The Earth Charter as a Global Ethic

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1. Introduction

The following paper is written in the belief that IUCN, as a leading world environmental organization, will do well to endorse the Earth Charter. In the first half I argue that (a) ethics – as having an ethic and thinking about ethical issues – is important to environmental protection; (b) the appropriate form of ethics is *global*; (c) the Earth Charter represents a balanced and effective expression of a global ethic. In second half I address a number of objections or reservations which many people, including those within IUCN, may have about the Earth Charter in particular and ethics more generally.

2. The need for an appropriate ethic

(a) Why is ethics important?

Successful environmental policies require many things – not least sound scientific understanding and clear and practicable environmental laws – which nation-states and their international organizations are willing both to pass and to implement. None of this however will either happen or if it happens be effective, unless ordinary people support it – that is, support government moves to enact legislation and to pursue environmental policies, and to play their part in making laws and policies work. For this ethics is essential – that is an ethical commitment to environmental values.

From an expert's point of view – for instance a scientist or environmental lawyer working within IUCN – the ethical basis may seem so self-evident that it is hardly worth focusing on. Anyone drawn to work for IUCN is likely to be motivated by a serious concern for nature conservation, the preservation of species etc., and although it may well turn out that that ethical basis is not the same for each (some may in fact have enlightened human-centred concerns, others biocentric or ecocentric concerns), the ethical commitment to certain general goals will be shared, and active disagreement will be on technical questions about means and effective ways.

But it is precisely the acceptance of this self-evidency of environmental ethical values and the moral passion to realise them that are lacking in very large sections of human populations. Since effective policies require that the vast majority of human beings are 'on board' so to speak, the question is: what kind of ethic will get them on board?

(b) What kind of ethic do we need?

The answer can be given in regard to four dimensions of an ethic: (i) its content, (ii) its scope, (iii) its style, and (iv) its social actualization. In short, an ethic needs:

(i)   to have a certain content in being both about essential human goods alongside concern for the environment and being sufficiently robust in its account of duties as to provide a basis for making progress towards a future which is substantially better for humans in general than is the case at the moment;
(ii)   to be global in scope – that is, to be a common universal ethic which includes a commitment to global responsibility;
(iii)   to be truly motivational by being both emotionally and intellectually engaging;
(iv)   to be widely shared, seen as the product of inter-cultural agreement and consultation, and embodied in public symbols and statements of various kinds.

To anticipate: the Earth Charter fits the bill in all these respects.

(i)   Content

The ethic that is needed is one which combines concerns for human well-being with concerns for the environment. The former relates to the moral ground rules for social co-existence – not harming one another, not deceiving, coercing, stealing etc. – with principles of distributive justice which enable everyone to have access to sufficient resources to realise their basic rights. The latter refers to protecting the environment so that human well-being can be achieved for all not merely now but in the future – hence the emphasis on sustainability. It also refers for many thinking to additional biocentric concerns that we should preserve the environment because of the independent value of other life forms, ecosystems etc.

What is crucial to a successful environmental ethic is that it involves a commitment to serious environmental protection but at the same time is integrated into concern for human well-being, social justice and so on. The importance of this, apart from being intellectually sound, is that without this combination most people are simply not going to take environmental protection seriously.

Such an ethic needs to be sufficiently robust and rich in content so as to challenge people to act in new ways (since clearly current practices are both socially unjust and environmentally damaging), but at the same time not too specific in content so as to be inaccessible to a wide range of people with certain philosophical, religious or cultural beliefs inconsistent with it. There are really two issues here.

First, we need an ethic which is on the one hand not so idealistic or demanding as to leave people unmoved, but at the same time is not so bland and unchallenging that it requires of people little more than what they do anyway. So an ethic needs both to contain realizable requirements here and now, and, combined with these, ideals towards which we can strive.

Second, however rich the content, it needs to be such as not to reflect the presuppositions of any one religious, philosophical or cultural perspective. This is one of the challenges of universalism (to which I return in the latter part of the paper), but suffice it to say here that what we need is a mid-range universalism that falls between something so minimalist as to make no difference or something so maximalist not to be reasonably acceptable to people of many different belief backgrounds (for a middle way see e.g. Dower 1998).

(ii)   Scope of an ethic as global

There are various different reasons why the ethic that we need, with the above content, needs to be interpreted as a global ethic – that is an ethic which is about universal values and norms and which includes a principle of global responsibility – namely that people and countries have a responsibility (where they are in a position to take effective action) for what happens elsewhere in the world – such as extreme poverty, violation of human rights, wars etc.

First, insofar as ethics arises in the context of finding co-operative solutions to common problems, many of our problems in the world are global problems requiring global solutions. Second, as reflected in the cosmopolitan tradition going back to the Stoics, the idea of a universal morality is intellectually compelling anyway since, given our common human nature, restricting ethical concern to only some fellow human beings seems arbitrary (see e.g. Heater 2002 and Dower 2003). Third, the process of globalization has produced such a high degree of interconnectedness, interaction, and development of global communities of common discourse, that the emergence of glottal ethical thinking is an inevitable concomitant to such developments. This does not mean there is just one common ethic of course – quite the contrary – but there is now a *common field* in which rival global discourses interact with one another, and thus make natural the attempts either to identify or to create global ethical consensuses (not as universally held but as held by many actors across the world) – consider the *Declaration toward a Global Ethic* of the Parliament of the Worlds' Religions in 1993 (Küng & Kuschel 1993) as an attempt to highlight a pre-existing common core of values in the world's major religions or the construction of a global civic ethic by the Commission on Global Governance in 1995 as an ethic appropriate to our times (Commission on Global Governance 1995). The Earth Charter is of course another such attempt to produce an ethic acceptable to a wide range of agents throughout the world.

