

A Reflection on The Earth Charter Project and its Mission in the Anthropocene

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A Time of Hope

For those of us lucky enough to have been born in North American, Australia, western Europe and other wealthy countries that have escaped warfare through invasion or civil war in their homelands, the last 50 years appeared to herald a golden age of ever-rising levels of material wealth, security, education, health and environmental protection. For the vast majority of people whose experiences have been otherwise, there was perhaps still a belief in a rising tide of a better life for all; and if not for us then our children. The United Nations for all its faults continued to advance peaceful international cooperation, democracy was in the ascendency, environmental protection and nature conservation were recognized in policy and law, civil society gained strength and organizational clout, and the internet meant that at least no injustice need go unwitnessed. We were still on a hard road but the end of the journey if not in view could at least be imagined as a greener, fairer and more prosperous world.

The Earth Charter was a child of the optimistic post-cold war era, posing a radical proposition to the world community: could international affairs be as strongly directed by ethical considerations as they are by narrowly defined national self-interest? By definition, ethics refers to considering what is right or wrong regarding our treatment of others. In the context of international relations, the ‘our’ refers to national governments and the ‘others’ clearly means citizens in other countries as well as our own. In practice, ethics in international relations is considered relevant up to the point it becomes inconvenient with standard diplomacy based on the sophism that nations have interests, not friends.¹ As the British political analyst Hobbes noted, the general state of international affairs is

¹ N. Dower (1998) *World Ethics: The New Agenda*. Edinburgh. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press.

either one of war or war readiness.² The Earth Charter offered a counter-narrative to this conventional state of world affairs.

A formal process to draft a negotiated Earth Charter was intended to be one of the outcomes of the 1992 Rio Earth Summit. Alas, the international community passed on this opportunity instead supporting the more action focussed set of so-called Rio Commitments which included Agenda 21, the Rio Declaration, The United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change and The Convention on Biological Diversity.³ In the wake of the failure of the Earth Summit to endorse an Earth Charter drafting process, a decision was taken by notable leaders behind the Summit's organization to establish a civil society initiative. Freed from the constraints of governmental processes, the Earth Charter Initiative decided to draft the text as a "People's Charter" which meant its ethical values and obligations could extend beyond governments to all communities and kinds of social organization.⁴

Untethered from what would have been taunt and constraining formal U.N. negotiations, the Earth Charter Initiative⁵ drafted a text drawing upon the findings from a global consultation process and a systematic review of principles that had already found expression in international documents.⁴ This time consuming, but deliberative and consultative process was designed so that the Earth Charter could emerge as a progressive world ethic of shared values and principles that complement those ethical norms that are situated within specific cultural and geographical contexts. The drafting process however did draw boundaries, for example, by limiting the text to ethical values and principles for which there was evidence of, among other things, a broad and diverse base of support either in civil society or as articulated in formal intergovernmental deliberations. The main material evidence that there is a global base of support for the Earth Charter is the 7,270 organisations and 34,971 individuals as of December 2016 who have formally endorsed the Earth Charter since its launch at the Hague Peace Palace in the year 2000.

² T. Thomas (1651). *Leviathan*, edited by Tuck R. Cambridge, MA: Cambridge University Press.

³ See *The Rio Earth Summit: Summary of the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development* prepared by Stephanie Meakin, Science and Technology Division, Government of Canada. November 1992; <http://publications.gc.ca/Collection-R/LoPBdP/BP/bp317-e.htm> History of the Earth Charter; <http://earthcharter.org/discover/history-of-the-earth-charter/>

⁴ *History of the Earth Charter*; <http://earthcharter.org/discover/history-of-the-earth-charter/>

⁵ The Earth Charter Initiative encompasses Earth Charter International (ECI) which is comprised of the ECI Secretariat and the ECI Council, along with the global network of organisations and individuals who have endorsed the Earth Charter; see <http://earthcharter.org/>

At a fundamental level, the Earth Charter greatly extended conventional international ethical norms by proposing a definition of ‘other’ that include not only all people in all countries, but future generations and the greater community of life – the species and ecosystems with whom we share Earth as home. From this Earth Charter perspective, the community that warrants our moral consideration encompasses but extends far beyond our fellow citizens.

