value-semantic aspect, meaning that the connection between humans and cultures is long-term, historically formed, forming extremely stable forms of interaction, and affecting almost all aspects of human existence. There is a rather convincing discourse in science regarding the interpretation of socio-cultural phenomena and the analysis of their structure and nature. O. Lizardo [10, 11] discussed the role of socio-cultural phenomena in enhancing the communicative and cognitive impact of culture on people and society.
Other modern researchers, J. L. Martin [12] and A. Miles [15], focused on the concentration of local or regional values in socio-cultural phenomena while emphasizing the need for sociologists to participate in the study of such phenomena since sociologists have the opportunity to catch the slightest changes in the system of values and norms of a person based on their empirical analysis. In turn, we must assume that any socio-cultural phenomenon is represented by a specific system of values and norms. Undoubtedly, we should not forget that socio-cultural phenomena accumulate symbols, codes, and meanings that can only be realized or conventionalized under the influence of social reality. Changes in social reality do not always have a noticeable effect on the transformation of symbols and codes. This aspect of the problem is noted by S. B. Srivastava and M. R. Banaji [22], and A. Swidler [23]. Such views do not differ from the “final” understanding of culture as a set of “values, norms (the creative potential of cultural codes) of actions and interactions, activities, and their results” [7].

No special research was carried out on the value-semantic understanding of the environment as a socio-cultural phenomenon. Nevertheless, within the framework of social anthropology, social ecology, and some other scientific branches, independent research areas managed to develop this link (e.g., culture and ecology (ecological culture), culture, and consumption (consumer culture), etc.). For example, the differences in understanding environmental culture between Russian and American students are as follows:

1. In American socio-ecological discourse, the concept of “ecological culture,” so popular in modern Russian sociological science, is rarely used;
2. Instead of the Russian concept of “environmental consciousness,” American scholars discuss “environmental attitudes” (environmental awareness), which are considered by Russian sociologists as structural components of environmental culture;
3. In the American tradition, it is customary to talk about environmental behavior, which, in terms of content, is symmetrical to the domestic concept of “environmental activity” [6].

The famous philosopher, S. Moscovici, touched upon the interaction between nature and man in his “Essay on the Human History of Nature. The Natural Question.” He said, “When we turn our attention to the modern age, we will find that the need to place humanity on a par with the forces of the material universe comes to the fore to increase the ability to adapt to the shocks that constantly occur in this universe and fill the gaps associated with them. Associated with this need, there is a movement that seeks to make scientific progress a criterion for relations between existing societies and connections (relationships) within each of them. Here are two converging trends that raise the natural question in our century” [16]. Understanding the environment as a socio-cultural phenomenon is directly related to determining the role of man in preserving the environment. However, the question is not only about solving specific environmental problems, but also about the way a person identifies the environment as a universal or local value and what place it occupies in the value-normative system of modern society. Additionally, the ethnonational coloring of this identification process also becomes essential.

Thus, this paper aims to identify the properties of the environment as a socio-cultural phenomenon, which is an integral part of the value-normative system of society.

2. Materials and Methods
The awareness of the environment as a socio-cultural phenomenon has determined the vector of empirical research of the problem. It was based on data from the Russian public opinion Foundation, which studied the opinion of Russians about the state of the environment and world environmental problems in the surveys “Global environmental problems” (2019) [19], “The State of ecology and inclusion in environmental practices” (2018) [18], “Aspects of human environmental behavior” (2014) [17]. We also used the results of expert surveys of state and local government officials responsible for implementing regional and municipal programs for the preservation and development of ethnonational cultural heritage in the cross-bordering regions of Russia, Kazakhstan, and Mongolia (n=65; respectively for countries 37; 20; 8). Thus, the original application tools were tested along with the use of secondary data from empirical studies.
The research methods were aimed at identifying the following:

1) How to change attitudes to the environment over the past five years; whether these changes occurred with understanding the environment not only as a natural fact but as universal and regional values;
2) What is the structure of the concept of “environment as a socio-cultural phenomenon”;
3) Does the understanding of the socio-cultural significance of the environment affect the adoption of management decisions in the field of its protection and care for it;
4) What measures of upbringing and education, cultural development, official programs for environmental protection, and socio-economic development can effectively influence the value-semantic perception of the environment;
5) How the environment affects the ethnonational consolidation of people and the continuity of generations.