(iii)   The style of an ethic

An ethic, if it is to be fully motivational needs to be one which is both emotionally and intellectually engaging. This is particularly true of an ethic which is going to motivate people to act in new ways, often against conventional assumptions, including the determination not just to do what is right but also to *promote* what is right (through NGOs, political parties and so on). For an ethic to inspire an agent it needs to be more than a dry formulation of words; its general character and the kind of language used to express it need to engage the heart, and to have a visionary quality to it. It's not merely that an ethic needs to contain ideals (see (a) above) but that a person sees himself as identified with his moral life, as part of a moral community and as seeking to create a better country or better world. There are many ways in which this emotional engagement with morality comes about, but certainly the kind of language used plays a significant part in it. Often religious affirmations and creeds have this character, though this is not meant to imply that those with secular commitments cannot have a similar visionary quality to them (such as a commitment to humanity). Certainly for many the Earth Charter has this emotionally engaging quality to it (and some have compared its language to that of poetry).

On the other hand, an ethic need also to be intellectually engaging in the sense that the moral agent takes seriously the bushiness of moral discernment, of working out what to do, what principles to accept and so on. An ethic rarely exists as a set of values and norms in the complete absence of ethical thought and reflection – what may be seen as the activity of 'ethics' as opposed to an 'ethic'. It is a mistake to think of ethics as neatly contrasted to having an ethic, as something done by professional philosophers and other academics but not generally by ordinary moral agents. Arguably an ethic as a set of values and norms which are acted on is the more satisfactory the more it is grounded in ongoing reflection. In speaking of a global ethic one is really speaking about global ethics as the combination of belief, thoughtful application and background reflection. The kind of global ethic I am advocating is really global ethics in this sense, and arguably the Earth Charter fits the bill here too, though on the face of it it looks like a very rich set of principles which are simply there for the taking. However as I will explain more fully later on, its real value lies in being a critical tool for engaged ethical reflection and decision.

In saying that an ethic should be both emotionally and intellectually challenging, I mean 'should' not 'is'. All too often a person's ethic may be one or the other or neither – intellectually rich but emotionally unengaging, emotionally charged but not properly thought through, or just rather superficial all round (as is the case for much conventional following of the social rules and little more). So it is real challenge to create the conditions in which a person's ethics has the right engagement – and of course the right content too. (It could be engaged but have the wrong content after all.) Part of this challenge relates to the next point.

(iv)   Social actualization of an ethic

As was indicated earlier in connection with the role of public declarations, a global ethic (assuming that this is the form an appropriate ethic should take) may also have certain characteristics which make it acceptable or more acceptable. This may have to do with its provenance, or how it has come to be accepted. In this regard, especially for something like a *global* ethic it is significant that it is the product of a widescale process of consultation throughout the world. It is not just the brainchild of a few thinkers. It may also have to do with the fact that an ethic is a publicly shared set of values and norms – this may or may not mean that it is precisely stated in some set of words like a declaration or charter, but the fact that something is embedded in the form of a public statement which can be endorsed or accepted gives it a certain social reality and thus, if it is signed up to by many thinkers throughout the world, a certain claim to being a global ethic in this sense. Being something of this kind which can be signed up to certainly adds to its motivational power and contributes to a certain moral culture.

For some thinkers an ethics being publicly shared and being the product of consultation and consensus building is what makes it a genuine global ethic at all. For others what makes an ethic a global ethic is its being a set of values and norms which the person's moral thinking has led him to endorse – its being publicly shared or widely endorsed is a bonus or an extra, something which makes it more likely to be widely accepted. I will return to this in looking at possible criticisms, but for the time being merely wish to

note that there are all these respects in which someone could think of an ethic as being global. And certainly if we turn to the Earth Charter we can see that it is a global ethic – and indeed the right kind of global ethic – in all the above respects.

3. The Earth Charter

(a) Background

The agreed text of the earth Charter was agreed in March 2000. It was produced by the Earth Council, an international NGO based in Costa Rica. Though four individuals played an editorial role in the drafting process, the text was developed, vetted and modified by a much larger group of representatives from different parts of the world. Indeed the Charter was the product of extensive consultations all over the world over a number of years. The Brundtland Commission Report *Our Common Future* had suggested a Charter for Nature, and although things did not come to fruition in that form, later after the Rio summit in 1992 the idea was taken up again. It now exists as a people's charter – something which individuals can endorse, and institutions likewise can endorse and adopt for their work. Educational institutions particularly are seeing it as something to be used for educating children to have the right values for living in the 21st century. It is hoped that it may eventually be endorsed in the United Nations by governments, although its format is not such as to be a basis for any hard law instruments. In this connection there is a parallel process going on in which the IUCN is playing a significant role in advancing a Covenant in the same area which would provide the basis for effective international law. But the two processes are linked, since the more ordinary people, NGOs, educational institutions, local governments and so on endorse the spirit of the Earth Charter, the greater normative pressure will built up on governments to accept something like a Covenant on Environment and Development.

(b) Familiarisation with the Earth Charter

At this point the reader is invited, if he or she has not already done so, actually to read the Earth Charter (to be found at the end of this paper) and become familiar with its main ideas. What follows is a brief summary of the Earth Charter, and some discussion of just some of the salient features to do with its content which are particularly important to my task of showing why in broad outline it is the right kind of global ethic for us to accept and use.

The Earth Charter consists of a Preamble, the central body of the text containing four sections, and finally a section entitled 'The Way Forward' The four sections are: Respect and care for the Community of Life, Ecological Integrity, Social and Economic Justice, and Democracy, Non-Violence and Peace , and within each of these there are four main principles and a number of sub-principles. It is some 2400 words long and fits neatly onto 4 sides of A4 paper.

(c) The Content of the Earth Charter

It will be apparent from the above outline what kind of content the Earth Charter has, since it combines concerns for ecological integrity, social justice, democracy and peace. A similar picture emerges if we look at the first four main principles in section 1:

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.

