The Earth Charter

The Earth Charter is a declaration of fundamental principles for building a just, sustainable, and peaceful world. It endeavors to identify the critical challenges and choices facing humanity and to provide a moral framework for the development of the emerging global civilization. It is designed to inspire in all peoples a new sense of global interdependence and shared responsibility for the well-being of the human family, the greater community of life, and future generations. It is at once an urgent call for major social and economic change and an expression of hope. The principles in the Earth Charter were developed in and through a decade long, world-wide, cross-cultural, interfaith dialogue on common goals and shared values.

First proposed in Our Common Future (1987), the report of the United Nations World Commission on Environment and Development, the drafting of the Earth Charter was part of the unfinished business of the 1992 UN Rio Earth Summit. In 1994 Maurice Strong, the secretary general of the Earth Summit and chairman of the Earth Council, and Mikhail Gorbachev, the president of Green Cross International, launched a new Earth Charter initiative with support from the Dutch government. An Earth Charter Secretariat was established at the Earth Council in Costa Rica, and in 1997 an Earth Charter Commission of eminent persons with representation from all regions of the world was formed to oversee the project.

The Commission proceeded to draft the Earth Charter as a people’s treaty, because there was little interest among governments in negotiating new and stronger commitments regarding the environment and sustainable development. Thousands of
individuals and hundreds of organizations from Africa, the Americas, Asia and the Pacific, Europe, and the Middle East participated in creating the Earth Charter. Forty-five Earth Charter national committees were formed. Earth Charter dialogues were held in all regions of the world and on the internet. The project involved the most open and participatory consultation process ever conducted in connection with the drafting of an international document.

The ideas and values in the Earth Charter reflect the influence of a rich diversity of intellectual sources and social movements. These include over 50 international law declarations and treaties, the new scientific worldview being shaped by discoveries in physics, cosmology, and ecology, the wisdom of the world’s religions and philosophical traditions, and over 200 nongovernmental declarations and people’s treaties. The document reflects the concerns and aspirations expressed at the seven UN summit conferences held during the 1990s on human rights, population, children, women, social development, and the city as well as the environment. It also recognizes the importance of the spread of democracy for human development and environmental protection.
The Earth Charter is an especially significant product of the global ethics movement, which gained wide support in the 1990s. In an increasingly interdependent world, cooperative problem solving is a necessity, and effective collaboration among diverse cultures and peoples requires shared values. It has been the objective of the Earth Charter initiative not to impose the values of one group, culture, or tradition on all others, but rather to seek common ground while respecting and supporting cultural diversity. This meant, for example, that the Earth Charter could not employ theological language or the concept of animal rights, but the document does acknowledge the important role of religion in achieving sustainability and affirms that animals warrant moral consideration. The Earth Charter principles reflect a consensus on basic values that is taking form in the rapidly developing global civil society.

The vision of widely shared values in the Earth Charter does focus special attention on the environment. However, the document contains an inclusive and integrated ethical vision reflecting the realization that humanity’s environmental, economic, political, social, cultural, and spiritual challenges are interrelated. It recognizes, for example, the interconnections between the protection of ecosystems, the eradication of poverty, human rights, gender equality, economic justice, democracy, and a culture of peace. The result is a new holistic understanding of what constitutes a sustainable way of living and sustainable development.

At the heart of the Earth Charter is an ethic of respect and care for all life forms and the greater community of life, of which humanity is a part. The Earth Charter founds the principle of respect for all life on the recognition that all beings are interdependent and all life forms have value regardless of their worth to people. The sense of ethical
responsibility begins with an attitude of respect for others and finds expression in active caring, which involves the prevention of harm and the promotion of well-being. A fundamental purpose of the Earth Charter is to encourage all peoples to identify with the whole Earth community as well as their local communities and to expand their moral concern and caring to include the present and future well-being of the entire human family and the larger living world.

The ethics of the Earth Charter are grounded in a vision of widely shared spiritual values. For example, the document affirms, “when basic needs have been met, human development is primarily about being more, not having more.” It asserts, “the spirit of human solidarity and kinship with all life is strengthened when we live with reverence for the mystery of being, gratitude for the gift of life, and humility regarding the human place in nature.” The Earth Charter culminates with a vision of peace and the joyful celebration of life.

A final version of the Earth Charter was approved by the Earth Charter Commission in March 2000. A new phase in the Earth Charter initiative began with the official launching of the Earth Charter at the Peace Palace in The Hague the following June. Efforts are now underway to disseminate the Charter around the world, to promote its educational use in schools, universities, and faith communities, and to encourage its endorsement and implementation by civil society, business, government, and the United Nations General Assembly. Thousands of local, national, and international organizations, including hundreds of local governments, have endorsed the document and are using it as an educational tool and guide to a sustainable way of living.
Further Reading

www.earthcharter.org

www.earthchartersummit.org


Rockefeller, Steven C. “The Earth Charter: Building a Global Culture of Peace.” The Ecozoic Reader 2 (Fall 2001),1:3-11.