

Richard M. Clugston and John A. Hoyt, USA. A thematic essay which speaks to Principle 15 on humane animal treatment and humane sustainable development

The Earth Charter and Animals



Rick Clugston is Executive Director of the Center for Respect of Life and Environment, and publisher and editor of *Earth Ethics*. He is Vice President for Higher Education of the Humane Society of the United States. He directs the Secretariat of University Leaders for a Sustainable Future and the Secretariat for the Earth Charter USA Campaign. Dr.

Clugston currently serves as the Chair of the Global Higher Education for Sustainability Partnership, and is the Deputy Editor of *The International Journal of Sustainability in Higher Education*. He serves on the Steering Committee of the Earth Charter Initiative.



John A. Hoyt, former President and Chief Executive Officer of The Humane Society of the United States, has been a member of the Earth Charter Commission since its formation in 1994. As President of one of the largest animal protection organizations in the world, Mr. Hoyt's principal contribution to the Earth Charter document was a

concern for the respect and protection of individual non-human creatures. Mr. Hoyt, in concert with Rick Clugston, through the Center for Respect of Life and Environment of the Humane Society of the United States, has been one of the major financial contributors to the advancement of the Earth Charter internationally. Mr. Hoyt has spoken widely throughout the United States in advancing the acceptance and utilization of the Earth Charter.

While most people would agree that we should treat all animals well, concern for our fellow sentient beings is not present in high-level discussions about development policy. Over the past twenty years there have been intense national and international debates over the limits of the dominant economic model and the meaning of a possibly more effective alternative called sustainable development. A major problem in the current approach to fostering global economic development is the assumption that nonhuman animals and nature are “objects” which have no intrinsic worth or moral claim on us, and which human societies can exploit for even trivial human ends. Our

economic, legal, and political systems embody this anthropocentric and mechanistic premise in their principles and practices.

The worldviews, of both modern science and European Christianity, that shaped our globalizing economies have encouraged human beings to exploit animals with little regard for their suffering. Francis Bacon and René Descartes, founders of modern science, believed that only humans have souls and that nature is just a great machine. Descartes regarded the screams of animals being vivisected as no more than the noise a machine makes as it breaks down, a mere grinding of gears. So, too, has the Christian church emphasized human dominion over the Earth and all its creatures. Too often dominion has been interpreted to mean domination – implying that the only value of the rest of creation is its utility to humans. Hence, our economic task is only to exploit these natural resources efficiently.

Such worldviews must change if we are to create a sustainable future. Scientists, religious leaders, educators, and politicians must begin to recognize that the community of life on Earth, as Thomas Berry says, is a “communion of subjects, not a collection of objects.” With such a shift in worldviews, our economics, science, and education would cultivate compassion for all sentient beings and contribute to lifestyles and business practices that are ecologically sound, socially just, and humane, as well as economically beneficial.

As Steven Rockefeller states:

A major objective of the Earth Charter is to promote a fundamental change in the attitudes toward nature that have been predominant in industrial-technological civilization, leading to a transformation in the way people interact with Earth's ecological systems, animals, and other nonhuman species. Humanity must, of course, use natural resources in order to survive and develop. However, the Earth Charter rejects the widespread modern view that the larger natural world is merely a collection of resources that exists to be exploited by human beings. It endeavors to inspire in all peoples commitment to a new ethic of respect and care for the community of life.¹

Principle 15. Treat all living beings with respect and consideration

The Earth Charter is the first major international document that makes the humane treatment of individual animals a necessary condition for sustainable development. As a past president, and a current vice president of The Humane Society of the United States, we are committed to the preservation and protection of animals – not just species, but particular animals subjected to unwarranted and unjustified abuse and suffering. Happily, the Earth Charter, for the first time in any international document of this sort, recognizes and embraces this concern.

Principle 1.a reads, “Recognize that all beings are interdependent and every form of life has value regardless of its worth to human beings.” What this principle acknowledges is that sustainability is not exclusively about the human situation, but must address all beings and acknowledge our mutual interdependence with all living beings and ecological systems.

