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Sacrifice, Memory and Ecology: Understanding Bishnoi Environmentalism in Contemporary India

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ABSTRACT

The Bishnoi community of western Rajasthan showcases a unique form of environmentalism based on religious beliefs, shared history, and daily social activities. This paper looks at how the historical legacy of sacrifice, especially the Khejarli martyrdom of 1731, continues to shape current environmental activism among the Bishnois. Using Connerton's idea of collective memory and insights from environmental sociology, the study argues that Bishnoi environmentalism is not just an idea but is reflected in their daily actions, moral values, and community involvement. The shift from traditional ecological beliefs to organized activism, especially through groups like the Bishnoi Tiger Force, shows the rise of a culturally rooted approach to environmental governance. Additionally, the paper discusses tensions between conservation laws and the livelihood practices of nearby communities, raising important issues about inclusion, fairness, and government involvement. By placing Bishnoi environmentalism at the crossroads of memory, culture, and politics, the study adds to wider discussions on grassroots environmental movements and sustainable practices in India.

Introduction

Environmental conservation in modern India is often discussed in terms of policy, law, and institutional governance. Legislative measures like the Wildlife Protection Act (1972) play an important role in protecting endangered species and managing human-nature interactions. However, these frameworks

usually assume that environmental protection is mainly a task for the state, neglecting the contribution of communities whose ecological practices come from cultural values and historical experience. In this case, the Bishnoi community of western Rajasthan offers an interesting example, where environmentalism is not forced from outside but sustained internally through a strong moral and social order (Menon, 2012; Srivastava, 2001).

The Bishnois are well-known for their dedication to protecting plants and animals, especially species like the blackbuck and chinkara, which receive the highest legal protection under Indian law. Yet, their environmental practices go back long before modern conservation policies and cannot be fully explained by legal or ecological frameworks. Instead, these practices are rooted in a unique worldview shaped by religious teachings, daily habits, and a strong sense of historical continuity. This worldview is not just a set of beliefs; it is reflected in daily actions such as vegetarianism, caring for injured animals, and sharing agricultural resources with wildlife (Khan, 2004; Hemsingh & Jakher, 2007).

At the center of Bishnoi environmentalism is the lasting memory of sacrifice, especially from the Khejarli incident of 1731, when 363 community members died to protect sacred Khejri trees (Ghose, 2008). This event continues to serve as a moral reference point, shaping the group's identity and influencing their actions today. As Connerton (1989) suggests, social memory is not just a record of the past; it exists in the practices that pass on cultural meanings over generations. For the Bishnois, the legacy of sacrifice goes beyond historical storytelling; it is actively shown in current environmental efforts, including standing up to poachers and joining in conservation initiatives.

In recent decades, these deeply rooted ethical practices have changed significantly, becoming more organized forms of activism. Groups like the Bishnoi Tiger Force illustrate a shift from individual moral responsibility to collective political action, with community members actively engaging with legal institutions, law enforcement, and public discussions to fight environmental crime (Luthra Sinha, 2016a; Goswami, 2018). This change aligns with wider views on new social movements, which highlight identity, culture, and values as central to collective action rather than just economic or class concerns.

However, the rise of Bishnoi activism also reveals some complex social tensions. Conservation efforts, especially those backed by legal frameworks, often clash with the livelihood practices of nearby communities like the Bhils and Ban Bawris, for whom hunting may be vital for survival or cultural identity. Criminalizing such practices under modern law raises essential questions about justice, inclusion, and the unequal effects of environmental governance (Agrawal, 2005; UNDP & HDRC, 2004).

These tensions show the need to go beyond simple distinctions between conservation and exploitation and look into the social and cultural dynamics that shape human-environment relationships.

In this context, the present paper aims to analyze Bishnoi environmentalism through the interconnected ideas of collective memory, sacrifice, and embodied practice. It argues that the strength and continuity of Bishnoi environmental activism come from its ability to blend historical awareness with daily life and political involvement. By placing this case within broader discussions in environmental sociology and political ecology, the paper seeks to provide a more nuanced understanding of grassroots environmental movements in India.

Literature Review

The relationship between society and the environment has been widely studied in sociology, especially through environmental sociology and political ecology. In India, this relationship reflects the blending of traditional ecological practices with modern legal and institutional frameworks like the Wildlife Protection Act of 1972. While government-led conservation efforts focus on regulating biodiversity, many scholars emphasize the importance of community-based environmental practices that exist outside formal governance.