These are seen as the foundational principles or commitments, since the rest following are seen as necessary expressions or implementations of them.

The Earth Charter acknowledges that having such a list of principles does not get rid of dilemmas in implementation. What it does do is provide a framework of principles which it commends to us for acceptance. In what follows I first look at a number of interpretative issues, and then address some objections which may be raised against its acceptance.

(i) The Earth Charter - a comprehensive ethic?

Taken in the round these principles in one sense constitute a comprehensive ethic in that they cover all the common aspects of human well-being and the common norms necessary to enable all human beings to achieve their potential for well-being. However there are two respects in which these principles are not comprehensive, and these respects in which it is *not* comprehensive are as important to the Earth Charter's acceptability as is the comprehensiveness it does possess.

First, it does not claim to be an exhaustive ethic capable of covering every aspect of an individual's or group's existence. Despite its richness it leaves much room for further values and norms – those associated with particular religious traditions or these relating to other aspects of a particular culture's or society's traditions, as well as what may relate to personal choices made by individuals in answer to the Socratic question 'how ought one to live?'. Indeed a further feature of the Earth Charter which is implicit in much of it (especially its commitment to dialogue, democracy and peace) and made more prominent towards the end though not stated as a major principle, is the principle of respect for cultural diversity (seen as parallel to respect for biological diversity). This would hardly make sense if the Earth Charter made out to state the full range of values and norms applicable to all people. This brings out the point that it constitutes a *common* ethical framework because this is seen as if you like the minimum necessary given the twin goals of (a) ecological integrity or living within our eco-systemic limits and of (b) living justly and peacefully with all other human beings. Although some might think that the Earth Charter ethics is far too complex to be such a common core, we should I think recognize that the main principles are not that specific. Many of the sub-principles are of course expressions of or derivations from the main principles, so that if questions are raised about some of the detailed prescriptions, for instance on the grounds that they just don't *work* as expressions of the main principles, this is no basis for rejecting the framework as a whole.

Second, it is not comprehensive in that it does not purport to be an ethic is the sense of a set of moral beliefs combined with the complete worldview that for any given thinker *justifies* or *rationalizes* those moral beliefs. It is not as such a Christian ethic or a Buddhist ethic or a humanist ethic or a biocentrist ethic, but it is an ethic which can be supported as the appropriate expression of an ethic by someone with Christian belief, Buddhist belief, humanist belief or biocentrist belief. This does not mean that all Christians, Buddhists, humanists or biocentrists will accept it as the appropriate expression of their beliefs, but that the Earth Charter *can* be such an expression – and indeed those who do favour it hope that all such people accepting their own 'isms' will come to accept it as such.

The idea that it is an ethic which is accessible to people from many different backgrounds with different worldviews, philosophies or theologies is one of its strengths and attractions. The examples I have given may however seem controversial since it may be thought by some of those who have read carefully the Earth Charter that its ethic is both religious and biocentric, so it would *exclude* anyone who wasn't a religious biocentrist! The issue is important and needs explanation – which is partly why I gave just those examples!

(ii) Is the Earth Charter biocentric?

First, is the Earth Charter biocentrist – that is, it is a commitment to an ethic which says that all life-forms are intrinsically valuable? As such anyone who is an anthropocentrist and believes that humans alone have intrinsic value would have to reject it. How biocentric is it though? There is one principle which on the face of it is such, namely principle 1 (a): Recognize that all beings are interdependent and every form of life has value regardless of its worth to humans. Apart from this there is nothing else as a statement of intrinsic value. In Principle 15 there is the injunction to avoid suffering in higher animals but this relates to sentience not life as such. What there is a lot of particularly in section II is reference to ecological integrity but this idea does not as such equate with the intrinsic value thesis. A common interpretation of it of course does

assume the latter, but the key point about ecological integrity is that its about the limits humans need to observe so as to maintain or restore ecological systems upon which future human health and well-being depends. Thus ecological integrity is capable of being interpreted in an enlightened anthropocentric way.

What about principle 1 (a) though? There are two responses to this. The first response (in my opinion the right response) is to say that, yes, it a biocentric principle but it is a very mild biocentrism (as a colleague of mine put it) that ought to be accommodatable by an anthropocentrist who is otherwise happy with the Earth Charter. There are really two points here. The biocentrism here only speaks of lifeforms have *value*, it does not claim *equal* value, and indeed could hardly do so given other principles such as 15 which allows for the rearing or hunting of animals. There is certainly nothing anti-human or misanthropic here. But equally important is the point that endorsing the Earth Charter is not about signing up to a moral creed which you have to accept in all its particulars if you accept it at all (rather like a religious catechism is supposed to be). The Earth Charter should not be read as a final moral truth but as a tool for promoting international cooperation and solidarity for changes which need to be made in the way we collectively behave. Endorsing it or treating it as one's global ethic is not signing up to everything in it nor should it be treated by others as so doing. Rather it's an ethical perspective from which one is prepared to think, deliberate and engage in dialogue.

Second, even Principle 1 (a) is not quite as straightforward as it seems. One friend of mine (a resolute anthropocentrist) claims it can be interpreted in such a way as not to be biocentric. Whilst I am not convinced by this, I do see the point that the claim about value is in the context of the *interdependence* thesis and could mean that whilst a form of life may have no *direct* worth to humans (utilitarian or aesthetic), its value (not, note, intrinsic value) is in relation to the ecological interdependence of which it is a part, and humans have reason to respect and maintain that interdependence. What this illustrates, inter alia, is that many of the key principles are capable of different interpretations. This is not a weakness of the Earth Charter, but demonstrates that it should not be seen as the final unambiguous set of moral truths but a best approximation which humans can use and co-operate in using to forge common understandings and develop common goals.

(iii) Is the Earth Charter a religious ethic?

