

**Excerpt of Remarks on the Earth Charter  
by Steven Rockefeller – 29 June 2000  
The Earth Charter Launch**

Humanity is at a turning point in history. What we do or fail to do will have far reaching ramifications for future generations and the greater community of life. It is fitting that we are gathered here in the Peace Palace for our goal is peace on Earth. This is an old human aspiration, but we are still learning what real peace requires of us and how to achieve it.

Over 2,500 years ago the prophet Isaiah in ancient Israel had a vision of world peace that emphasized justice for all and equity for the poor and he imagined a spirit of respect for life and non-violence pervading the whole world. "They will not hurt or destroy" throughout all the Earth, wrote Isaiah. Over the centuries, in both the East and West, there have been many prophets and courageous women and men who have understood that peace requires of us respect for life, justice, economic equity, and non-violence, *ahimsa* as it is known in India. However, those in positions of power and influence have rarely taken this way of thinking to heart, and for most of us, an understanding of it has been momentary or partial at best. Now as we stand at the dawn of the 21st Century and a new millennium, an appreciation of this inclusive vision and wholehearted commitment to realizing it is a matter of the utmost urgency. It is essential to the survival of human civilization and to the well-being of the greater community of life of which we humans are interdependent members.

The story of the United Nations reflects humanity's struggle to understand the true nature and scope of the challenges before it. When the UN was formed following World War II, its Charter included a commitment to promote world peace, equitable socio-economic development, and respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms. However, it would be over two and a half decades before environmental conservation was added to the UN agenda. This occurred in 1972 at the Stockholm Conference on the Human Environment under the leadership of Maurice Strong. The World Charter for Nature adopted by the UN General Assembly in 1982 added important new insights to the Stockholm vision. It was, for example, the first international instrument to affirm respect for nature and all life forms as the foundation principle for an ethic of caring for Earth's ecological systems. When the industrialized world learns to respect nature, we will abandon the very harmful notion that Earth and other life forms are merely a collection of resources that exist for human exploitation.

Since Stockholm--and especially in the last decade--there has been a growing realization that humanity's environmental, economic, and social challenges are interrelated and require holistic thinking, the cooperation of all sectors of society, and integrated problem solving. The Earth Charter builds on this developing understanding of the need for a global partnership and an integrated approach to the great challenges facing the human family. It provides a fresh concise formulation of this emerging consensus, offering a new framework for public policy and decision making.

The Earth Charter, which was first proposed by the Brundtland Commission in 1987, does focus special attention on the environment and the idea of sustainability. All the principles in the Charter are related to environmental issues, but they do not deal exclusively with environmental issues. The Earth Charter vision reflects the conviction that caring for people and caring for Earth are two interdependent dimensions of one task. We cannot care for people in a world with collapsing ecosystems, and we cannot care for Earth in a world with widespread poverty, injustice, economic inequity, and violent conflict.

The Earth Charter is a declaration of fundamental ethical principles for building a just, sustainable, and peaceful global society. It is an expression of the hopes and aspirations of women and men in diverse cultures and communities throughout the world. It recognizes the great value of cultural diversity and the vital importance of our local commitments. However, it seeks to inspire in all peoples a new sense of global interdependence and shared responsibility for the well-being of the human family and the greater community of life. Global interdependence and universal responsibility are the core message of the Earth Charter.

The Earth Charter contains a preamble, sixteen main principles, sixty-one supporting principles, and a conclusion entitled "The Way Forward." The preamble describes in general terms the basic challenges ahead and the need for a shared ethical vision. The sixteen main principles are divided into four parts with titles that identify the major themes around which the principles are organized. The titles of the four parts indicate the inclusive nature of the Earth Charter vision. The conclusion is a call to commitment and action.

The first four principles, which are found in Part I, are very broad in scope, and they can be used as a brief overview of the Earth Charter vision.

1. *Respect Earth and life in all its diversity.*
2. *Care for the community of life with understanding, compassion, and love.*
3. *Build democratic societies that are just, participatory, sustainable, and peaceful.*
4. *Secure Earth's bounty and beauty for present and future generations.*

The first principle on respect for life in all its diversity is the foundation of the other three and of all the other principles in the Earth Charter. Our sense of moral responsibility flows from an attitude of respect. The second, third, and fourth principles deal with the three major spheres of human relationship and ethical responsibility--relations between human beings and the greater community of life, relations among human beings in society, and relations between present and future generations. In the Earth Charter vision, future generations and other life forms are part of the moral community to which we belong.

The twelve main principles and their supporting principles that follow in Parts II, III, and IV spell out more fully the meaning of the first four principles in Part I. The principles in the Charter set forth fundamental ethical guidelines and identify major strategies. The Charter does not attempt to describe the mechanisms and instruments required to implement its ethical and strategic vision.