A Harder Road Emerges

There are threads in human affairs that persist through time, culture and landscape with war, hunger, disease and environmental degradation seemingly our constant companions. But despite progress on many fronts, these evils persist and their aggregated impact at a global scale present in a literal sense an existential threat to the human project. We can truly say that for the first time because of human activity nearly half of the diversity and abundance of life on Earth is lost and the future of what’s left is bleak.⁶ For the first time, the impacts of human activity are breaching planetary boundaries that have provided a safe haven since the advent of hunter-gatherer societies and the emergence of farming.⁷ Neither must forget the all too real potential for the utter destruction of Earth through global warfare as the risk of nuclear holocaust is growing not diminishing each year.⁸ The land and seas is rapidly being appropriated for industrial scale production of food, fibre and energy, gobbling up ecosystems with Earth being treated as little more than a source of raw materials, a waste dump, or a substrate for human infrastructure. We now impact the atmosphere and oceans as much as the land⁹. None withstanding the positive, speculative fiction of Hollywood movies, as far as we know we are alone in the universe and there is no Planet B to which we can migrate. In contrast to these escapist fantasies, authors like Margaret Atwood paint a bleaker Earth-bound world and a more hardened road ahead.¹⁰

The flames of the prevailing global threats were well and truly alight in 1992 and in plain sight for all to see when the Earth Charter was launched to bring in the new millennium. Not surprisingly, we now face ever increasing deteriorating environmental, social and economic conditions and

⁶ WWF. 2016. *Living Planet Report 2016*. Risk and resilience in a new era. WWF International, Gland, Switzerland

⁷ W. Steffen et al. (2015) Planetary boundaries: Guiding human development on a changing planet. . *Science*. 347 (6223): 1259855. doi:10.1126/science.1259855.

⁸ See Doomsday Clock; Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists; <http://thebulletin.org/timeline>

⁹ T.F. Stocker, D. Qin, G.-K. Plattner, M. Tignor, S.K. Allen, J. Boschung, A. Nauels, Y. Xia, V. Bex and P.M. Midgley (eds.), *Climate Change 2013: The Physical Science Basis*. Contribution of Working Group I to the Fifth Assessment Report of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, Cambridge: Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, Cambridge University Press, 2013.

¹⁰ See *The MaddAddam Trilogy* by Margaret Atwood; <http://margaretatwood.ca/maddaddam-trilogy/>

regression in many national, regional and international settings of the hard-fought for governance and regulatory policies, laws, and institutional arrangements that were established to protect our environment and promote sustainability. Recent events have laid bare the root causes of these regressive developments and the compounding interconnections that feed and drive them. Included here must be the growing power of the industrial-military complex, forewarned by U.S. President Eisenhower when in his 1961 farewell speech he argued that “In the councils of government, we must guard against the acquisition of unwarranted influence, whether sought or unsought, by the military industrial complex. The potential for the disastrous rise of misplaced power exists and will persist.” Presciently, in the same speech he also noted the associated risks arising from technological innovation.¹¹ We now find that that industrial military complex is morphing into a hitherto unimaginably bloated industrial-military-technological-financial global complex. This is readily imagined as a soulless, self-serving beast without ethics that is further fed and enabled by the rise of bigoted, nationalistic totalitarian political parties and leaders who garner popular support through undermining democratic processes and public good policies and outcomes. ‘Talk of a ‘soulless beast’ is of course nothing more than a clichéd metaphor and the reality we are dealing with is more accurately described as overlapping and interacting domains of power, capital and influence, each one of which is an amorphous cloud of self-serving networks.