What then about the religious tone of the Charter? Is this acceptable to atheists or secular humanists or indeed any moral thinker who, even if religious, adopts secular philosophical positions such as Kantianism, utilitarianism, human rights theory and so on? Again there are really two points to be made about this. First, the language of religion, even less that of theology, is remarkably absent from the Charter. What there is are a number of references to *spiritual* values and beliefs. Some of these references are in fact to the respecting of such values and beliefs as being important to the people who given their own understanding of their relationship to the Earth, but that point is easily accepted by a secular liberal. Furthermore whilst for many the term 'spiritual' is understood in such a way as to refer to or entail a transcendent realm, for others it might not have this implication, for whom for instance spiritual experience such as wonder and reverence for nature are like aesthetic experiences an important aspect of human experience without metaphysical implications. Second, as remarked earlier, even if one did take spirituality to entail religious belief, the secular thinker could still bracket this off and endorse the Earth Charter as a whole (one might say endorse its 'spirit' in a different sense).

(iv) Is the Earth Charter then a bland, lowest common denominator?

It might appear from what I have said that the Earth Charter is acceptable to so many different thinkers from different backgrounds that it is in effect a rather bland ethic and kind of lowest common denominator intended to include everyone. As such it is hardly going to be very useful or significant. In fact it is neither.

It is important to see that although it is clearly presented as a global ethic it is not seen as an ethic which is already accepted by everyone. There is no such ethic (nor in all likelihood will there be for a long time). At the end of the Preamble it states 'we urgently need a shared vision of basic values to provide an ethical foundation for the emerging world community'. It is a work of advocacy. Even if a world community is emerging, this is a shorthand for an emerging community with shared values made up of people from *all*

over the world. It does not means a community in which *everyone* has the same values. (Smaller communities within nation-states need not be like this anyway.) Its principles are ones which its advocates hope others will adopt. This means they are not universally accepted now. Some advocates may think that its principles are such that all reasonable thinking people either given time *will* or given exposure to it *should* on pain of being less than fully rational accept it. Others may, given different views about morality and rationality, be more sceptical about that, but nevertheless advocate it, since from their point of view the best hope for humanity is for at least most people to accept it.

(d) Why is the Earth Charter not accepted by many?

There are at least three groups of people who do not now accept the Earth Charter. First, those who at a deep level simply reject key parts of it or its whole ethical tone. Second, those who have not thought about the Earth Charter or the kind of ethical principles it advocates (which of course could be advocated without reference to the Earth Charter) but who, given appropriate exposure to the environmental and global facts and to moral reasoning, would endorse it. Third, those who, having read and absorbed something of the Earth Charter ethic do not endorse it because they seen it as too demanding or unrealistic.

(i) Why is the Earth Charter unacceptable to some?

Whilst the Earth Charter may be acceptable to a wide range of thinkers, it is clearly not acceptable at a basic level to a variety of different kinds of thinkers about ethics. Amongst others we can include a religious fundamentalist for whom a more specific ethic linked to his or her theology is what is important, a relativist who denied universal values, a nationalist or communitarian who rejects or downplays global responsibility, or a freemarket libertarian who rejects the anti-growth agenda and emphasis on extensive responsibility. The response to each of these throws light on the nature of the Earth Charter as a global ethic, so let me briefly discuss each. The point is that with this first group of diverse thinkers the disagreement is at a deep level and so even with full understanding of the Earth Charter there may still be a rejection of or failure to endorse it. In sketching objections and replies below, I am fully aware that my replies are too brief to be liley to convince objectors, but at least they alert the defender of the Earth Charter to the kinds of resistance around – often lying below the surface of the actual discussions.

Fundamentalism

The religious fundamentalist may reject the Earth Charter for a number of different reasons, some to do with what the Earth Charter includes but should not (such as respect for cultural diversity, the equality of women, acceptance of diverse sexual orientations), others to do with what is missing but should not be missing from a global ethic (such as specific ethical commitments based on the truths of the religion in question).

The reply to the religious fundamentalist touches on one of the biggest challenges the world faces. After the (in retrospect hubristic) perception in the early 90s of the 'end of history' and of the emergence after the fall of communism of a universal liberal, democratic capitalist value system (Fukuyama 1993), and pessimistic response to this of a rival perception of an endemic 'clash of civilizations' between secular and religious worldviews (the latter represented now *in extremis* by Al Qaeda) and between different religious and cultural worldviews (Huntington 1996), the challenge is to find a middle way of some core common moral values capable of being endorsed from diverse religious and cultural standpoints – a generalization of the need implicit in Hans Küng's claim 'There will be no peace in the world without peace amongst the religions; there will be no peace amongst the religions without dialogue between the religions' (Küng 1991). Whilst some may see the Earth Charter as party to the 'clash of civilizations' model and as the expression, despite its gestures towards religious or 'spiritual' values, of a liberal, largely secular worldview, it seems to me to be much more plausibly seen as an expression of the common ground *between* many worldviews, for instance, liberal humanism and many other perspectives. All but the most extreme of advocates of particularist agendas ('*our* way is right for the rest of the world') must surely recognise the positive value of promoting the common ecological and social framework necessary for reasonable co-existence on the planet.

Relativism

The relativist may reject the Earth Charter on the grounds that the proposed universal values are illusory since there is no such global ethic, either as an ethic universally accepted or, more to the current point, as an ethic it would be reasonable for all to endorse. From the relativist point of view morality is culturally specific and there is no universal point of view from which to construct such a global ethic (see e.g. Wong 1984). It may be thought that relativism was more plausible in the past when societies were indeed more discrete and separate from one another, but that now with the impact of extensive globalisation, such a picture is no longer tenable. Globalisation however hardly delivers a clear verdict on this issue. It is true that with globalisation, there are many new types of community which are 'deterritorialised' i.e. spread across the world and these communities share values across old societal boundaries (see e.g. Scholte 2000), but for the relativist these still remain multiple ethical communities, and are neither evidence of an emerging universal community of universally shared values nor a basis for an argument that moving toward this is somehow a requirement of reason. The relativist is hardly in a position to deny that there is an emerging 'Earth Charter community' which is global in reach – precisely those all over the world who are part of it and have signed up to its shared set of values. But he can still reject the universalizing or proselytizing *agenda* – that is, projecting the Earth Charter as something *to be endorsed* because it is correct or reasonable – as being without foundation.