In addition to its general affirmation of a non-anthropocentric worldview, the Earth Charter also includes a major principle and three sub-principles focused on animal protection, 15.a, b, and c. Unfortunately, from the authors’ point of view, the subprinciples for Principle 15 do not reflect a coherent agenda for animal protection. Rather they reflect what the drafting committee members could agree upon. A fuller development of an animal protection agenda foundered with major disagreements about whether the Earth Charter should condone the use of animals for food or medical research under any circumstance. Inuit hunters, Hindus, and Jains advocating nonviolence toward animals, representatives of a major animal protection organization, and others could not find much common ground. So proposed principles were dropped to guide appropriate laboratory tests on animals, or the conditions for raising and slaughtering cattle, chickens, and hogs for food.

Thus, Subprinciple 15.a is only an assertion that domesticated animals should be treated humanely, without mentioning specific contexts. Subprinciples 15.b and 15.c. address wild animals, asserting that methods of hunting, trapping, and fishing should neither cause unnecessary suffering to the target animals, nor be so inexact that non-targeted animals are killed.

Clearly, more fully developed animal protection principles would need to set guidelines for direct and indirect human impacts on the lives of animals. The Humane Society of the United States describes some of these challenges:

Humans have exploited some animal species to the point of extinction. Research animals suffer pain and distress in laboratory tests considered necessary for human health or well-being. Animals killed for fur fashions endure unimaginable agony in inhumane traps or on fur ‘ranches.’ Animals used by the food industry live on factory farms where they are treated as unfeeling commodities rather than as sentient beings. The use of animal parts for traditional medicines has contributed to the disappearance of some species worldwide.

Animals raised as pets, or used in circuses, or for other forms of entertainment often suffer. Development decisions rarely consider the impact on individual animals. In factory farming, millions of animals are crammed into small cages and pens, never seeing the light of day in an attempt to reduce the costs per unit of production. This development approach creates terrible consequences: cruelty toward farmed animals; the environmental impact of their wastes; worker safety and health; public health concerns from antibiotics and contaminated meat; and the quality and viability of rural life. Factory farming – with all these negatives – may be an issue that helps wake up the public to the need for a new political economy that values rural communities, animals, Earth, and future generations. It shows the inhumaneness of the current economic and political system underlying globalization, which discounts future generations, externalizes social and environmental costs, and fails to recognize the sentience of animals, or ecological integrity. There is a better way. The path toward food security for all and enduring well-being of rural communities, animals, and Earth is being articulated and practiced by a wide range of groups. The Earth Charter as a guide to sustainable development can help shape a new economy and a new agriculture that respects and cares for the community of life.

A major task to be completed in the future is to refine what the principles and sub-principles of the Earth Charter statements will mean ultimately in, as “The Way Forward” section states, “an international legally binding instrument on environment and development” (paragraph four). The Earth Charter presents a consensus vision of an integrated agenda for the pursuit of peace, social and economic justice, and the protection of cultural and biological diversity. It affirms that each of these important goals can only be achieved if all are achieved. Justice, peace, and ecological integrity are inextricably intertwined. We can only care for people if we care for the planet. We can only protect ecosystems if we care for people by providing freedom, eradicating poverty, and promoting good governance. The Earth Charter identifies, in a succinct and inspiring way, the necessary and sufficient conditions for promoting a just and sustainable future.

The remarkable contribution of the Earth Charter is to make respect for and the protection of individual animals a necessary condition for sustainable development. It also challenges those of us focused on our particular interests to work together with others for a larger integrated agenda. We, as animal protectionists, must recognize that our agenda cannot be achieved without alleviating poverty, empowering women, and protecting ecosystems. So, too, must those who care primarily about poverty alleviation, women’s health, climate change, and other issues recognize that animal protection is an essential dimension of a sustainable future.

Note

1 Rockefeller, S.C. (2004). “Earth Charter ethics and animals.” *Earth Ethics*, Spring 2004, p. 5.