Sustainability has become the utopian chapeau term for what philosophers call “the good life”. It is often portrayed as a journey where the world’s problems of environmental degradation, war and violence, tyranny, and economic equity, are progressively addressed through a combination of public policy reform, private sector innovation, and responsible consumerism. An in-depth discussion of the promise of sustainability in the context of the Earth Charter can be found by Ron Engel in the Encyclopedia of Bioethics.¹² Sustainable development pathways leading to sustainability utopias are given expression using scenarios reflecting different plausible future socio-economic futures; including scenarios where transformation change is envisaged, tracking humanity to new utopias.¹³

Are such utopian visions supported by the contemporary geopolitical realities? Perhaps the metaphor of “roads and pathways” is misleading and the reality is that we are simply on a hard road

¹¹ For the text of this speech see <http://coursesa.matrix.msu.edu/~hst306/documents/indust.html>

¹² R. Engel (2014) Sustainability In *Encyclopedia of Bioethics*, 4th Edition, Editor-in-Chief, Bruce Jennings. New York: Macmillan, pp.3040-3051.

¹³ R.A. Roehrl (2012). *Sustainable development scenarios for Rio+20*. A Component of the Sustainable Development in the 21st Century (SD21) project. New York: United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs, Division for Sustainable Development; <https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/content/documents/793SD21%20scenario%20report.pdf>

without end. If so, is there no room for optimism in the era many now call the Anthropocene and will history view the Earth Charter's grand vision as just a wistful expression of a passing optimistic moment in human history?

The Work of the Earth Charter in the Anthropocene

The notion that good will inevitably prevail in the human project because it is divinely pre-ordained or the inevitable consequence of a rising tide of cosmic consciousness is an indulgence we cannot afford. As history documents, good and bad things happen because of the choices people make and the actions they take. If sustainability is to be progressed, it will require lifelong commitment by people of courage. We must have faith in the ability of people, individually and collectively in their communities and polity, to make judgements about what is right and wrong in human affairs and have the courage of conviction to take the actions needed to advance that which is judged good and promote justice to counter the bad.

The required work is difficult and everyone has a different role to play and contribution to make. Not everyone can go to U.N. summits, has the ear of heads of state, or can have their voice heard in national policy debates. But everyone can start working within their own spheres of influence however small or large they may be; though this is far more easily said than done. Often the hardest spheres to work in are those that intersect most with our personal life - our family, friends, neighbourhood and workplace. Engaging with local government, professional associates and national entities brings different kinds of challenges. If we are truly committed to influencing societal change in ways that give expression to the Earth Charter's ethic, then action of some kind is required on our part. To do otherwise is to risk suffering the cognitive dissonance that arrives when our actions do not reflect our inner convictions. I would like to comment on three areas where the Earth Charter can be put to useful work: education, governance and activism. And in doing so, keeping in mind the four ethical pillars of the Earth Charter - (1) Respect and Care for the Community of Life, (2) Ecological Integrity, (3) Social and Economic Justice, and (4) Democracy, Nonviolence and Peace - as these provide the foundation of a world ethic on which to our collective goal of a more just, sustainable and peaceful world.

Education

A major purpose role of the Earth Charter is in education and the Charter explicitly recognizes this and provides guidance through principle 14 *Integrate into formal education and life-long learning the knowledge, values, and skills needed for a sustainable way of life – (a) Provide all, especially children and youth, with educational opportunities that empower them to contribute actively to sustainable development; (b) Promote the contribution of the arts and humanities as well as the sciences in sustainability education; (c) Enhance the role of the mass media in raising awareness of ecological and social challenges; and (d) Recognize the importance of moral and spiritual education for sustainable living.*

A consultation with leading educators starting in 2001 identified ways in which the Earth Charter can be used to develop an approach to “values education” and key principles were identified for guiding development of education programs based on the Earth Charter¹⁴. The report highlighted that values education requires teachers and learners to be aware of the need to avoid proselytising, respect the right of individual learners to independently hold values, and understand that within the search for common ground there remain important values associated with cultural diversity. As a global ethic for a more sustainable way of living, the Earth Charter can be used to achieve three key educational objectives: (1) consciousness-raising about problems of environment and development and their solutions; (2) application of values and principles to local and global problems; and (3) to serve as a call for action and partnership. The Earth Charter has an additional educational role to play in promoting ongoing dialogue about, and intellectual inquiry, into global ethics. As noted in the Earth Charter conclusion, we have much to learn from the ongoing collaborative search for truth and wisdom. I will say more on this point shortly.