Defusing the relativist objection is an important task (see e.g. Borchert & Stewart 1986; Dower 1998). Part of the task lies in showing that a global ethic can be universal without undermining the importance of cultural diversity. Respecting diversity (within and between societies) is itself a *universal* principle (and contrary to what is often claimed, there's nothing about relativism to entail respect for diversity: a society could for instance just as easily be xenophobic and intolerant of other cultures.) Second, there is surely a core of human 'goods' and central moral norms which are both as a matter of fact recognised in all societies, and as a matter of reason to accept – and this is consistent with accepting a variety of *other* values. Third, a robust relativist is unable to give any good reasons for accepting the universal normative status of all human beings; for instance for why the Spanish should not have maltreated the Aztecs, since there is no universal 'human-ness' which provides the normative basis for such restraint (Apel 1992).

Communitarianism

A different kind of rejection may come from a communitarian or nationalist who sees the Earth Charter's commitment to global responsibility as problematic. The global ethic in the Earth Charter is not merely about certain common values to be accepted anywhere in the world, it is also about accepting responsibility *across borders*. In the Preamble there is a paragraph on universal responsibility, and there is a statement that we are 'at once citizens of different nations and of one world in which the local and the global are linked'. Principle 2(a) affirms that 'with increased freedom, knowledge and power comes increased responsibility to promote the common good' – a clear reference to Agenda 21's idea of 'common but differentiated responsibility' i.e. rich countries and people have greater responsibility because they have greater possibilities, though all have *some* responsibility. Principle 9 speaks of eradicating poverty as an ethical, social and environmental imperative, and indeed the whole document is redolent with the global perspective in which global problems require global responses.

It is this global perspective that may be rejected by those who think that moral obligations are primarily (if not exclusively) towards member of your own community or nation-state (see e.g. Sandel 1982; Taylor 1989). We are a long way off a perspective in which what happens elsewhere is the world really matters (in psychological terms) as much as what happens within established political communities. Whilst many of us may regret this situation and see the Earth Charter as helping to correct the bias of community and state, the robust communitarian or nationalist will deny this and say: this basis is as it should be, and thus question the ethical agenda of the Earth Charter.

Answers to the communitarian challenge to the global responsibility theme in the Earth Charter can come from several lines of argument. First, one can take the communitarian on on his own terms. If ethical values depend on *actaul* socially established and consciously felt community, then global community or at least networks of global communities are now clearly in existence (and indeed the Earth Charter community is

itself an example of this). An important part of globalisation is the globalisation of community (Scholte 2000) - global civil society, the informal world-wide Web and the emergence of public declarations like the Earth Charter and the *Declaration Toward a Global Ethic* are all evidence of this. Second, the argument from community can take a different form. Community is not just about *felt* community (or sense of community) but also about the objective interdependencies of human beings across the world (and also wider communities with other species in Aldo Leopold's famous idea of a 'land community' (Leopold 1949)). We may not feel our global interdependence enough but it is real, pressing and generates powerful obligations. This is partly what Piet Hein had in mind when he said 'We are global citizens with tribal souls' (quoted in Barnaby 1988: 192). Third, to see our obligations and their relative strength as *simply* a function of the actual communities, political or otherwise, which we belong to, is to fail to see that morally we stand in relation to anyone (or any being) whose well-being we might affect – the vulnerable or those on whom we do not depend as well as the powerful and those on whom we do depend. This is something recognised in virtually all the religions and most moral theories such as Utilitarianism, Kantianism, Natural Law theories or human rights theories (see e.g. Dower 1998).

Libertarianism

Finally in my list of mentioned opponents (though not an exhaustive list), we should consider the libertarian free market capitalist. There are at least two things wrong with the Earth Charter. First, it's far too loaded with positive obligations, whereas on the libertarian view the only core value – a global one to be sure – is respecting the right to liberty, by not violating such a right by for instance deceiving, coercing or stealing from others (see e.g. Nozick 1974). Second, its statement in the Preamble 'when basic needs have been met, human development is primarily about being more, not having more' is indicative of an attitude which runs through the document and strikes at the heart of free market capitalism, namely the pursuit of economic growth which is primarily about *having* more.

The key to an adequate reply to the economic libertarian lies in accepting the central importance of liberty or freedom but then dissociating this (as for instance Sen has done recently (Sen 1999)) from the minimalist ethic of economic liberty and the endorsement of the unrestricted free market. First, it is important to say that though liberty is important, so are other aspects of basic human well-being such as basic security and the availability of the basic necessities of life. Second, if liberty is a 'public' value – something which is not just valuable for me to have but for anyone to have – then its realization requires a wide range of background conditions which include, in addition to significant moral and legal restraints on others, positive interventions by public bodies (involving the use of taxed money) to secure the adequacy of economic means to make liberty 'effective'. Third, liberty as the power of economic *choice* is valuable insofar as its exercise enables people to choose activities and ways of living which realise well-being and a range of capabilities in a full life. Ever increasing wealth is not a precondition of that – at least for the more affluent sections of the world's population.

This brief review of some of the main reasons for rejecting the Earth Charter and of the beginnings of replies to them serves *inter alia* to show that the Earth Charter is by no means the lowest common denominator, and that there are a number of groups of thinkers who may not accept it at a basic level of disagreement with one or other of its premises.