The chosen methodology allows us to show the socio-cultural significance of the environment for making effective management decisions, managing resources and subsurface resources, a prudent and careful attitude to what will be passed on to future generations, and what will determine the ethnonational consolidation of society.

3. Results
The research, conducted using the original empirical methodology and secondary data, showed a high degree of understanding of the environment as a socio-cultural phenomenon. This approach cannot be called formal or irrelevant for making certain decisions, including managerial ones in government and local self-government bodies. The environment is firmly entrenched in people’s minds as a value on the scale of humanity and specific local territories. The expert survey should be supplemented with a mass survey of the population of different territories. However, we believe that it is hardly reasonable to expect significant conceptual changes in the views on the understanding of the environment as a socio-cultural phenomenon. Every person realizes the need to take care of the environment. However, there are certain problems in understanding the environment’s significance depending on different circumstances, for example, ethnonational. The opinions of experts from three countries are divided on the positions that can be correlated with the perception of the environment as a socio-cultural phenomenon.

In large-scale sociological surveys carried out by various foundations, the emphasis was placed on the environmental characteristics of the environment. Most of the respondents identify the environment with natural reality. At the same time, when assessing global environmental problems, 32% of respondents appealed to the concepts of the surrounding world in a broad sense, including as a sign and symbolic system that carries the codes of civilizational development, human security, and survival in the modern world [19]. Some experts also joined this position (12%), noting that the symbolization of the environment does not always solve the urgent problems of the environmental profile or management related to the distribution of natural resources, ensuring their expenditure, etc. This position is partly seen in the studies of some scientists [13, 14].

Experts from different states expressed the opinion that the population’s attitude to the environment saw a significant change over the past five years. These changes are seen in the following:

1. The environment is increasingly perceived as an area of human survival in the conditions of technological and consumer development (31%);
2. Under the influence of the environment, new generations of people are formed, who have more opportunities for their further improvement (20%);
3. People became more interested in how to take care of the environment and how to impart this information to the younger generation (15%);
4. The attitude to the environment depends on people’s mentality (14%), etc.
All experts are unanimously inclined that modern people changed their attitude to the environment and began to relate it to the universal and regional values. This approach is also found in the results of the study “State of ecology and inclusion in environmental practices” (2018) [18].

However, for inhabitants of many cities and especially megacities, the environment appears in a slightly different perception. It remains a decisive factor in the economic policy of urban development. It is evaluated as a recreational system or a comfortable environment. Therefore, it is considered the most affected by human influence [20, 21]. Sometimes this influence is destructive, and the environment irretrievably loses its original value. Experts were not specifically asked about the fate of the environment in cities. Nevertheless, some experts drew attention to the fact that the attitude of urban inhabitants to the environment is more “superficial,” “consumer,” “negative,” etc.

When clarifying the concept of the environment as a socio-cultural phenomenon, we received different opinions from experts. Nevertheless, we can find a common pattern in their positions: the concept in question is more “technological” than socio-cultural. Experts did not deny the axiological interpretation of the environment concept, but still, due to their managerial position in the government system, they are forced to recognize the “technological” attitude. This means that for the implementation of the programs of socio-economic development of territories offered by authorities, officials are forced to “fit” the environment to man and seek for new opportunities for technological improvement (e.g., to cut down some green areas or shape them following the development plan or the change of the legal status of land). Meanwhile, in the structure of the concept of the environment as a socio-cultural phenomenon, the experts singled out the following elements:

- Values and norms (“the environment as part of the value-normative system of society”) (35%);
- Source of civilization development (“customs,” “the transmission of values between generations”) (22%);
- Cultural universals (“nature,” “symbols of flora and fauna”) (18%);
- The cultural level (“understanding a human or social value of the surrounding world”) (15%);
- Traditionalism and innovation (“cultural and historical changes influence the experience of relation to the environment”) (8%), etc.