The educators also noted that open, participatory, inclusive educational processes are needed which are transdisciplinary in character, utilising experiential learning activities. The group discussed the difficulties of introducing additional material into an already crowded discipline-based curriculum and the benefits of integrating ethics educational activities and outcomes into existing subject material. Regression is also apparent in many of our educational systems, particularly in our publicly funded systems, with teachers under increasing stress and declining resources. Therefore, the constraints and barriers faced by teachers in bringing values, ethics and Earth Charter-specific

¹⁴ *Synthesis Report on The Earth Charter Initiative Education Advisory Committee* – 2001. Edited by Brendan Mackey. Published by Earth Charter Initiative; <http://earthcharter.org/virtual-library2/synthesis-report-on-the-earth-charter-initiative-education-advisory-committee-online-discussion-forum-2001/>

education activities into the mainstream curricula of their schools and universities are perhaps even greater today than they were at the turn of the millennium.

Governance

As noted, the Earth Charter was originally conceived as the negotiating text for an international declaration to be drafted and finalised through a U.N. mediated process. As a Peoples' Charter, however, its brief was expanded as proclaimed in the final paragraph of the Preamble:

We urgently need a shared vision of basic values to provide an ethical foundation for the emerging world Community. Therefore, together in hope we affirm the following interdependent principles for a sustainable way of life as a common standard by which the conduct of all individuals, organizations, businesses, governments, and transnational institutions is to be guided and assessed.

The Earth Charter value to governance at the international and national levels stems from the legitimacy and authority it can validly claim in helping establish universal ethical norms for a more just, sustainable and peaceful world. Internationally, notable endorsees of the Earth Charter include UNESCO and the International Union for Conservation of Nature. Thus, while a Peoples' Charter and one that has yet to be endorsed by the U.N. General Assembly, the Earth Charter can claim international soft law status in the same sense as other ethical declarations such as the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples.

The Earth Charter therefore can still play a significant role in global governance and international relations. For example, Klaus Bosselmann, Peter Brown and myself argued that the concept of a “green economy” remains illusionary without major reforms of the U.N. system of global governance; and that reforms in governance require the implementation of a new economic vision¹⁵. The necessary integrative perspective requires a commonly shared moral basis, as exemplified by the Earth Charter. We proposed that the global scope of the challenges, together with the special requirements of common goods, will require a new “World Environment Organization” mandated with a trusteeship function over global public goals and common goods whose duties would include: global obligations for the integrity of planetary boundaries and the wellbeing of the greater community of life; overseeing markets to ensure that they are protective of non-market common

¹⁵ K. Bosselmann, P.G. Brown and B. Mackey (2012) Enabling a Flourishing Earth: Challenges for the Green Economy, Opportunities for Global Governance. *Review of European Community & International Environmental Law* 21, 23-39.

goods; and ensuring impartiality between all interests - individual, civil society, corporate, national - along with respect for human rights and concern for ecological wellbeing. We further argued that the Earth Charter articulated the ethical basis of these trusteeship duties. These and related concepts are also discussed in depth by Klaus Bosselmann, Ron Engel and colleagues in their 2010 volume entitled The Earth Charter: A Framework for Global Governance.¹⁶

