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Global Aims and Beautiful Designs: The Earth Charter and William Morris



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The sacred and secular values of rivers are universal, embodying the global aims of the Earth Charter. These aims echo the environmental and everyday aesthetics of William Morris. Both the Charter's and Morris's visions are reflected in the depiction of riverine and everyday life in the artwork "Along the River during the Qingming Festival." Its 21st-century digital version, "The River of Wisdom," highlights the educational value of appreciating our harmonious relationship with the natural world.

Global Aims

The aims of the Earth Charter and the challenges it addresses resonate with universal values and issues associated with the planet's rivers, particularly emphasizing "respect and care for the community of life" and "ecological integrity." It also includes goals such as "social and economic justice," "democracy," "nonviolence," and "peace." The concluding section, "Way Forward," acknowledges that harmonizing these aims presents practical problems involving difficult choices. Within the problem of harmonization, rivers symbolize and exemplify the challenges of integrating diverse socio-economic, political, and environmental objectives. Historically, rivers have served various functions for humanity, ranging from mythological to economic. The first civilizations emerged on floodplains of large rivers, which provided fertile soil, fresh water, and

natural travel routes. Rivers were vital to life, and that inspired their sacred status. But managing rivers, saving them even in instances evidenced by restoration projects around the world, necessarily means addressing ecological issues in their working relationships to a complex range of human needs.

Earth Charter aims must move us beyond intellectual and scientific understanding to practical actions. To actions that are replete – in the terms of an Earth Charter principle – with 'love and responsibility'. That is, with actions made with proper awareness of 'protecting diversity', of building 'sustainable lifestyles', and of 'dignity and well-being'. In short, the Earth Charter's 'Way Forward' encourages us to 'find ways to harmonize' all kinds of paired demands, sacred and scientific, natural and human.

We can be encouraged in this pursuit of solutions to sets of ecological-socio-economic problems by the example of the 19th century designer and proto-environmentalist William Morris. In his creative and business life, William Morris faced similar issues of moving from principles to action. He established Morris & Co in 1874, opening shops in London and Manchester, and workshops in south London. He sought the best suppliers and skilled workers with aims of good work, high wages, and producing everyday affordable quality products. But how could this be sustained in the late 19th century western economies of cost-cutting, low wages, and producing shoddy goods,

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with no regard for environmental costs? Morris understood a global situation, not dissimilar to that faced in the early 21st century. So, from the 1880s, he wrote and lectured on topics like 'How We Live and How We Might Live' and 'A Factory as It Might Be'. Akin to the Earth Charter's 'Way Forward', Morris integrated his creative and business aims with socio-economic and environmental principles. He realized that this meant political and educational activism. In this, he shares the approach of the Earth Charter's 2024 Conference on 'Education for Ecological Civilizations'.

However, this begs the question of why environmental and related socio-economic problems, long identified, have not been met with solutions sooner. We know the facts, the stories of ravage and destruction. There exists a practical science to deal with many of these problems. But populist thinking for short-term political success, the remoteness of ecological causes, and the sheer numbers of people to persuade, has made educational work

difficult. Building ecological civilizations against this general background suggests the need for more than scientific education backed with politics. A wider and deeper philosophy is required. In that, both east and west offer long traditions of holistic thought that support building sustainable civilizations. Examples include Chinese Daoism, with its emphasis on organicist thinking, and in western ethics, the 'golden rule' applied not simply between people but for all life. If the Earth Charter indicates the need for an ethics and philosophy that generates a thoughtful atmosphere in which we act in the right way towards our natural surroundings, then Morris's example is valuable in suggesting we also need an aesthetic sensibility in all we do and make.

Morris's utopian romance 'News from Nowhere' conveys a universal conception of harmonious work and life that embraces the range and variety of human interests and experience. It is a literary response to the political requirement to offer people a



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vision of how life might be better: the fundamental need expressed by 'if I could but see it!'. What Morris describes in his 'Nowhere' is a clean River Thames, replete with salmon, and his shabby London suburb by the river transformed by a new bridge, its beauty surpassing even Florence's Ponte Vecchio, the soap-works with their smoke-vomiting chimneys and the lead - works, gone. Buildings are small and fanciful, like shops with painted and gilded vanes, showing no signs of grimy sootiness. It is a new world described in aesthetic terms, in short.