Some experts found it difficult to answer the question, “Does management decision-making change the understanding of the environment as a socio-cultural phenomenon in any way?” In their minds, there is a stereotype of a “technological” attitude to the environment for managing it and adapting to everyday human life. On the other hand, some experts (18%) answered this question positively, meaning that the proposed understanding of the environment can attract various public structures and active citizens to the problems of environmental protection, to ensure the integrity of the interaction of people and nature, people and the environment (house, street, city, etc.). Additionally, experts (15%) drew attention to the fact that the emergence of environmental problems at the socio-cultural level can change the very practice of considering the environment primarily as a human habitat. From this perspective, the environment appears as a “bulwark of generations,” ensuring their stability, families’ stability, the development of farms and households, uniform migration flows, reproducibility of cultural traditions, customs, crafts, arts, etc. These attributes are passed on from generation to generation, and, therefore, ensure the continuity of generations of culture carriers. Experts from Russia focused more on the “consolidation of generations” around the environment (“the environment forms a sustainable interaction of people based on the recognition of its consolidating function”) (56%). Experts from other countries (44%) are focused on increasing the role of the environment in the formation of ancestral features of cultural development (“the environment affects the maintenance of ancestral traditions passed between generations for a long time”). The divergence of experts’ positions is expected, since experts represent different types of cultures (European and Eastern) and, taking into account their ethnic and national features, form assessments of the role of the environment for people and society. However, this position is also indicated in the works of researchers of global environmental problems [24, 26].
The main principle found in experts’ opinions is the rejection of exclusively consumer attitudes to nature and the environment in general. In the modern scientific discourse devoted to environmental issues and various environmental practices, the refrain is the idea of improving the efficiency of environmental conservation. Additionally, there are more and more studies and opinions about the need for “natural socialization” of people and increasing their susceptibility to irrational attitudes to the human environment [1, 3, 5, 17]. We put two key questions to the experts:

1) Is it possible to effectively manage the environment by changing the formal attitude, and in what way?
2) Does the border situation of regions and countries complicate the environment’s rational management, and to what extent?

In the first case, most respondents (75%) supported the possibility of an effective organization in environmental management. At the same time, they proceeded not only from “technological” (“scaling and zoning,” “comfortable environment,” “accessibility of green parks,” “recreational zones,” etc.) (73%) but also from socio-cultural considerations (“leisure and recreation,” “favorite places” “old center,” “cultural places,” “monuments,” etc.). The experts adhere to the line of convenience, comfort, and accessibility of the environment. Nevertheless, they noted the need to preserve the traditional appearance of culturally significant areas and recreations. It should be noted that there were practically no differences of opinion among experts from different countries. This means that officials’ attitude to the environment and other priorities of a socio-cultural nature remains unchanged. In turn, this indicates the loss of a long-standing bias towards consumer attitudes to the environment. The experts are also aware that the understanding of the environment is superior in its structure only to the natural world in which people live and carry out their collective and individual life activities. Some applied studies also noted that understanding environmental practices includes not only, for example, protecting nature and nurturing respect for the “green world,” but also knowledge of the environment, “softening” the role of man in relation to it, a thoughtful and morally determined attitude consistent with the traditions and customs of the ancestors [18].

Experts linked the choice of the primary way to organize environmental management by changing the formal attitude with the “technological” attitude to the environment and socio-cultural factors. However, the choice of this method showed the following ranking:

- application of new technologies (50%);
- preservation of traditions (34%);
- compliance with global projects (11%), etc.

Technology is always leading the way. Nevertheless, it is noteworthy that traditionalism and globalization are regarded as key properties that change attitudes to the environment. It is quite possible that, in the future, the socio-cultural factor will take the first place because, over time, people will increase their awareness of the need to educate a conservative attitude to nature and the environment. This fact implies relying on generations’ traditions, without which the inculcation of such an attitude is impossible.

Analyzing opinions on the second issue of the complexity of rational environmental management due to the border situation of regions and countries, we drew attention to a certain inconsistency. It is related to the fact that, in the first case, experts put “technological” environmental management mechanisms in the first place, and the border conditions of such management probably confused the experts. The very property of borderline (not only in geographical terms but also in socio-economic terms) is perceived as an additional complexity in forming specific environmental management priorities. In this situation, respondents expressed concern that neighboring regions or states may not share a policy of effective management in nature and the environment. Many experts (71%) pointed out that it is not always easy to achieve unity of regions or countries in environmental protection matters. The respondents noted such reasons as differences in climate, a wind rose, and zoning of territories (40%), differences in the prevailing types of the economy (for example, sedentary in Russia...
and Kazakhstan, or nomadic in Mongolia) (21%), violation of international laws in environmental protection (15%), religious cult (Buddhism), which is peculiar to the inhabitants of the Mongolian regions and which involves a contemplative attitude to nature (11%), etc.

