Introduction

In this book I call into question the assumed harmony between human rights norms and the demands of environmental sustainability. Human rights represent the dominant normative framework against which political standards are judged, and in terms of which political claims are made. Environmental problems are increasingly evident, globally and locally. More and more, we find activists and theorists presenting environmental claims in human rights terms. The prevalence of this strategy suggests confidence about the compatibility of the human rights and environmental agendas. Yet human rights emerge from, and to a considerable degree continue to reflect, a liberal tradition in political theory that has often been held to be inhospitable to environmental values.

The questions animating this study are both political and conceptual: from a green point of view, what, politically, is gained and lost, by adopting the language and institutions of human rights? Conceptually, is there coherence or tension between the values of human rights and environmental sustainability? Is the idea of environmental human rights plausible, and defensible? Given, on the one hand, the significant environmental challenges we face, and, on the other hand, the dominance of human rights as a normative framework, these questions demand our attention.

The focus here is specifically on environmental sustainability, rather than the more often discussed sustainable development. Sustainable development is said to foster human rights and environmental goals simultaneously, indeed, symbiotically. But my concern is that human rights and environmental sustainability might sometimes be in tension with one another: if that is so, then the idea of ‘sustainable development’ is itself beset with tensions.

My strategy in what follows is to critique human rights from a green point of view, and environmental sustainability from a human rights point of view, as well as to assess the criticisms of each from within human rights theory or green theory that might shed light on the question of whether environmental sustainability can be adequately addressed in terms of a human rights framework. To be clear, such criticisms as I present of both human rights and environmental sustainability, as political goals and moral claims, are intended to be friendly. I remain committed to the belief
that human rights ought to be respected, and that achieving environmental sustainability is a moral imperative. But I am less confident than others that human rights can be taken as they are and appropriated for green ends.

The argument is structured as follows. In Chapter 1 I argue that economic globalization necessarily engenders environmental degradation, from which human rights problems follow. In view of this, environmental sustainability is itself a human rights issue. The question nevertheless remains as to whether environmental sustainability is best addressed in terms of the language and institutions of human rights. In Chapter 2 I explore the philosophically contested territory of what might be said to justify human rights claims, and, in Chapter 3, I assess some criticisms of the contemporary global human rights regime, and a proposed alternative: Thomas Pogge’s institutional model. In Chapter 4 I outline what I take to be the necessary conditions of environmental sustainability, and argue for integrity as a core environmental value. In Chapter 5 I address the question of what sort of political institutions foster sustainability. I also argue that an account of rights is vital to environmental sustainability. In Chapter 6 I draw together the assessments of human rights and environmental sustainability by considering (i) whether rights or sustainability could legitimately be prioritized over one another, and (ii) whether the idea of environmental human rights is (a) conceptually coherent and (b) politically attractive.