A substantial amount of literature highlights the role of religion and cultural values in forming ecological awareness. For the Bishnoi community, environmental ethics are deeply connected to their religious beliefs and daily activities. Srivastava (2001) argues that Bishnoi environmentalism arises from a worldview where protecting nature is seen as a sacred duty. Similarly, Menon (2012) shows that conservation for the Bishnois is not an isolated activity; it is woven into their daily lives. Practices such as vegetarianism, wildlife protection, and the prohibition against cutting green trees illustrate this. Khan (2004) situates these practices within broader religious identities in South Asia, where ecological awareness is linked to moral and spiritual values.

Another important area of literature examines the role of collective memory in shaping social action. Connerton (1989) provides a foundational view by stating that memory is not only cognitive but also manifested in the rituals and practices that uphold social continuity. This idea is particularly relevant for understanding the Bishnoi community, where the historical event of Khejarli continues to impact their current environmental behavior. Ghose (2008) documents the Khejarli sacrifice as a key moment in Bishnoi history, emphasizing its lasting symbolic meaning. However, while these accounts recognize the

significance of memory, they often do not fully explore how historical experiences evolve into organized environmental activism today.

The literature on environmental movements and grassroots activism offers further insights into this change. Luthra Sinha (2016a) analyzes Bishnoi protests as forms of micro-social movements. This demonstrates how local actors engage with democratic institutions to address environmental issues. This perspective aligns with the broader understanding of new social movements, where identity, culture, and values are central to mobilization. Additionally, Luthra Sinha (2016b) highlights the complexity of these movements, where traditional beliefs overlap with modern political practices. These studies suggest that Bishnoi environmentalism is dynamic, evolving to meet contemporary social and political realities.

At the same time, the literature on political ecology and environmental governance points out the tensions between conservation policies and livelihood practices. Agrawal (2005) discusses how public institutions in India often find it difficult to balance environmental protection with social justice. Reports such as those by UNDP and HDRC (2004) indicate that rural communities that rely on natural resources may face marginalization under conservation policies. In areas like western Rajasthan, these tensions appear in the interactions between the Bishnois and hunting communities, where differing ecological practices can lead to conflict.

Ecological and wildlife studies provide important empirical support for these social dynamics. Research on species like the blackbuck shows how crucial conservation efforts are for maintaining biodiversity (Rahmani, 2001; Jhala & Isvaran, 2016). Studies by Hemsingh and Jakher (2007) and Kumar and Niraj (2016) indicate that regions with strong community participation, such as those dominated by the Bishnois, often achieve better conservation outcomes. However, challenges like habitat loss, climate stress, and human-animal conflict still persist (Ahmad & Bothra, 2017; Sebastian, 2010).

Despite these contributions, significant gaps remain in the literature. Existing studies often look at religion, memory, activism, and ecological conflict as distinct areas. There is limited work that connects these aspects to explain how collective memory, cultural values, and everyday practices together support a long-term environmental movement. While Luthra Sinha's work comes closest to bridging this gap, further focused analysis is needed, particularly regarding the role of lived practices and historical awareness.

This paper aims to fill this gap by combining insights from these different areas of literature to create a more thorough understanding of Bishnoi environmentalism. It argues that the strength of this movement

lies in its ability to transform historical memory into everyday practice and collective action, thereby providing an alternative model for sustainable environmental governance.

Methodology

This study uses a qualitative and interpretive research design to explore the relationship between collective memory, sacrifice, and environmental activism within the Bishnoi community. A qualitative approach is best suited for this research problem, which aims to understand meanings, practices, and cultural processes.

The paper relies mainly on secondary data and ethnographic insights, drawing heavily from existing studies on the Bishnoi community. These studies often use field observations and interviews. For instance, Luthra Sinha's work (2016a, 2016b) provides a strong empirical foundation. It is based on detailed ethnographic engagement with Bishnoi activists, hunting communities, and state actors in western Rajasthan. These studies include interviews, group discussions, and participant observations, which provide rich insights into the lived experiences and social dynamics of the region.