Among the major sources of Earth Charter values are the following: contemporary science, international law, the wisdom of the world's religions and philosophical traditions, the seven UN Summit meetings held during the 1990s, the new ethics of environment and development, the global ethics movement, over 200 NGO declarations issued since Stockholm, and best practices for sustainable living, ancient and contemporary.

There have been many extended debates over the wording of the principles and these debates often reflected differing cultural perspectives. However, in the vast majority of cases we were able to find common ground. The good news from the Earth Charter project is that a consensus on global ethics is emerging in all regions of the world. It is also the case that different cultures may interpret the meaning of the principles somewhat differently. There has been and always will be, of course, an ongoing discussion about the meaning of all important texts. This is inevitable and healthy. A document like the Earth Charter does, however, frame the debate and focuses the discussion on critical issues.

Perhaps the most difficult issue for the drafting committee was the debate over a very short text with ten or twelve principles and a longer more substantial document like an intergovernmental declaration. However, the consultation process made it clear that a very brief text of a page or less would not win wide support. Many groups on the front lines of social change felt that such a text would be so general as to be insufficient. Groups who are marginalized and excluded from decision making processes were especially insistent about the need for the supporting principles that spell out more fully the meaning of the main principles.

In the end we opted for a layered document. The first four principles, which contain 39 words, can be used as a very short summary of the Earth Charter vision. The Preamble and sixteen main principles can be used as an abbreviated version that fits easily on a poster or a one-page handout. The longer text, however, is there for those who want the vision elaborated and clarified. It is especially valuable as both an educational tool and soft law instrument.

Over the next few years the document will be circulated as a people's charter to civil society, the business community, and governments throughout the world. With the help of many partner organizations and Earth Charter national committees, a variety of programs and campaigns will be undertaken to mobilize support for the spirit and aims of the Earth Charter and to promote implementation of its principles.

The Earth Charter is a valuable educational tool and is already being used in schools, universities, faith communities, and other organizations. Educational materials are being designed and disseminated to support these activities. Discussion of the Earth Charter in classrooms, conferences, and workshops can heighten awareness of the basic challenges and choices that face humanity. It can help people learn to think globally and holistically. It can focus attention on fundamental ethical issues and their interconnectedness. It can serve as a catalyst for cross-cultural and interfaith dialogue on shared values and global ethics.

The Earth Charter can be used effectively as a values framework for designing sustainable development plans at all levels of government. The Earth Council in Costa Rica is encouraging use of the Earth Charter by national councils of sustainable development, and the International Council for Local Environmental Initiatives (ICLEI), which represents over 350 cities, towns, and counties around the world, is promoting its use among municipal governments.

It is a soft law instrument that provides an ethical foundation for the ongoing development of international and national law. In this regard the Earth Charter Initiative will continue to work closely with the Commission on Environmental Law at the World Conservation Union (IUCN).

In civil society and the business community, the Earth Charter is being promoted as a call to action and guide to a sustainable way of life. It can be used to inspire hope, commitment, a sense of global citizenship, and a spirit of cooperation. It shifts authority from the political ideologies dominant in the twentieth century to an integrated vision of ethical values.

The Charter can be used as a values framework to help design professional codes of conduct in all sectors of society. It is also a valuable instrument for assessing progress toward building a just, sustainable and peaceful society and for promoting transparency and accountability in government, business, and civil society.

The Millennium NGO Forum, which assembled representatives of over 1,000 nongovernmental organizations at the UN Headquarters last May, called on governments to endorse the Earth Charter through the UN General Assembly. The Earth Charter Initiative will be working to secure that endorsement by 2002. The Millennium NGO Forum also urged "civil society to adopt and disseminate the Earth Charter as a tool for promotion of values and actions which will create sustainable development." ("We the Peoples Millennium Forum Declaration and Agenda for Action *Strengthening the United Nations for the 21st Century*" May, 2000) This is beginning to happen. The Earth Charter Initiative encourages such endorsements when appropriate. Wide support of this nature enhances the chances of endorsement by the UN General Assembly. However, we are most concerned to help organizations and committees find ways to use the document and to implement its principles.

From the very beginning, the leaders of the Earth Charter Initiative have been concerned that the document address the spiritual and ethical dimensions of the way to a better future for all. This is a distinctive feature of the Charter. In conclusion, I would like to reflect on one aspect of this part of the Earth Charter vision. The Charter recognizes that in order to find solutions to the problems of the planet and to build enduring peace, sound knowledge and wide understanding are essential but not sufficient. A spirit of compassion and love is also necessary. "Care for the community of life with understanding, compassion, and love" affirms the Earth Charter in Principle 2. Our best thought and action flow from the integration of the head and the heart, science and faith, intelligence and compassion. Here lies the great spiritual challenge of the 21st century and a path to individual fulfillment, social transformation, and ecological well-

being. The Earth Charter summons us anew to join hands and to dedicate ourselves to this endeavor.