

The Earth Charter and Conservation

THE Earth Charter is a declaration of values and principles for a more just, sustainable and peaceful world. Very nice you say, but “what does such a document have to do with conservation and why is it of interest to the readers of *Pacific Conservation Biology*?” To answer these questions we must begin with a little history.

The idea for an Earth Charter was advanced by many groups in global civil society in the post-WWII years, beginning at least as early as the 1950s when the famous British scientist Julian Huxley proposed the idea to IUCN. In the 1980s numerous draft “charters” were composed by international civil society groups. In 1987 the idea was further advanced by the UN World Commission on Environment and Development, chaired by Gro Harlem Brundtland. Their report entitled *Our Common Future* stressed the need for action to ensure environmental protection and sustainable development, and called for creation of “a universal declaration” in the form of “a new charter” that would “consolidate and extend relevant legal principles” creating “new norms . . . needed to maintain livelihoods and life on our shared planet” and “to guide state behaviour in the transition to sustainable development.” The WCED also recommended that the new charter “be subsequently expanded into a Convention, setting out the sovereign rights and reciprocal responsibilities of all states on environmental protection and sustainable development” (Brundtland 1987).

An attempt was made to draft the Earth Charter at the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development (UNCED), the Earth Summit, held in Rio de Janeiro in 1992. But, national governments were not interested. A new Earth Charter Initiative was launched in 1994 as a civil society initiative, with the assistance of funding from the Netherlands and Costa Rica Governments, and subsequently by various philanthropic organizations. A secretariat was established in Costa Rica, eventually co-located at the University for Peace. During the years 1995 and 1996, extensive research was conducted in the fields of international law, science, religion, ethics, environmental conservation, and sustainable development in preparation for the drafting of the Earth Charter. The Earth Council and a number of partner organizations conducted Earth Charter consultations throughout the world in an effort to promote the global dialogue on common values and to clarify the emerging worldwide consensus regarding principles of environmental protection and sustainable living. This global consultation process continued until 2000, when

the Earth Charter was released at an event in The Hague Peace Palace.

The Earth Charter comprises an introduction (*Preamble*), a set of principles written in the style of ethical imperatives, and a concluding statement (*The Way Forward*). There are 77 principles organized around four main themes: (1) *Respect and Care for the Community of Life*; (2) *Ecological Integrity*; (3) *Social and Economic Justice*; and (4) *Democracy, Nonviolence and Peace*. Each theme has four main principles, each of which has a varying number of supporting principles. The principles in the first theme identify four core ethical commitments. Following these is a linking sentence “*In order to fulfil these four broad commitments, it is necessary to . . .*”. This makes clear that the 12 main principles under the following three themes are action orientated in that (if accepted) they impose an obligation for people (or organizations and states) to give them due moral consideration and modify their behaviour accordingly in order to advance the first four core ethical commitments.

This is all very good and interesting you say, but “what has it got to do with biological conservation?” Well, now we need to consider a bit of philosophy and something of the current geopolitical situation.

It is axiomatic that the scientific method demands objectivity in terms of hypothesis generation, experimental design, together with data analysis and interpretation. But, researchers are also citizens and members of communities, in addition to being scientists. As good citizens, researchers should be concerned with the social implications of their research investigations. In so doing, scientists endeavour to ensure that knowledge is applied in a responsible and hence ethical manner.

Ethics also plays out in the public as well as private spheres. National governments have legal and moral responsibilities to both their own citizens and those of other nations. For example, the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change imposes a legally binding obligation on national governments to “protect the climate system for the benefit of present and future generations of humankind . . .” and “take precautionary measures to anticipate, prevent or minimize the causes of climate change and mitigate its adverse effects. Where there are threats of serious or irreversible damage, lack of full scientific certainty should not be used as a reason for postponing such measures . . .” (UNFCCC 2005).

Under the UNFCCC, national governments, including Australia and the USA, have made a moral commitment to protecting Earth's climate system for the common good. When they chose to act in accordance with this principle, then national governments are using scientific knowledge about Earth's climate system to develop public policy and programme guided by universal ethical values. The UNFCCC is typical of international legal instrument in containing an introductory section that states a series of principles that governments should be guided by in fulfilling their legal obligations under the legal instrument. Shared values and ethical principles are the starting point and foundation of all international environmental law.

It is at this point in our discussion that philosophy and theoretical law must give way to geopolitical reality.

I am not alone in suggesting that the current international legal framework is inadequate given the environmental challenges we face in the coming decades — as so comprehensively documented by the Millennium Ecosystem Assessment (MER 2005). We need a new generation of hard and soft law that provides an order of magnitude increase in our collective capacity to protect and manage Earth's biodiversity and associated natural life support systems. However, the political will is currently lacking to meet existing commitments, let alone generate a new international legal framework and accompanying policies and programmes.

In his recent book *Red Sky at Morning* Gus Speth (Dean, Yale School of Forestry and Environmental Studies) discusses the need for "a new movement bringing together a wide array of civic, scientific, environmental, religious, student, and other organizations with enlightened business leaders, concerned families, and engaged communities, networked together, protesting, demanding action and accountability from governments and corporations, and taking steps as consumers and communities to realized sustainability in everyday life." (Speth 2005). Indeed, it is hard to imagine any national government taking a leadership role in transforming global environmental governance in the absence of strong public support for action.

The Earth Charter can play a unique role in addressing the legal and political impediments to more ecologically compatible forms of global governance. The Earth Charter presents a statement of shared values and principles on which to base the next generation of international law. Indeed, a sister document — a draft legal covenant on environment and development — has been produced by the IUCN (World Conservation Union) Commission on Environmental Law (IUCN 2004). As a civil society

document, the Earth Charter can be endorsed and adopted (i.e., applied) by individuals, communities, organizations and governments at all levels. In this way, the Charter can help inform concerned citizens (including scientists and conservation practitioners) and contribute to catalysing a people's movement in support of a more progressive and ecologically sustainable system of global environmental governance. It is early days, but already the Earth Charter has made an impact in this arena, having been formally endorsed by the IUCN and UNESCO.

Many who agree with its values and principles dismiss the Earth Charter on the basis that the "era of declarations" has come and gone and we should not waste any more time on such things, which merely serve to distract us from solving more urgent and practical problems. I am sympathetic to such action orientated people. However, in the same way that it takes time to "get the science right" when it comes to solving environmental problems, so must we be prepared to take a long-term strategic perspective if we are to have any hope of re-orientating the human endeavour to more ecologically desirable ends.

References

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