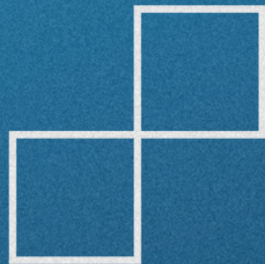


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A Blueprint for Tomorrow: The IUCN and Earth Charter's Shared Dream of a Sustainable World

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Abstract

This article examines the relationship between the Earth Charter (the document) and the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN), highlighting their shared commitment to ethical environmental governance. It explores the potential of the IUCN Resolution on the Earth Charter and Earth Charter's integration into IUCN's strategic planning, legal, policy and educational initiatives and recommends for deeper incorporation of Earth Charter principles into IUCN's frameworks to enhance global environmental governance and sustainability efforts.

Introduction

The International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN) is a global organization that works to conserve nature and promote the sustainable use of natural resources. It was founded in 1948 and it brings together government and civil society organizations, with a membership comprising of States, government agencies, non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and indigenous peoples' organizations. The organization focuses on key environmental issues such as biodiversity conservation, climate change and sustainable development, working at international, national and local levels. The Union involves – (1) member organizations, which include governments, non-governmental organizations and indigenous peoples' organizations; (2) seven commissions, which involve volunteer experts from a range of disciplines; (3) the Council and (4) the secretariat, which includes the head office and regional offices, for implementation of IUCN program.

A significant aspect of IUCN's mission includes its support of ethical frameworks like the Earth Charter, which provides a guiding philosophy for sustainable and just environmental stewardship. The World Commission on Environmental Law (WCEL) centers its efforts in advancing environmental law around the globe and has eight

specialist groups, out of which, the Ethics Specialist Group that seeks to highlight the ethical issues in biodiversity conservation and specific natural resource controversies and engage with diverse local and global partners to foster ethical engagement.

The Earth Charter is a declaration of sixteen fundamental principles for building a just, sustainable and peaceful global society in the 21st century. The document emphasizes on inclusive ethical vision that environmental protection, human rights, equitable human development and peace are interdependent and indivisible. The document was written by an international drafting committee (which was formed by the Earth Charter Commission in early 1997), through a consultation process and a broad multicultural and multisectoral worldwide dialogue. Since its launch, in the year 2000, the Earth Charter has been adopted by numerous organizations and individuals who are using it in various ways, such as by education programs through Earth Charter Centre for Education for Sustainable Development under Earth Charter International.

For the past 25 years, the Earth Charter movement is empowered by individuals and organizations from 90 countries around the world, who have embraced the vision of the Earth Charter and use it in various ways to guide the transition towards a more just, sustainable and peaceful world.

The Beginning – Connecting the Earth Charter document to IUCN

As mentioned above, the Earth Charter was drafted through a broad international consultation process. The IUCN, as a leading environmental organization, played a critical role in providing input and supporting the consultation process that involved environmental experts, indigenous leaders and civil society groups from around the world. The IUCN Commission on Environmental and its Ethics Working Group were particularly involved throughout its drafting process between 1995 and 2000. IUCN scientists, as well as experts in international environmental law and environmental ethics provided valuable inputs into the consultation and drafting of the Earth Charter. As stated by Mr. Parvez Hassan, former chair of IUCN Commission on Environmental Law, “... *the Earth Charter Commission contacted us in 1995 for the development of the Earth Charter and we decided to join the effort so that the Earth Charter and the IUCN Draft Covenant [on Environment and Development] can support each other. With this objective, we participated in the mainstream work of the drafting of the Earth*

Charter and, happily, we were able to ensure that the final Earth Charter is in substantial harmony with the IUCN Draft Covenant. ...” (Hassan P. 2006; South African Journal of Environmental Law and Policy; Volume 13, Issue 1, pp. 15-19)

Following that, the IUCN World Conservation Congress held in Bangkok in 2004, the IUCN General Assembly adopted a resolution that acknowledged the Earth Charter’s relevance to its mission.

The resolution reads:

“The World Conservation Congress at its 3rd Session in Bangkok, Thailand, 17-25 November 2004:

- 1. ENDORSES the Earth Charter as an inspirational expression of civil society’s vision for building a just, sustainable and peaceful world;*
- 2. RECOGNIZES, consistent with IUCN’s mission, the Earth Charter as an ethical guide for IUCN policy and will work to implement its principles through the IUCN Intersessional Programme;*
- 3. RECOMMENDS that the Earth Charter be used by IUCN to help advance education and dialogue on global interdependence, shared values, and ethical principles for sustainable ways of living; and*
- 4. ENCOURAGES member organizations and states to examine the Earth Charter and to determine the role the Earth Charter can play as a policy guide within their own spheres of responsibility.”*

This means that IUCN recognized the Earth Charter as an ethical framework for sustainable development and encouraged its use by its members and other conservation and environmental organizations, as an ethical guide for conservation policies, programs, and practices. IUCN further recognised the Earth Charter as a ‘declaration of fundamental ethical principles for building a just, sustainable and peaceful global society in the 21st century’ and emphasized the importance of integrating ethical values into global environmental policies by adopting this resolution.