Methodologically, the study follows the Emic Evaluation Approach (EEA) as outlined by Föerster et al. (2011). This approach focuses on understanding social phenomena from the actors' perspectives. It involves three steps: identifying relevant social actors, analyzing the discourses that shape their actions, and examining the practices that arise from these interpretations. In this context, this framework aids in exploring how the Bishnois view environmental protection as a moral and cultural responsibility, not just a legal obligation.

The study also uses thematic analysis to interpret the data. Key themes like collective memory, sacrifice, embodied practices, and activism are identified and analyzed throughout the literature. Special attention is given to recurring narratives, such as the Khejarli sacrifice (Ghose, 2008), and their influence on present-day environmental behavior.

Furthermore, the research incorporates document analysis, including reports, ecological studies, and news sources related to wildlife conservation and Bishnoi activism (Goswami, 2018; The Hindu, 2018). These sources help to contextualize the current significance of Bishnoi environmental practices and their relationship with legal frameworks like the Wildlife Protection Act (1972).

While the study offers an in-depth sociological analysis, certain limitations should be noted. As the research relies on secondary data, it does not incorporate primary fieldwork conducted by the author.

However, the use of well-documented ethnographic studies and trustworthy secondary sources lends reliability and depth to the analysis.

Overall, this methodological approach enables a nuanced understanding of Bishnoi environmentalism as a socially rooted and historically informed phenomenon. It connects cultural practices with contemporary environmental activism.

Collective Memory and the Legacy of Sacrifice: The Khejarli Narrative

A single moment in time - Khejarli, 1731 - holds lasting weight for the Bishnoi people, shaping how they see nature today. Instead of fading into the past, the loss of 363 lives under Amrita Devi's lead becomes a living guide, not just a tale retold. Trees stood tall; so did courage when villagers chose death over cutting down sacred Khejri groves. Because of such acts, meaning grows beyond history books - it pulses through choices made now. Though centuries pass, the stand taken then shapes decisions here, rooted deeply like the trees themselves.

Sometimes it's how people carry the past in their bones more than in books. Connerton claimed back in 1989 that tradition moves through habit, ceremony, yet also stories told again until they stick. For the Bishnois, Khejarli breathes inside daily talk, lessons shared by elders because symbols grow where blood was spilled. This story does not sit on shelves - it walks. Though time passes, certain acts remain footsteps others follow without choosing.

When people speak of the Khejarli sacrifice, they point to a belief: losing a life matters less than saving a tree. That idea reveals values placing nature on par with humans - or higher. Unlike conservation shaped by cost-benefit calculations or government plans, Bishnoi practice stands apart. What drives them isn't convenience or rules, but an unshakable duty toward living things. Their stance treats care for land and forests as nonnegotiable - not something weighed against profit or survival.

This memory shifts constantly, never fixed. With each new crisis, it takes on fresh meaning. When nature faces harm - like illegal hunting or ruined forests - people recall those who gave their lives before. Because of this, today's efforts feel linked to yesterday's losses. Following Connerton (1989), these deep-rooted memories settle into the body itself. They quietly guide how people see events, react, move through life.

From time to time, Bishnoi people step forward when nature's under threat, acting without hesitation. Sometimes it's chasing those who hunt illegally, sometimes alerting authorities, other times lifting hurt

creatures to safety - records show this pattern clearly (Goswami, 2018; Luthra Sinha, 2016a). Not laws alone pull them in, though they know the rules well. What really moves them lives deeper - an old knowing passed down, felt more than spoken.

Stories like Khejarli keep ecological beliefs alive through time. Because youth grow up hearing them, they learn to see giving for nature as right. When elders pass down these moments, it shapes how children understand duty. Over years, such telling binds each age group to shared care for land. In this way, old choices echo in new actions among the Bishnoi.

Even so, giving up something valuable helps the Bishnoi hold weight when speaking on nature issues. Because they have long protected the environment, people listen when they challenge harm or talk with officials. Though they do not run official systems, their strong ethics place them at the center of local ecological decisions.

Bold beliefs sometimes stir friction, especially when neighbors follow different ways of living off the land. When survival depends on activities like hunting, firm eco-standards can feel threatening. Sacrifice fuels their voice, yes - yet echoes into strained ties beyond their borders.