Morris's view directs us to harmonious working relationships between human aims, values, and the natural world. It is one expressed in the 12th century Song Dynasty artwork *Along the River during the Quigming Festival*, a vision of vibrant riverine life, symbolic at least of 'ecological civilization'.

Sacred Rivers

Human harmony with the natural environment is radically different to the successful interactions of plant and animal

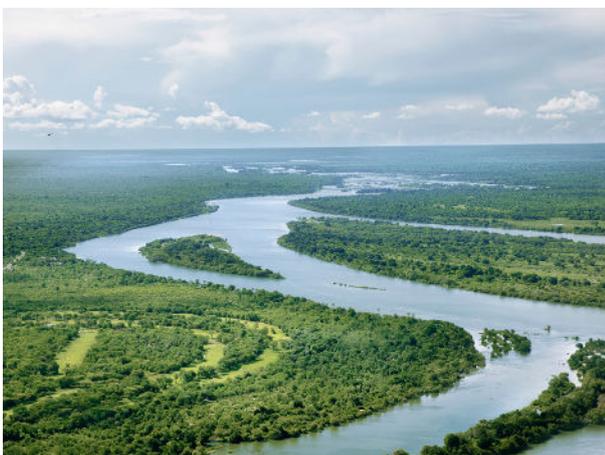


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life. Our interactions engage our conscious, imaginative, working lives in the unique places we live. Morris's home in Hammersmith was part of urban London and the River Thames there was polluted, with its riverbanks blighted by ugly commercial buildings. He imagined the Thames as it might be in his poem, 'The Earthly Paradise':

"And dream of London, small, and white, and clean,

The clear Thames bordered by its gardens green."

Of course, this pastoralist vision of the English countryside is not generalisable. And yet, it is generally important as an artistic view of realizable aims. Of an 'ecological civilization' on the Thames made aesthetically appealing. The experiential drama of our lives on earth is presented as a thing to understand and love. The state of rivers was both real and symbolic for Morris, evidenced in John Ruskin's description of a tributary of the Thames, the River Wandle [2]. Morris was greatly influenced by Ruskin's aesthetic and social-reforming ideas and later built his Merton Works, where he produced Morris & Co goods, on the Wandle. Ruskin wrote that the source of the Wandle was the "loveliest piece of lowland scenery in South England," expressing "sweet human character and life." But he went on to describe how it had been defiled by "human herds dumping into the source of the river their heaps of dust and slime, and broken shreds of old metal, and rags of