The Earth Charter's ethical framework is also highly relevant to the growing issue of climate justice in all its complex dimensions. The Paris Agreement notes the importance of ensuring the integrity of all ecosystems, including oceans, and the protection of biodiversity, recognized by some cultures as Mother Earth, along with the importance of "climate justice".¹⁷ The Agreement also acknowledges that climate change is a common concern of humankind, and that Parties should, when taking action to address climate change, respect, promote and consider their respective obligations on human rights, the right to health, the rights of indigenous peoples, local communities, migrants, children, persons with disabilities and people in vulnerable situations and the right to development. As discussed in an article I wrote with Nicole Rogers,¹⁸ intergenerational and Earth justice require nations to consider the long-term consequences of their negotiations. Current governments must meet the costs of making the extensive changes necessary to reduce emissions while the benefits will largely accrue to future generations. National governments must place the needs of future generations and other species ahead of short-term national self-interest. The Earth Charter's holistic ethical framework provides concrete guidance for unpacking the meaning of justice and equity in the contact of climate change and sustainable development.

To the degree its soft law status is accepted, as noted by Francisco Javier and Camarena Juarez in their essay on how the Earth Charter has influenced sustainable development related policy in Mexico,¹⁹ the Earth Charter is an instrument that can and should permeate in the decisions of National Executive Powers, Legislative and Judicial, in the public policies, and in the reasoning and discussions of judicial sentences. As they document, the Earth Charter has been endorsed by the

¹⁶ Klaus Bosselmann and J. Ronald Engel, eds., *The Earth Charter: A Framework for Global Governance*. Amsterdam: KIT Publishers, 2010; <http://www.worldcat.org/title/earth-charter-a-framework-for-global-governance/oclc/659911841>

¹⁷ The Paris Agreement on climate change;

https://unfccc.int/files/essential_background/convention/application/pdf/english_paris_agreement.pdf

¹⁸ B. Mackey and N. Rogers (2015) Climate justice and the distribution of rights to emit carbon. Chapter 13 In *Access to International Justice*. P. Keyzer, V. Popovski and C. Sampford (eds.) Routledge, pp 225-240.

¹⁹ Francisco Javier and Camarena Juarez (2014) The Earth Charter. An Instrument of Environmental Policy in Mexico-a Soft Law or Hard Policy Perspective, chapter 19 in *The Earth Charter, Ecological Integrity and Social Movements* edited by Laura Westra and Mirian Vilela. Taylor and Francis eBooks.

Mexican Government and used to guide various policies and programmes on sustainable development particularly in relation to local communities, and various states and cities in Mexico are formalising adoption of the Earth Charter through legislation.

Activism

A casual reader of the Earth Charter, giving it a quick scan, might find it an inspiring text but one that gives little direction by way of implementation, as it does not specify on who or where the many responsibilities implied by its 77 principles lay, and is soft on enforcement given that the document lacks any accountability measures. A more careful reading, however, reveals that while the text may lack such teeth it does contain a host of imperatives demanding strong if not radical action including principles 9a (*Guarantee the right to potable water, clean air, food security, uncontaminated soil, shelter, and safe sanitation, allocating the national and international resources required*), 9c (*Recognize the ignored, protect the vulnerable, serve those who suffer, and enable them to develop their capacities and to pursue their aspirations*), 10 (*Ensure that economic activities and institutions at all levels promote human development in an equitable and sustainable manner*), 11a (*Secure the human rights of women and girls and end all violence against them*), and 13c (*Eliminate corruption in all public and private institutions*).

It is hard to imagine how environmental rights, protecting vulnerable people, ending violence against woman, and eliminating corruption, can be progressed let alone achieved in any country without politically engaged activism on the part of civil society. When we do take the Earth Charter's call to action seriously and use its principles to help guide activism aimed at addressing real world problems, we inevitably confront matters of power, capital, politics, and vested interests. We can see that this need for activism to advance environmental justice is recognized by Earth Charter as a necessary societal response in the light of principle 13c (*Protect the rights to freedom of opinion, expression, peaceful assembly, association, and dissent*); which in turn needs to be interpreted in light of principle 16 (*Promote a culture of tolerance, nonviolence and peace*).