What happened in Khejarli isn't just an old story. Instead, it breathes through how people live now - shaping who they are, what they value, why they act. Memory becomes motion here; faith turns into doing, not just saying. This way of being lives in the body, not only in books or speeches. Because of those earlier losses, today's choices carry weight. The Bishnoi keep their path alive by walking it differently each generation.

Embodied Environmentalism in Everyday Life

.What keeps Bishnoi environmentalism alive isn't just remembrance of Khejarli - its roots grow deeper through daily life. Though the past gives it meaning, real power comes when belief becomes behaviour. Instead of staying in stories or rare gestures, values take shape in how people eat, move, speak, live. Often without words, choices reflect care for trees, animals, land. Because of this, their ethics aren't declared - they're shown, step by step. Not through speeches but repeated acts does the tradition stay strong.

What stands out most is how deeply held beliefs shape eating habits - avoiding meat, refusing to harm creatures. These choices trace back to wisdom shared by Guru Jambheshwar, guiding actions through a

principle: do no harm, to any life form (Khan, 2004). Eating here isn't just about hunger - it becomes a quiet statement, tied to wider views on nature and balance.

Much like that, the Bishnoi people step forward to shield creatures like blackbuck and chinkara. Instead of seeing them apart from daily life, they welcome them as neighbors sharing one home ground. Often, families let these animals feed across farmland - crops sometimes suffer because of it. This choice shows how values shape survival; doing right by nature outweighs short-term harvest worries (Menon, 2012).

Studies show places with many Bishnoi people often see healthier numbers of some animal species. Blackbuck thrive more where local groups actively guard them, according to findings from Hemsingh & Jakher in 2007 and Rahmani in 2001. These habits rooted in daily life support nature better than official programs sometimes can. What grows from tradition here outperforms structured efforts elsewhere.

Caring for hurt animals sits at the heart of how some Bishnoi people live their beliefs. When creatures are weak or wounded, locals step in - offering rest, food, close watch. Homes turn into shelters without warning; backyards become healing spots almost by accident. Lines between where humans stop and nature begins start to fade in these moments. Kindness here isn't just spoken - it moves, breathes, shows up with bandages and patience.

Looking at it one way, what people do every day often comes from habits passed down through generations. Because of how groups remember their past, certain routines stick around without much thought behind them each time. Paul Connerton pointed out back in 1989 that physical acts - things you actually do with your body - keep memories alive across years. Among the Bishnoi, giving food to animals, looking after forests, and avoiding specific foods turn into small rituals done regularly. These gestures carry echoes of older stories where loss and dedication played a part. While they seem like simple choices today, together they replay moments long gone. So instead of fading, those experiences take shape again each morning in quiet actions. Memory lives on because bodies repeat.

What stands out is how this hands-on approach to caring for nature gets shaped by group habits and shared expectations. When someone steps outside those lines, it tends to draw frowns; following them brings quiet approval, even inner pride. Out of this grows a tight weave of belonging, centered on respect for the living world - passed down simply because it feels right.

Still, these actions ripple beyond their immediate purpose. When people choose nature instead of profit, friction can grow - especially where survival depends on tight margins or nearby groups face unequal pressures. Drought, vanishing habitats, and stretched resources pile onto those strains (Ahmad & Bothra,

2017). So even though Bishnoi ways model balance with the earth, they unfold amid systems shaped by uneven access and environmental strain.

What stands out about Bishnoi environmentalism is how it turns care for nature into daily habit, not just rules or slogans. Because their routines carry these values forward, the practice sticks - quietly, steadily. Actions take shape through small choices made again and again. Instead of distant ideals, they live them: planting trees becomes second nature, protecting animals feels ordinary. Such consistency shows change grows best when rooted in personal conduct. From one sunrise to the next, responsibility isn't declared - it's shown.

From Memory to Movement: Bishnoi Environmental Activism

Out here among the Bishnoi, daily life already breathes respect for nature - like it's woven into bone. Lately though, that quiet care has begun showing up louder, shaped into clear stands taken together. Instead of staying personal, actions now gather strength in groups. What once lived in habit now steps forward, speaking in shared voices. Culture doesn't just sit behind tradition anymore - it moves, joins crowds, raises questions where decisions are made.