Research on various environmental practices [18] demonstrates the relevance of the issue of upbringing, education, cultural development, and official programs for environmental protection and socio-economic development in the establishment of value-semantic perception of the environment. This allows us to consider the environment as a socio-cultural phenomenon. Environmental practices are aimed not only at implementing measures to preserve nature, but also at educating people to take care of it. Additionally, the attitude to the environment is evaluated in terms of human-environmental activity, which can become a factor in forming environmental culture [9]. Experts believe that human activity is not always safe for the environment. However, they believe that education is the most effective way to change such activities positively (including environmental training, familiarity with relevant legal acts, conducting scientific and research activities), the adoption of official programs aimed at increasing environmental activism and protecting the environment, developing skills of proper environmental behavior and corresponding moral principles, etc. These circumstances can radically change the attitude to the environment from “technological” to value-based, which, in turn, will ensure the transmission of value-semantic stereotypes to subsequent generations.

This intergenerational factor is recognized as vital in understanding the socio-cultural nature of the environment. This raises the question of how the environment affects people’s ethnonational consolidation and the continuity of generations. Experts tend to believe that this influence occurs to a high degree (73%). From their point of view, ethnonational consolidation occurs due to the following reasons:

- The environment affects mentality and national character (57%);
- The environment is associated with the emergence and consolidation of cultural symbols and cultural codes in the traditions of the people (27%);
- The environment primarily determines the development of various crafts, arts and crafts, and other types of arts to ensure people’s consolidation (12%).

Additionally, experts expressed their opinions on the impact of the environment on the succession of generations. They noted that the environment ensures human survival and security. Therefore, it affects the reproduction of the population (66%). The socio-cultural dynamics affect the succession of generations and is directly related to the features of the environment (19%). Finally, people are always looking for opportunities to unite with nature, which gives us additional strength to develop and transmit the most significant socio-cultural information and social experience to subsequent generations of cultural carriers (10%).

4. Discussion

Based on the conducted research, we revealed at least two central positions in understanding the problem of identifying the environment as a socio-cultural phenomenon. The first position is related to the need to change the attitude to the environment based on the principles of moral reflection and respect for their people’s traditions. The second position was defined mainly in applied research, which revealed the importance of environmental activism and various practices of cognition of the surrounding world and the environment as the basis for civilizational development and ensuring the survival and safety of cultural carriers. These positions are consistent with the opinions of the above-mentioned authoritative scientists. However, several debatable issues need further scientific development:

1) What are the recognized effective ways of caring for the environment that can have drawbacks in preventing their adequate implementation in reality?
2) Does the re-evaluation of the environment in terms of its socio-cultural functionality change its attitude, and to which extent?
3) Can environmental practices ensure the survival of man and the consolidation of society?
Other issues that were addressed in the article in one way or another also matter. Globalization has the most significant weight in environmental research. Scholars tend to most often consider the problem in this way [2, 4; 25]. It is still relevant for specific countries and territories where attitudes to the world and the environment are formed on religious, ethnic, and national grounds. Experts of different states expressed a common opinion on the need to change the environment’s attitude. Nevertheless, they also noted that such a change must consider the specifics of the ethnonational plan, which can speed up and make more effective ways of inter-generational impact on the world.

5. Conclusion
The conducted theoretical and empirical study showed several trends in the changing world. These trends are associated with a change in attitude to the environment from “technological” to socio-cultural. At the center of the latter are values and norms, forming a new view of the role that the environment plays in human life and society. During the research, we can conclude the following:

1. The attitude to the environment has seen significant changes over the past five years. The environment is now perceived as a universal human and regional value;
2. The concept of “the environment as a socio-cultural phenomenon” emphasizes values and norms;
3. Understanding the socio-cultural significance of the environment affects the adoption of management decisions in the field of its protection and care;
4. Among the most important measures of upbringing, education, cultural development, and implementing official programs for environmental protection and socio-economic development, the value-semantic perception of the environment is effectively influenced by those that are related to moral and socio-cultural (religious, socializing, inculturation, etc.) principles of social development;
5. The environment affects the ethnonational consolidation of people and the continuity of generations.

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