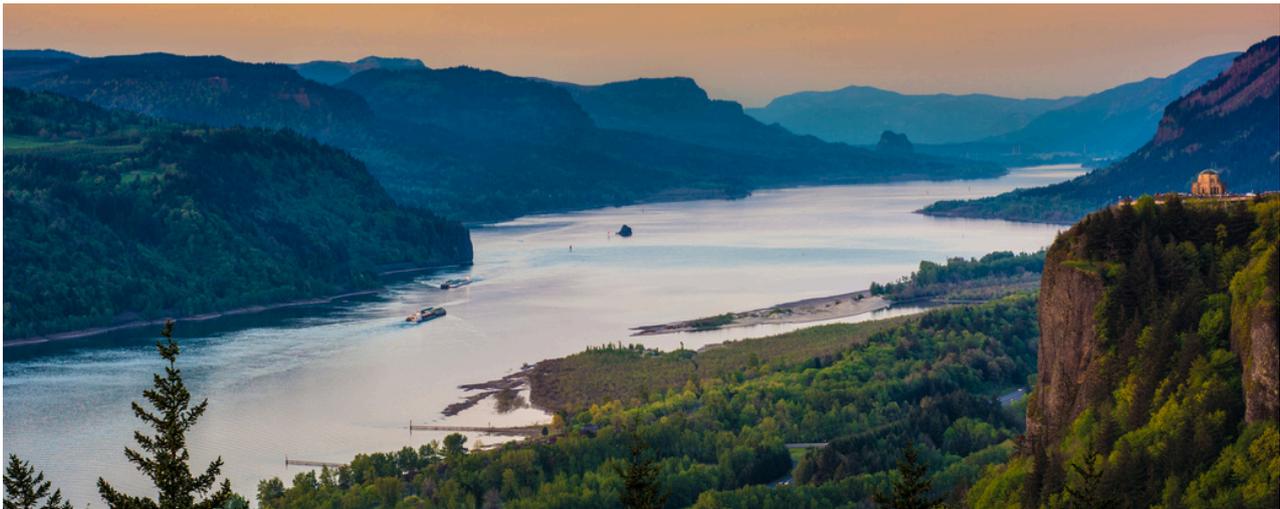


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putrid clothes.” Ruskin’s description appeals to aesthetic as well as environmental sensibilities. And he thinks the polluting behaviour is sacrilegious, despoiling a river’s sacred beauty. In Ruskin’s and Morris’s time too, the Thames reached a deleterious condition, recorded primarily in sensory terms as the ‘Great Stink’. It was, indeed, only this basic experiential response that prompted practical actions to clean and restore the health of the river.

Extreme experiences of environmental damage and climate change prompt political philosophies and practical actions. Ruskin and Morris saw that need, and it is similarly addressed by the Earth Charter. Their special contribution, however, remains linking environmentalism to aesthetics. They both saw problems and envisioned solutions, giving due place to our feelings towards places in any effective ecological, civilizing work. This is not the feeling of tourists toward ‘beauty spots.’ It is an aesthetic sensibility grounded in a sense of responsibility for one’s own local places of beauty. And to

enjoy them in our everyday lives. It is also not then an architectural, landscape aesthetic but one of everyday use and pleasure. In Morris’s *Nowhere*, the Thames is swum in and fished by people living there. What Morris conveys – in his literature, lectures, business, and designs – is the interdependence of environmental conditions and our individual and societal well-being.

All Morris’s work was inspired by the romance of rivers and driven by beautiful design solutions for everything from goods of everyday use to factories and whole communities. That is revealed most clearly in essays like ‘Art and the Beauty of the Earth’. In the spirit of Morris, rivers are indeed sacred but also works (of ‘Art’) in perpetual progress too. Their proper development is real and emblematic of humanity’s progress. Rivers are therefore not tamed by aesthetics but managed, using the appropriate technology, with aesthetic notions of harmony in mind. There is no return to a general state of ‘wilderness’. Still, beautiful ecological civilizations can be built.



Morris's environmentalism is not scientific, but vitally it is literary, visual, and about everyday things we make and use. These are vital elements in building new civilizations because the Earth Charter aims, in those terms, have a reality for people in their everyday lives. Along the River also provokes sacred, caring, and creative experiential responses to riverine life that are generalisable to our proper regard for our environments. That felt experience, as well as scientific understanding, is essential to an effective way forward building ecological civilizations.

Beautiful Designs

Morris's designs, including his patterns based on idealized views of the tributaries of the Thames, and works of art like *Along the River*, are 'visual ecologies' reflecting socio-economic aims and values [Morris, 1988]. They are important because aesthetic sensibility is vital to building ecological civilizations. Precedent and inspiration should be drawn from other artistic insights, from poetry to the visual