Discussion of activism in the contemporary context also demands we consider the problems of war, the impacts of war on the environment, the devastation war brings to human communities, the religious-nature of many of the conflicts persisting across the planet, and the shocking plight of war refugees. Neither should we forget the black shadow of global nuclear holocaust that hangs over all

our lives from the 10,000 warheads still deployed among the 11 nuclear armed countries.²⁰ As the scientists responsible for the Doomsday Clock recently noted, with particular concern for the twin risks from nuclear war and anthropogenic climate change: “...The probability of global catastrophe is very high, and the actions needed to reduce the risks of disaster must be taken very soon. In 2017, we find the danger to be even greater, the need for action more urgent. It is two and a half minutes to midnight, the Clock is ticking, global danger looms...”²¹

The need and opportunity is there for us to bringing the ethical values and principles of the Earth Charter to the frontline of sustainability activism.

Updating the Earth Charter

In parallel with actions that make use of the Earth Charter in education, governance and activism, I would like to now suggest that we consider an additional task over the coming years for the Earth Charter Initiative, namely, to review and update the Earth Charter in light of issues arising and our responses since the Earth Charter was launched in the year 2000. The kind of updating I am proposing would involve additional text being written that becomes, through an appropriate vetting process, formally associated with the Earth Charter text as “Addendum”; analogous to how “Amendments” are added to the Constitution of the United States of America without changing the existing articles. I am not suggesting here, therefore, that the text of the Earth Charter as written be altered in any way as its vision remains valid, its articulation inspirational and its principles enduring.

I argue this task warrants consideration because much has happened over the last 16 years that has enriched and added to the global dialogue on ethics and sustainability, in both formal policy forums and in civil society dialogue. Furthermore, many problems, such as climate change, have escalated to be of preminent concern that demand our attention, along with new problems arising from disruptions caused by large scale industrialisation and technological innovation, among other things. If the Earth Charter is not somehow updated from time to time then we risk it being seen as only an historic document or, worse still, as an ethic that is out-of-touch with the current problems dominating our era.

²⁰ See Doomsday Clock, Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists, Nuclear Notebook – Nuclear arsenals of the World; <http://thebulletin.org/nuclear-notebook-multimedia>

²¹ 2017 Doomsday Clock Statement Science and Security Board Bulletin of the Atomic Scientist; <http://thebulletin.org/sites/default/files/Final%202017%20Clock%20Statement.pdf>

There are three specific and related tasks needed to update the Charter in the manner I am suggesting. First, new principles are needed that address themes and terms that have crystallised and found a level of international support that was not apparent during the drafting process. Second, a review is needed of recent declarations and treaties promulgated by the international community. A third task is to capture new concepts and terms that have become germane to the sustainability agenda.

A good example of the first task is the term ‘Mother Earth’ which has now received formal recognition through the U.N. General Assembly’s adoption of the resolution to designate 22 April as International Mother Earth Day. The proclamation text acknowledged that “the Earth and its ecosystems are our home”, and expressed its conviction that, in order to achieve a just balance among the economic, social and environmental needs of present and future generations, “it is necessary to promote harmony with nature and the Earth”.²² Mother Earth is also referenced in the Paris Agreement on climate change under the U.N. Framework Convention on Climate Change.²³ The Universal Declaration on the Rights of Mother Earth is a civil society text promoted by the rights of nature movement that further demonstrates the extent to which expressions such as Mother Earth and legal concepts such as ‘rights of nature’ have become widely used internationally.²⁴ The ethical significance of the expression “Mother Earth” was made clear to me when in an Earth Charter conversation, Leonardo Boff noted that the juxtaposition of the two words makes it clear that some things are not for sale. At the time of the Earth Charter’s drafting, a judgement was made that the term was not sufficiently recognized internationally, outside of Indigenous circles where it resonated strongly. Clearly, this situation has changed dramatically over the last 16 years and the concept of Mother Earth warrants being embraced by the Earth Charter.

