

Global Warming is an Ethical Issue

By Alan AtKisson

"Ethics" is a word that does not usually get the blood flowing. It calls up images of Aristotle, schoolteachers, hearings where political leaders weakly defend their honor after having done something foolish that everyone else understands to be wrong.

"Ethical issues," as a phrase, is even worse. Ethical issues are often precisely the ones we prefer to avoid, because they force us to confront the sometimes muddy difference between doing right and doing wrong -- or because we know that in confronting ethical issues generally, we must sometimes confront the ethical deficiencies in our own behavior.

But global warming is undeniably an ethical issue, and we must face it as such. That means asking hard questions about responsibility, accountability, and the differences between actions -- whether political, economic, or wholly personal -- that are right versus those that are wrong.

I say "ethical" rather than "moral," a word used often lately in connection with global warming, because the definitions of "moral" include reference to what we feel about something individually, rather than what we agree to commonly. I recall watching a recent hearing before the US Senate where a retiring General (being quizzed about Iraq) defended his public statements that homosexuality was immoral, because that was what he

had been taught, "according to my upbringing." By that standard, the beliefs and reactions learned by anyone at their parents' knee would hold equal moral standing.

Allowing global warming to continue may well be immoral, in the sense of indecent, especially with regard to future generations. It feels indecent to be leaving our grandchildren a world without polar bears or the Maldivian Islands, a world of greater geopolitical instability caused by climate instability. But the issue of climate change is too important to be reduced to a mere question of individually judged decency.

Ethical issues, by contrast, have to do with the actions that everyone, or at least most reasonable people, *agree* to be moral. These agreements usually take the form of principles, such as the famous and widely shared principle of the Golden Rule: Do not do something to someone else that you would not like to have done to you. (Here we might ask: Would we like it if our grandparents had set slow fire to the world, a fire that crested into visibility during our lifetime, and left it to us to deal with the problem? This is what climate change will be like to our descendants.)

In the field of sustainable development, the Earth Charter -- a statement of fundamental ethical principles to guide development in a more just, sustainable, and peaceful direction -- has emerged as an essential ethical guide. It may seem odd that this widely endorsed document does not include the phrases "global warming" or "climate change." This is because the ethical issues involved are much broader; climate change is, after all, merely a

symptom of a much deeper problem. Global warming is not the root cause of climate change, either, but simply an intermediate step between the actions of human beings (resulting in emissions) and the response of Earth's dynamic systems.

The Earth Charter opens with inspiring and sobering words about the challenge to human beings of living in these times, and closes with a call to responsible action and commitment. In between, the Charter lists a set of sixteen general ethical principles, and sixty-six more specific supporting principles, that can help us with an essential task for the 21st Century: discerning right from wrong action in the care of nature and development of human societies.

The lower-numbered Principles are the most general and aspirational. "Secure Earth's bounty and beauty for present and future generations," says Principle 4 -- and already we know that we are in trouble. If we allow the processes warming the globe to continue, Earth's bounty and beauty is anything but secure.

"Transmit to future generations values, traditions, and institutions that support the long-term flourishing of Earth's human and ecological communities." One dearly hopes that the world's governments, gathered in Bali to determine the fate of their collaborations to address climate change, take this Principle (4b) to heart, and create the institution of a strong agreement, based on shared values, and ultimately adopted as heartily as a tradition, one carried forward for generations.

In seeking ethical guidance on climate change, one could stop there. But the Earth Charter continues with sixty-five more Principles, and nearly all of them are relevant to the challenge of global warming and climate change. "Ecological Integrity," "Social and Economic Justice," "Democracy, Non-Violence, and Peace" ... the challenge of climate change is the challenge of grounding our decision in all of these core values, all at once, under increasingly challenging circumstances.

When faced with great, complex challenges, ethical principles are an essential compass. They help us choose the right path ... and avoid the wrong ones.