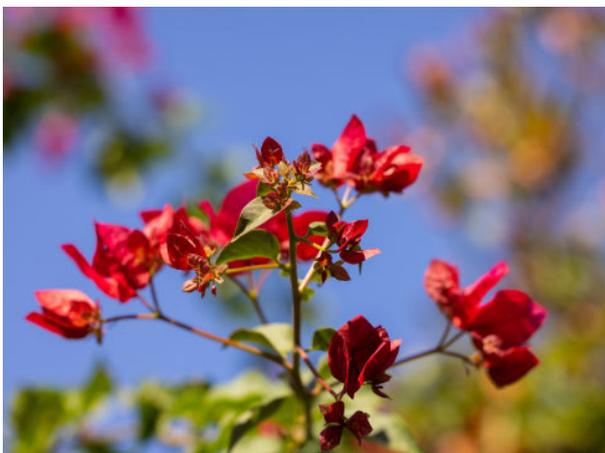
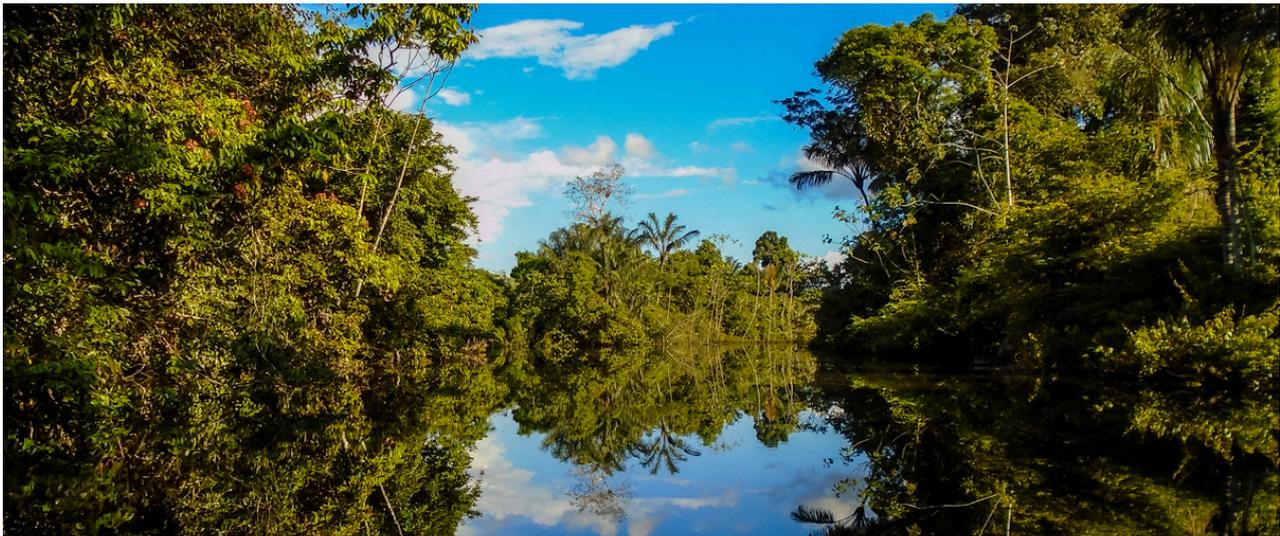


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arts, about what our relationships with the world should be. Their appeals to 'divine' yet real human working relationships offer exemplars and opportunities to feel as well as think about ecological problems.

Beauty is thus conceived, in respect of the principles of the Earth Charter, as evidencing the vitality and inter relatedness of sustainable and progressive living. While these are universal themes of truly human existence, art's forms can still be infinitely various. Again, Morris helps us understand what this means in practice. His designs named after tributaries of the Thames reflect the real botany and physical forms of the countryside, he knew from his Thameside life. They are more than mere decorative patterns applied to wallpapers, for example, in pursuit of 'style' in the home. They are intentional evocations of successful harmonious environments, of integrated, vibrant, and colourful living. Indeed, they are intended to provoke as well as visualise new ways of people and nature living in harmony.

In such creative work, a sense of the sacred is retained, but finds secular meaning too in the experiential value we give to beautiful places and things in our everyday lives. A contemporary example of this spirit of Morris in practice is the British design company, Soane. Its work manufacturing beautiful designs of everyday goods using local skilled workers, sustainable raw materials and processes, adhering to international standards like the Science Based Targets initiative (SBTi), and collaborative national



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and international networks of workshops, echo Morris's and the Earth Charter's aims and principles. These are integrated then in a way forward that produces beautiful things but also good working lives, international cooperation, and a sustainable natural world. Soane exemplifies the overarching educative aim of Morris and the Earth Charter: emphasis on production in its widest sense of producing good people, things, and places.

These educational aims for bringing about ecological civilizations are also reflected in a set of commitments made in 2023 by Liaoning University in China. The Earth Centre at Liaoning aims to educate students to apply Earth Charter principles in their work and lives. So, the Earth Charter Education Centre at the university aims to enhance recognition among teachers and students: 1) of the interdependence of the global community, 2) of the concept of a human family, with 3) shared responsibility for the well-being of future generations. All are given a focus on promoting sustainable lifestyles and models of human

development. With Morris too in mind, it might reasonably be added that this education requires that this recognition of Earth Charter values should properly engage aesthetic as well as scientific interests.