Examples of the second task include the U.N. Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP) and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). UNDRIP, as the name suggests is a declaration of the U.N. General Assembly.²⁵ While the Earth Charter has a principle that speaks to this theme (*12b Affirm the right of indigenous peoples to their spirituality, knowledge, lands and resources and to*

²² General Assembly proclaims 22 April ‘International Mother Earth Day’ adopting by consensus Boliva-led resolution. United Nations Press report; <http://www.un.org/press/en/2009/ga10823.doc.htm>

²³ The Paris Agreement of the U.N. Framework Convention on Climate Change; https://unfccc.int/files/essential_background/convention/application/pdf/english_paris_agreement.pdf

²⁴ See The Global Alliance for the Rights of Nature; a copy of the Declaration can be accessed at <https://therightsofnature.org/wp-content/uploads/pdfs/FINAL-UNIVERSAL-DECLARATION-OF-THE-RIGHTS-OF-MOTHER-EARTH-APRIL-22-2010.pdf>

²⁵ United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples; http://www.un.org/esa/socdev/unpfii/documents/DRIPS_en.pdf

their related practice of sustainable livelihoods), UNDRIP however provides a rich and detailed articulation of Indigenous world views, values, and ethical principles. Indigenous communities made a significant contribution to the drafting of the Earth Charter, including *Principle 15: Treat all living beings with respect and consideration - (a) Prevent cruelty to animals kept in human societies and protect them from suffering; (b) Protect wild animals from methods of hunting, trapping, and fishing that cause extreme, prolonged, or avoidable suffering; and (c) Avoid or eliminate to the full extent possible the taking or destruction of non-targeted species*. Acknowledging UNDRIP through an Earth Charter Addendum would help honour the ongoing contribution of Indigenous Peoples to sustainability.

Another important international soft law document that demands its own addendum in an Earth Charter update is the SDGs²⁶. These are now being used to frame all international dialogue and negotiations concerning environment and development and thus cannot be ignored when considering global ethics. Fortunately, there is in fact a positive synergy between the two documents that can be readily acknowledged and drawn upon. Each of the 17 SDG goal has associated targets which can be used to track progress. The means by which these goals and targets are achieved however, are not spelt out in the text. The Earth Charter, on the other hand, while also not prescribing practically how these goals can be achieved, does provide a set of ethical principles that can be used to guide our decision making and behaviours when working out how best to achieve the SDGs. The SDGs, therefore, seek to guide the international community by posing a specific set of sustainability goals or ‘ends’ while the Earth Charter provides ethical guidance when making decision to help promote sustainability. Thus, the Earth Charter can be interpreted as an articulation of the “ethical means” by which the SDGs’ “just ends” can be met.

The third task is more open ended as it requires a constant scanning of how the sustainability dialogue is evolving. For example, consistent with the Earth Charter’s principle of ecological integrity (*5. Protect and restore the integrity of Earth’s ecological systems, with special concern for biological diversity and the natural processes that sustain life*) we have seen the emergence and increasing use of the science-based concepts of “planetary boundaries”. Planetary boundaries are a set of biophysical global indicators that measure the degree to which human activities have degraded environmental life support systems. The idea is that if we can limit the impacts of human activities so that these impacts stay within specific biophysical thresholds, Earth’s environment will continue to provide the

²⁶ The Sustainable Development Goals. Transforming our world: the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable. Resolution adopted by the General Assembly on 25 September 2015; <http://www.un.org/sustainabledevelopment/sustainable-development-goals/>

natural processes that sustain life.²⁷ Regrettably, three of the nine boundaries have already been crossed: biosphere integrity, biochemical flows, and atmospheric greenhouse gas concentrations. Another science based term that is related to ecological integrity is “The Anthropocene” (which I have referenced in the title and various sections of this essay), defined as the time period recognized by geological science starting when humans began to significantly influence the global Earth system including through causing mass extinctions, changes in atmospheric and marine chemistry, and altering terrestrial features.²⁸ Neither of these terms are referenced in the Earth Charter yet they have become, in the intervening period since its launch, part of the lexicon of sustainability.