Nowadays, far beyond just village traditions, Bishnoi care for nature shows up in courts and official systems. Since the 1900s shifted into today's world, one change stands out: groups like the Bishnoi Tiger Force took shape. Instead of waiting, they watch for harm to animals. Because of that effort, locals act fast when needed - research from Luthra Sinha backs this, papers from 2016 onward show it.

What these groups do shows where things are headed now

Fences once held things out. Now they push back. Barriers used to wait. Not anymore. They step forward now. Quiet defense changed. It acts first today

from individual ethics → collective action

from cultural practice → political engagement

Out here, people from the Bishnoi group keep watch for illegal hunting, tipping off officials when they spot trouble - sometimes stepping in themselves. Because they know every stretch of land around them so well, plus share news fast through tight-knit circles, help arrives quickly even in far-off spots where government reach is thin. Working alongside rangers and police isn't rare either; these villagers often

bridge gaps in safeguarding animals, quietly shaping how conservation plays out on the ground (Goswami, 2018; The Hindu, 2018).

Change makes sense when seen through fresh kinds of public efforts, focused on who people are, what they believe, how they live, instead of just money or rank. Luthra Sinha (2016a) sees Bishnoi action as small-scale pushback, working inside India's democracy yet testing its edges at the same time. Not aimed at tearing down government, it tries to nudge, shape, support it - especially where green rules barely exist in practice.

Still, Bishnoi efforts stay close to their heritage. Action comes less from laws on paper and more from inner duty passed through time. Stories like Khejarli live on, feeding courage to face threats, challenge wrongs, yet demand fairness. So protest feels less like rebellion - more like breathing old values into now.

Even so, how Bishnoi activists engage with government bodies shows where top-down conservation falls short. Legal processes drag on, convictions for animal crimes stay rare, enforcement stays weak - these gaps push locals to act without waiting. Filling that void, the Bishnois become unofficial enforcers, standing alongside formal authorities without holding office.

Still, rising confidence brings complications. When Bishnoi collectives step in to stop animal killing, clashes may follow - especially with people who hunt, whether for profit or by inherited practice. These moments often stir unease, blur lines of power, challenge whose voice counts, question how far local efforts should stretch. Uncertainty lingers where protection meets tradition.

Even with obstacles, Bishnoi efforts show what community-led care for nature can look like. Not waiting for outside help, people in these villages take real steps to guard forests and wildlife. Because old wisdom mixes now with new tools - like phones and networks - their actions stay rooted yet reach further. What grows from tradition also finds strength in today’s ways of connecting.

What begins as remembrance grows into motion - that shift defines Bishnoi care for land. When past awareness meets daily habit, organized group effort takes shape, linking tradition with civic voice. Change like this deepens protection work while reshaping who gets to decide what happens to nature.

Conflict, Law and Contested Ecology

Though praised for strong ethics and results in protecting nature, Bishnoi efforts unfold alongside deep social tensions, uneven power, and clashing ways of using land. When Bishnoi actions meet government rules and local survival needs, friction arises across western Rajasthan's dry terrain.

Tension often flares around how the 1972 Wildlife Protection Act is put into practice, especially since it shields animals like the blackbuck and chinkara by law. Because of these rules, long-standing customs - hunting among them - are now treated as crimes. While aimed at preserving nature, the law ends up clashing with ways of life followed for generations. Among groups like the Bhils and Ban Bawris, where hunting once played a role in daily survival, new restrictions feel less like progress and more like exclusion. Their routines, shaped over centuries, suddenly fall outside what the state allows. So legality shifts, yet lives built on older rhythms find little space to adapt.

It strikes some researchers how green rules in India sometimes miss what life is actually like on the ground. Though goals are set high, official bodies rarely manage to listen closely to people living nearby forests or rivers. Because of this gap, gains tend to spread unevenly across regions. When protected zones go up, those who rely on gathering wood or grazing animals often lose out first. Without real substitutes for their daily needs, hardship follows quietly. One study from 2004 shows how village households bear heavier loads under such plans. Even well-meaning laws can tilt unfair when voices from small towns get left behind.

Out here, calling something hunting or poaching isn't just about rules - it shapes how people see right and wrong. Though laws might lump them together, folks on the ground usually split hairs: one feeds a family, the other fills pockets. Driven by cash, that second kind ties into shadowy chains moving across borders, hitting animals harder. When the system ignores these shades, friction grows - fairness feels off, even if the books say otherwise.