Conclusion

Thinking about Earth Charter aims, sacred rivers and beautiful designs suggests an aesthetics of politics insofar as harmonious working relationships are necessarily at the fore of building ecological civilizations. What is meant by that is that the essence of the aims, concerns, and principles of the Earth Charter amounts to a twofold education in both the science of climate change and in something like Morris's practical aesthetics. For example, education enabling 'The Way Forward' is best conceived in terms of encouraging creative, working, beautiful design solutions to environmental problems. It is worth noting too how that education and work alleviates the 'climate anxiety' – recorded in all countries – that people express with only knowing the problem.



This takes us back to the sacred view of rivers and the social and environmental aims and designs we associate with them. In both Morris's art and *Along the River*, the riverine character of vibrant everyday life is celebrated: bustling, flowing, harmonious. Morris's environmentalism is also secular but tends to a paradisaical view, in his poetry and designs, that contrasts with the everyday work and vibrancy of *Along the River*. Morris's bucolic, garden vision might be thought unrealistic, but it properly damns the ugly and polluting, and brings colour and romance to lives. And the example of his business making things at a factory on a tributary of the Thames is a real contribution to conceiving the Earth Charter's aims in practical terms that engage all its environmental and socio-economic principles. It is work that stands alongside the poetry of trade, indicated by lines from an 18th century poem attached to the 12th century *Along the River*:

*"A wall of gold is mounted on Shu brocade
Watchtowers of the city rise to great heights
The bustling scene is truly impressive."*

Aims, at their best, are inspiring, evoking experiential, aesthetic visions of better lives. They are underpinned but not confined to the science and principles informing them. So, it is vital to apply aims with beauty in mind, that is, with the quality of experiential lives foremost. Then, like Morris the craftsman and

environmentalist, individuals will not only know what is wrong with bad ways of making and living, but point it out in our daily lives and, most importantly, create a new sustainable beautiful world through their own works. Morris offers an integrated vision of ecology and social and developmental aims, where action is initiated in good work: in care for one's local environment and conditions of life, and in making things in new sustainable and pleasurable ways.

In 2010, an animated version of *Along the River* was created and named *The River of Wisdom*. The lesson it teaches – evident in William Morris's work and the Earth Charter's 'Way Forward' – is the beauty of working harmonies, of divine and practical collaborations, artistic and technological, rural and urban, between humanity and nature.

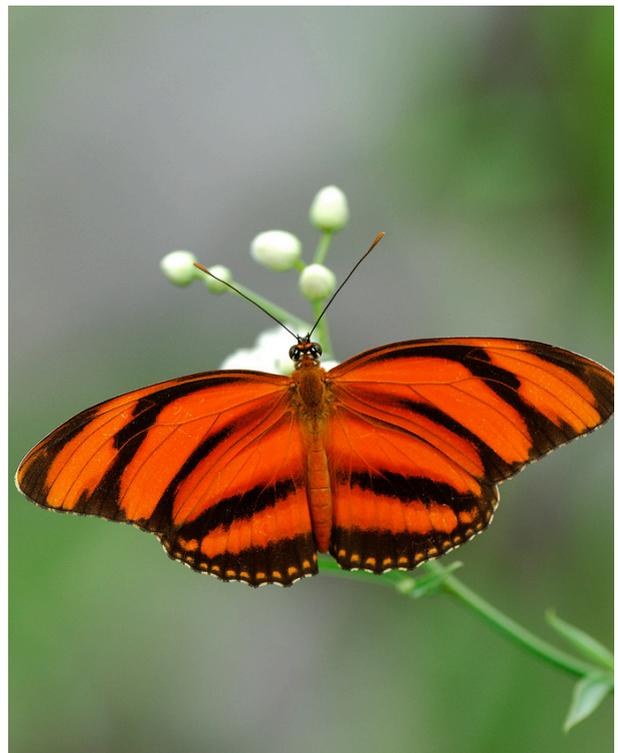


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