If further justification is needed to support my suggestion that the Earth Charter Initiative should embark on a process of updating the Earth Charter through a set of Addendums, we need look no further than the challenge offered in The Way Forward, the concluding section of the Earth Charter: “We must deepen and expand the global dialogue that generated the Earth Charter, for we have much to learn from the ongoing collaborative search for truth and wisdom.” From this perspective, the Earth Charter can be seen as a living document that grows over time, reflecting and documenting in an authoritative way the ongoing ethical dialogue around the real world problems of environment and development facing each generation.

Concluding comments

While nothing created by humans can be considered perfect, as a written declaration the Earth Charter comes close in terms of the care, precision and eloquence with which it was crafted. As I have suggested above however, as a global ethic it is far from complete. And, there are multiple ways, grounded in the diverse cultures, religions, and philosophies of the planet, by which its principles may be justified as reasonable claims to moral truth, that we have yet to tap. Nonetheless, if the world community were to put into practice its ethical principles, then many of our most pressing problems would be addressed. Indeed, some of its principles remain radical propositions to this day and probably for some time to come. Implementing principle 6b (*Place the burden of proof on those who argue that a proposed activity will not cause significant harm, and make those responsible parties liable for environmental harm*), would require a revolution of our legal systems. And it would be hard to find support from any OECD country in practice for principle 16c (*Demilitarize national security systems to*

²⁷ J. Rockström, et al. (2009), "A safe operating space for humanity", *Nature*, **461** (7263): 472–475, [Bibcode:2009Natur.461..472R](#),

²⁸ J. Zalasiewicz J., M. Williams, W. Steffen and Crutzen P. (2010) [The New World of the Anthropocene](#) *Environmental Science & Technology*, 2010, 44 (7), pp 2228–2231.

the level of a non-provocative defense posture, and convert military resources to peaceful purposes, including ecological restoration).

Perhaps the main problem with the Earth Charter is not what is missing ethically but more prosaically that people find it difficult to use and put into practice? This in part could be because of its format: a long list of principles, topped and tailed by a brief (albeit engaging) narrative. Would it help if there was substantial supplementary and explanatory material - some kind of “user manual”? Another more systemic reason could be that our dominant governance processes and institutions stumble when it comes to integrating ethical considerations explicitly into their decision making? Too often in political debates we hear that we must be “practical” and that “economic reality” must trump other concerns. Yet, all political and economic decision, however pragmatic, entail ethical considerations, even if these are unspoken, cryptic and remain hidden. We need to normalise the idea of “calling” out the ethical dimensions of public policy and vested interests and subjecting them to critical evaluation, drawing upon the Earth Charter ethical principles, and principles from other like-minded documents, as our criteria.

As noted earlier, we are witnessing a staggering loss of biodiversity; for example, from 1970 to 2012 there has been a 58 per cent overall decline in vertebrate population abundance and a 41 per cent overall decline in tropical forest species between 1970 and 2009, with habitat loss and degradation from human land use expansion and intensification being the primary cause.⁶ Furthermore, the climate change problem is on the cusp of spinning out of control as we approach the 1.5 degree safeguard, with business-as-usual projections sending us to a +3 degree world by the end of this century.⁹ The Earth Charter opens with the statement that “We stand at a critical moment in Earth’s history, a time when humanity must choose its future”. The criticality of this moment cannot be exaggerated: we live in a state of planetary emergency. Furthermore, the future we are choosing is not just our own, but that of our children and the greater community of life with whom we share Earth as home. It is time we looked below the inspirational aspect of the Earth Charter and dived more deeply into the substance of its text, the meaning of each principle, and the challenges that arise when we endeavour to put them into practice.