Out here, the Bishnoi stand firm - harming animals isn't tolerated, no exceptions. Because of that, clashes happen when hunters cross their path. When they step in to stop illegal hunts, results show up in protected forests, yet some see it as meddling instead of help. Where belief meets law enforcement, sparks fly more often than handshakes.

Outside forces pile onto already tense ties. Habitat vanishing, shifting weather patterns, along with dwindling supplies push people and wild creatures into sharper conflict. Research shows species such as blackbucks and chinkaras now turn more to farm plots when seeking meals or moisture - this eats into

harvests, hits farmer incomes hard (Ahmad & Bothra, 2017; Sebastian, 2010). Even if Bishnoi groups accept this toll, guided by long-held beliefs about nature, some villages respond differently - watchmen get paid, traps set, guns fired.

Power shapes who gets what when nature is at stake. Because lives depend on land, struggles over trees or water become fights about fairness too. Though guided by strong beliefs, the Bishnoi way doesn't exist apart from wider gaps in wealth and influence. When people face hardship, choices around conservation shift - context always matters. What seems like an ecological act often mirrors deeper social divides.

Even so, what the government actually does feels unclear. Where rules stand to shield animals, how they're applied wavers - leaving holes others step in to patch, like the Bishnois do. Out of this mix grows a shared kind of control, neither fully official nor entirely local. Still, when systems fail to back these efforts with real structure or broad inclusion, tensions beneath stay unresolved.

Out here in western Rajasthan, friction isn't just about land - it hints at something wider, deeper. Picture this: protecting nature while treating people fairly doesn't always go hand in hand. Take the Bishnoi. Their deep-rooted values have helped shield wildlife for generations. Yet their story shows rules made far away often miss local truths. When policy ignores lived experience, even good intentions stumble.

Every so often, the idea of "contested ecology" comes up when people talk about nature and how we manage it. This happens because saving ecosystems isn't just about science or doing what's right - it ties into who gets heard, what matters most, yet also who misses out. When different goals clash, things get messy. Seeing those tensions clearly can lead to better ways of protecting the environment - ways that actually include more voices.

Conclusion

What stands out here is how Bishnoi environmentalism grows from shared history, personal belief, yet routines woven into daily life. Instead of relying on government rules or laws, their way of protecting nature comes from within - shaped by tradition, guided by habit. The findings reveal a different path: care for the land lives not in statutes but in stories passed down, actions repeated without thought. While many look to courts or policies, this group leans on what feels right because it has always been so.

Something deep inside this system lives on - the memory of giving up something precious, like what happened at Khejarli, still shaping choices today. Not just stories passed around; it's carried forward by

daily acts - choosing plant-based meals, shielding animals from harm, guarding trees and rivers like they matter. Thanks to how groups remember things, explained by Connerton back in 1989, these habits keep history alive without needing words. In this way, caring for nature stops being some distant thought - it shows up every day in real life.

One more look at the research shows how quiet beliefs grew legs and started marching together. Out of that shift came crews like the Bishnoi Tiger Force - personal choices now moving as one force. Because of this change people began knocking on court doors, joining wider efforts to guard forests and animals. Tradition still holds firm at the core, yet their ways twist and stretch when new problems show up.

Even as it stands, the study questions how well this conservation method really works. What happens when Bishnoi efforts meet government rules and local ways of living shows just how messy protecting nature can be. When old hunting customs get treated as crimes, especially while land shrinks and animals lose homes, a deeper look becomes necessary. Instead of one-size-fits-all fixes, paying closer attention to people's lives might lead somewhere better.

From the Bishnoi story comes a quiet truth about people and nature. Not laws, but belief shapes how some care for the land. Still, good intentions falter when power stays unbalanced. What grows from tradition may bend under pressure. Even deep respect meets limits where injustice runs wide.

A quiet strength lives in the way Bishnoi people remember, choose, then act - each step tied tight to land care passed through time. Their habits aren’t separate from history; instead they grow out of old lessons lived daily, shaping a kind of order that comes from within. This balance doesn’t sit still, it moves with people who gather, resist harm, protect life together. When those ways are seen clearly - not as relics but as living paths - they challenge common fixes offered today. For anyone seeking better ground on which to build green futures here, listening becomes unavoidable.

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