(ii) The challenge of informing those who need informing

If we turn to the second group of people who do not accept the Earth Charter, namely those who currently do not know about it but who would, given suitable exposure to it, will 'see the light' and endorse it, there is little to add about this category. It is indeed the existence of this large cohort of those yet unconverted or those as yet uninformed (like children) that presents the biggest practical challenge for advocates of the Earth Charter. Thus work in formal and informal education is likely to pay dividends. The moral energy behind commitment to the Earth Charter precisely stems from the belief in the possibility that many more may come to accept it. The ethical imperative within the Earth Charter comes from a belief in this possibility of change in the direction of others coming to accept it. But is this realistic on the scale that is needed? This leads us to the next issue.

(iii) The problem of moral weakness

The third group presents us with a different issue. I suggested above that there may be many who having read the Earth Charter do not endorse it – not because they have some fundamental objection to some part of its content (as above under (i)) but because they feel that, fine as it sounds, it is idealist and too personally demanding. It is idealistic in the sense that the principles it presents cannot possibly be adhered to except marginally by a few, so the vision will never be realised. (Some might even think it is counterproductive in the sense that because it expects too much, less may be done than would be done if less idealistic standards were accepted.) It may also be seen as too demanding for someone and thus not accepted because that person cannot sign up to something she cannot fully live up to. Take for instance the claim about human development mentioned above. She may feel that it is unrealistic to suppose that human beings will give up economic growth for a 'quality of life' model and that meantime, though she feels it would be great if she did dramatically modify her life style, she has insufficient reason to do so in the face of general practices to the contrary.

The issue raised here is an important one. If we took it that the Earth Charter could legitimatley only be *advocated* on the grounds that *all* its principles could be fully implemented *now* or *endorsed* only if the endorser *does all that she can* to act on its every principle, then indeed it could not be advocated or endorsed (at least by most people of normal moral strength). But then so could many other ethical codes (the Christian ethic for instance) not be advocated or endorsed. But these consequences do not follow. The Earth Charter is a complex mixture of ideals to aspire to, principles that can be acted on now, and others which are challenging and require effort to follow. Take for instance principle 6(e) 'avoid military activities damaging to the environment'. Since virtually all military activities damage the environment in one way or another, this is a very radical demand and no doubt psychologically and politically impossible to fully implement in the world as it is now. But it is equally plain that what it is saying is sound: since military activity destroys the environment, this another powerful reason (apart from others) why we should endeavour to reduce the military footprint on the world. To reject the Earth Charter because this cannot now be fully implemented misses the point: it specifies a direction in which we need to move.

Interpreting the Earth Charter in terms of which principles are seen as aspirational, which directional and which mandatory now is an interesting exercise and not all people will divide it up in the same way. That is no objection to the Earth Charter. It shows it as a complex tool for dialogue and the testing of ideas. But quite apart from that, the fact that an ethical code is not one we are able or willing to live up to fully is not a reason for not accepting it. Whilst systematic failure not act according to the principle one says one endorses is evidence of moral insincerity, this must not be confused with the widespread phenomenon of moral weakness. Where failing to live up to certain central elements of one's moral code (to do with not killing nor harming others, not deceiving or coercing etc.) is serious and occasion for censure from others and guilt in oneself, failing to play one's part fully or as far as one is able in creating a better world need not be treated in the same way. This issue in moral psychology is a big one and I have not adequately treated it. My main point is that failure to do all that one can to act on or advance the Earth Charter is not a reason not to accept or endorse the Earth Charter.

Indeed for many the acceptance of and endorsement of the Earth Charter is primarily based on the belief that the more people who accept it, the more likely that goals will be effectively pursued, and aspirations become policies and so on. This is based on three observations. First, the more people accept certain principles, the more there will be action in accordance with those principles. There is a conceptual connection between moral belief, moral motivation and moral action. The connection is however far from being automatic, and so we need to recognise two further considerations. Second, the greater *mutual recognition* of shared values (as signing up to the Earth Charter clearly acknowledges), the greater encouragement to act on those principles from a sense of solidarity. Third, the public *embodiment* of an ethic in something like the Earth Charter reinforces an ethic as having a shared *public* nature and thus increases its potency particularly in the fields of policy making and political change.

4. Relevance to IUCN

Let me finally summarise why I think it is important for IUCN to take on global ethics generally and the Earth Charter in particular.

Within IUCN global ethics is important because

- making our values explicit energises what we do
- justification of what we do and recommend , whether legal, scientific or institutional, is at bottom ethical (unless it is a mask for vested interests)
- IUCN as a truly global institution needs an explicitly global ethic to hold its commitments together
- a shared global ethic is a source of strength if combined with an acknowledgement that the 'worldviews' supporting that shared ethic may be different (anthropocentric, biocentric, various religious worldviews etc.)

In its relationships to the outside world, members of IUCN with an explicit global ethic (and an interest in global *ethics* as reflective engagement)

- will be better able to persuade others of the ethical basis for improved laws and procedures
- will be better able to engage with the sources of resistance to a global ethic by being aware of the nature of these ethical disagreements.

The Earth Charter is important to IUCN's mission because

- it provides a particular formulation of a global ethic around which IUCN members can unite, given their different backgrounds
- it is both visionary and inspirational, as well as being a carefully thought out and nuanced synthesis of diverse ethical concerns, with relevant principles usable in relation to much of the work of IUCN

In its relation to the outside world, IUCN will find the Earth Charter helpful in its work because

- in publicly identifying with an ethic which combines concern for the environment with concerns for social justice, peace and democracy, IUCN can present itself as signing up to a *balanced* ethic, acceptable to both those in richer countries and those in poorer countries, and those interested in nature conservation and those interested in basic development
- since the Earth Charter is gaining widespread support amongst people throughout the world, IUCN will be showing solidarity with many participants in global change, and thus become more effective in delivering its message throughout the world.

Note

The ideas in this paper origniated from a paper I gave at a confercne at Pocantico Heights on the Earth Charter in April 2002, and were developed for a confernce in Aberdeen for members of the the Ethics Speciailst Group of IUCN to use in promoting the Earth Charter. I am grateful to members of the IUCN EWG and also members of IDEA (the International Development Ethics Association) for helpful comments. A rather different but complementtary treatment of the isuses of this paper can be found in 'The Earth Charter and Global Ethics' in *Worldviews*, spring 2004 (which is a special issue devoted to the Earth Charter).

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THE EARTH CHARTER

(adopted by the Earth Council in March 2000)

PREAMBLE

We stand at a critical moment in Earth's history, a time when humanity must choose its future. As the world becomes increasingly interdependent and fragile, the future at once holds great peril and great promise. To move forward we must recognize that in the midst of a magnificent diversity of cultures and life forms we are one human family and one Earth community with a common destiny. We must join together to bring forth a sustainable global society founded on respect for nature, universal human rights, economic justice, and a culture of peace. Towards this end, it is imperative that we, the peoples of Earth, declare our responsibility to one another, to the greater community of life, and to future generations.

Earth, Our Home
Humanity is part of a vast evolving universe. Earth, our home, is alive with a unique community of life. The forces of nature make existence a demanding and uncertain adventure, but Earth has provided the conditions essential to life's evolution. The resilience of the community of life and the well-being of humanity depend upon preserving a healthy biosphere with all its ecological systems, a rich variety of plants and animals, fertile soils, pure waters, and clean air. The global environment with its finite resources is a common concern of all peoples. The protection of Earth's vitality, diversity, and beauty is a sacred trust.

The Global Situation
The dominant patterns of production and consumption are causing environmental devastation, the depletion of resources, and a massive extinction of species. Communities are being undermined. The benefits of development are not shared equitably and the gap between rich and poor is widening. Injustice, poverty, ignorance, and violent conflict are widespread and the cause of great suffering. An unprecedented rise in human population has overburdened ecological and social systems. The foundations of global security are threatened. These trends are perilous—but not inevitable.

The Challenges Ahead
The choice is ours: form a global partnership to care for Earth and one another or risk the destruction of ourselves and the diversity of life. Fundamental changes are needed in our values, institutions, and ways of living. We must realize that when basic needs have been met, human development is primarily about being more, not having more. We have the knowledge and technology to provide for all and to reduce our impacts on the environment. The emergence of a global civil society is creating new opportunities to build a democratic and humane world. Our environmental, economic, political, social, and spiritual challenges are interconnected, and together we can forge inclusive solutions.

Universal Responsibility
To realize these aspirations, we must decide to live with a sense of universal responsibility, identifying ourselves with the whole Earth community as well as our local communities. We are at once citizens of different nations and of one world in which the local and global are linked. Everyone shares responsibility for the present and future well-being of the human family and the larger living world. 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.

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.

PRINCIPLES

I. RESPECT AND CARE FOR THE COMMUNITY OF LIFE

1. *Respect Earth and life in all its diversity.*
> *a. Recognize that all beings are interdependent and every form of life has value regardless of its worth to human beings.*
> *b. Affirm faith in the inherent dignity of all human beings and in the intellectual, artistic, ethical, and spiritual potential of humanity.*

2. *Care for the community of life with understanding, compassion, and love.*
> *a. Accept that with the right to own, manage, and use natural resources comes the duty to prevent environmental harm and to protect the rights of people.*
> *b. Affirm that with increased freedom, knowledge, and power comes increased responsibility to promote the common good.*

3. *Build democratic societies that are just, participatory, sustainable, and peaceful.*
> *a. Ensure that communities at all levels guarantee human rights and fundamental freedoms and provide everyone an opportunity to realize his or her full potential.*
> *b. Promote social and economic justice, enabling all to achieve a secure and meaningful livelihood that is ecologically responsible.*

4. *Secure Earth's bounty and beauty for present and future generations.*
> *a. Recognize that the freedom of action of each generation is qualified by the needs of future generations.*
> *b. Transmit to future generations values, traditions, and institutions that support the long-term flourishing of Earth's human and ecological communities.*

In order to fulfill these four broad commitments, it is necessary to:

II. 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.*
> *a. Adopt at all levels sustainable development plans and regulations that make environmental conservation and rehabilitation integral to all development initiatives.*
> *b. Establish and safeguard viable nature and biosphere reserves, including wild lands and marine areas, to protect Earth's life support systems, maintain biodiversity, and preserve our natural heritage.*
> *c. Promote the recovery of endangered species and ecosystems.*
> *d. Control and eradicate non-native or genetically modified organisms harmful to native species and the environment, and prevent introduction of such harmful organisms.*
> *e. Manage the use of renewable resources such as water, soil, forest products, and marine life in ways that do not exceed rates of regeneration and that protect the health of ecosystems.*

f. Manage the extraction and use of non-renewable resources such as minerals and fossil fuels in ways that minimize depletion and cause no serious environmental damage.

6. *Prevent harm as the best method of environmental protection and, when knowledge is limited, apply a precautionary approach.*

a. Take action to avoid the possibility of serious or irreversible environmental harm even when scientific knowledge is incomplete or inconclusive.
b. Place the burden of proof on those who argue that a proposed activity will not cause significant harm, and make the responsible parties liable for environmental harm.
c. Ensure that decision making addresses the cumulative, long-term, indirect, long distance, and global consequences of human activities.
d. Prevent pollution of any part of the environment and allow no build-up of radioactive, toxic, or other hazardous substances.
e. Avoid military activities damaging to the environment.

7. *Adopt patterns of production, consumption, and reproduction that safeguard Earth's regenerative capacities, human rights, and community well-being.*

a. Reduce, reuse, and recycle the materials used in production and consumption systems, and ensure that residual waste can be assimilated by ecological systems.
b. Act with restraint and efficiency when using energy, and rely increasingly on renewable energy sources such as solar and wind.
c. Promote the development, adoption, and equitable transfer of environmentally sound technologies.
d. Internalize the full environmental and social costs of goods and services in the selling price, and enable consumers to identify products that meet the highest social and environmental standards.
e. Ensure universal access to health care that fosters reproductive health and responsible reproduction.
f. Adopt lifestyles that emphasize the quality of life and material sufficiency in a finite world.

8. *Advance the study of ecological sustainability and promote the open exchange and wide application of the knowledge acquired.*

a. Support international scientific and technical cooperation on sustainability, with special attention to the needs of developing nations.
b. Recognize and preserve the traditional knowledge and spiritual wisdom in all cultures that contribute to environmental protection and human well-being.
c. Ensure that information of vital importance to human health and environmental protection, including genetic information, remains available in the public domain.

III. SOCIAL AND ECONOMIC JUSTICE

9. *Eradicate poverty as an ethical, social, and environmental imperative.*

a. Guarantee the right to potable water, clean air, food security, uncontaminated soil, shelter, and safe sanitation, allocating the national and international resources required.
b. Empower every human being with the education and resources to secure a sustainable livelihood, and provide social security and safety nets for those who are unable to support themselves.
c. 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.*

a. Promote the equitable distribution of wealth within nations and among nations.
b. Enhance the intellectual, financial, technical, and social resources of developing nations, and relieve them of onerous international debt.
c. Ensure that all trade supports sustainable resource use, environmental protection, and progressive labor standards.
d. Require multinational corporations and international financial organizations to act transparently in the public good, and hold them accountable for the consequences of their activities.

11. *Affirm gender equality and equity as prerequisites to sustainable development and ensure universal access to education, health care, and economic opportunity.*
a. Secure the human rights of women and girls and end all violence against them.
b. Promote the active participation of women in all aspects of economic, political, civil, social, and cultural life as full and equal partners, decision makers, leaders, and beneficiaries.
c. Strengthen families and ensure the safety and loving nurture of all family members.

12. *Uphold the right of all, without discrimination, to a natural and social environment supportive of human dignity, bodily health, and spiritual well-being, with special attention to the rights of indigenous peoples and minorities.*
a. Eliminate discrimination in all its forms, such as that based on race, color, sex, sexual orientation, religion, language, and national, ethnic or social origin.
b. Affirm the right of indigenous peoples to their spirituality, knowledge, lands and resources and to their related practice of sustainable livelihoods.
c. Honor and support the young people of our communities, enabling them to fulfill their essential role in creating sustainable societies.
d. Protect and restore outstanding places of cultural and spiritual significance.

IV. DEMOCRACY, NONVIOLENCE, AND PEACE

13. *Strengthen democratic institutions at all levels, and provide transparency and accountability in governance, inclusive participation in decision making, and access to justice.*
a. Uphold the right of everyone to receive clear and timely information on environmental matters and all development plans and activities which are likely to affect them or in which they have an interest.
b. Support local, regional and global civil society, and promote the meaningful participation of all interested individuals and organizations in decision making.
c. Protect the rights to freedom of opinion, expression, peaceful assembly, association, and dissent.
d. Institute effective and efficient access to administrative and independent judicial procedures, including remedies and redress for environmental harm and the threat of such harm.
e. Eliminate corruption in all public and private institutions.
f. Strengthen local communities, enabling them to care for their environments, and assign environmental responsibilities to the levels of government where they can be carried out most effectively.

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.
d. Recognize the importance of moral and spiritual education for sustainable living.

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.
c. Avoid or eliminate to the full extent possible the taking or destruction of non-targeted species.

16. *Promote a culture of tolerance, nonviolence, and peace.*
a. Encourage and support mutual understanding, solidarity, and cooperation among all peoples and within and among nations.
b. Implement comprehensive strategies to prevent violent conflict and use collaborative problem solving to manage and resolve environmental conflicts and other disputes.
c. Demilitarize national security systems to the level of a non-provocative defense posture, and convert military resources to peaceful purposes, including ecological restoration.
d. Eliminate nuclear, biological, and toxic weapons and other weapons of mass destruction.
e. Ensure that the use of orbital and outer space supports environmental protection and peace.
f. Recognize that peace is the wholeness created by right relationships with oneself, other persons, other cultures, other life, Earth, and the larger whole of which all are a part.

THE WAY FORWARD

As never before in history, common destiny beckons us to seek a new beginning. Such renewal is the promise of these Earth Charter principles. To fulfill this promise, we must commit ourselves to adopt and promote the values and objectives of the Charter.

This requires a change of mind and heart. It requires a new sense of global interdependence and universal responsibility. We must imaginatively develop and apply the vision of a sustainable way of life locally, nationally, regionally, and globally. Our cultural diversity is a precious heritage and different cultures will find their own distinctive ways to realize the vision. 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.

Life often involves tensions between important values. This can mean difficult choices. However, we must find ways to harmonize diversity with unity, the exercise of freedom with the common good, short-term objectives with long-term goals. Every individual, family, organization, and community has a vital role to play. The arts, sciences, religions, educational institutions, media, businesses, nongovernmental organizations, and governments are all called to offer creative leadership. The partnership of government, civil society, and business is essential for effective governance.

In order to build a sustainable global community, the nations of the world must renew their commitment to the United Nations, fulfill their obligations under existing international agreements, and support the implementation of Earth Charter principles with an international legally binding instrument on environment and development.

Let ours be a time remembered for the awakening of a new reverence for life, the firm resolve to achieve sustainability, the quickening of the struggle for justice and peace, and the joyful celebration of life.