This resolution reflects upon how the Earth Charter is a soft law instrument that provides ‘comprehensive ethical framework’ for addressing the challenges of sustainability, biodiversity conservation, human rights, social equity to say the least,

among several other things. The resolution emphasized the alignment of the Earth Charter vision with the IUCN mission, work and efforts of integrating ethical concerns like social justice, respect for diversity, environmental protection and a commitment to future generations.

However, the resolution – and for the reason this resolution is nothing else but a resolution – encourages the IUCN members and others to use the Earth Charter as a reference for ethical decision-making in conservation, sustainability and environmental governance. It urges the governments, organizations and individuals, who are members of the Union, to adopt and apply the Earth Charter's principles in their policies and programs to foster global cooperation and to achieve sustainability. Thus, the Earth Charter is a non-binding force. Klaus Bosselmann presented a paper titled 'Legal Aspects of IUCN's Recognition of the Earth Charter' at the IUCN Commission meetings where he explained that, *"...if the motion were correctly classified as a Resolution, IUCN members who voted for it would be under no legal obligation to implement the Earth Charter within their own jurisdictions."* (Report prepared by Mirian Vilela, Ron Engel and Brendan Mackey, March 2005 on The Earth Charter at the IUCN World Conservation Congress, Bangkok 2004).

Scope of Earth Charter Resolution for IUCN

So, now that we have understood that the Earth Charter is a non-binding, reference for ethical decision-making, soft law instrument and as such has been endorsed by the IUCN as an inspirational expression of civil society's vision for building a just, sustainable and peaceful world; what does the IUCN do, or can do, with such an endorsement? As rightly asked by Ron Engel, in his article 'The Earth Charter Covenant', *"... What does it mean for the Earth Charter to be an 'ethical guide for IUCN policy'?"* (Engel R., 2004). What is the value of such a resolution? Is the resolution important for IUCN? How long is this resolution valid for? What could possibly come out with IUCN and Earth Charter together? What are the possible avenues where Earth Charter principles could shine in public eye and be recognized by others?

By a bare reading of the above-mentioned part of the resolution, there seems to be two basic routes through which the Earth Charter principles can be implemented by

IUCN. The first – which we shall call as the ‘internal use’ of the Earth Charter – is through the recognition that the Earth Charter should be recognized as an ethical guide for IUCN policy. This further should be implemented through the IUCN Intersessional Programme, where the organization works to implement the Earth Charter principles. The resolution further recommends that the Earth Charter be used by IUCN to help advance education and dialogue on global interdependence, shared values and ethical principles for sustainable ways of living. The second – which we shall call as the ‘external use’ of the Earth Charter – is through the encouragement by the resolution to member organizations and states to examine the Earth Charter and to determine its possible role as a policy guide within their own spheres of responsibility. For the above-mentioned actions to happen as a minimum, awareness of the existence of this resolution needs to happen, hence a conscious effort needs to be undertaken to disseminate information about the Earth Charter and the IUCN resolution within the IUCN Secretariat, as well as among IUCN members and Commissions.

Clearly, by promoting and endorsing the Earth Charter, IUCN has helped to spread the values of sustainability, environmental justice and the protection of biodiversity. On the other hand, Earth Charter’s soft law status and comprehensive ethical framework for sustainability compliment IUCN’s legal work in advocating for stronger international environmental protections.

The inter-twining of The Earth Charter and IUCN over the years

Over the past 30 years, the IUCN has increased its work and influence in shaping environmental norms and influenced global policy frameworks undoubtedly. It has played a foundational role by promoting sustainable development, biodiversity conservation through its resolutions, formation of legal norms, international agreements and governance frameworks. In doing so, it has carried the resolution of recognizing the Earth Charter and using it as an ethical guide.

Naturally, we start with the Draft International Covenant on Environment and Development (ICED) by International Council of Environmental Law (ICEL) and the IUCN Environmental Law Programme (IUCN ELP). The draft treaty was first published in 1995. It is essentially a comprehensive legal framework which brings environmental

protection and sustainable development together. The idea is to codify and have a single binding treaty with existing international environmental principles and obligations. It is built upon principles of Rio Declaration on Environment and Development (1992) and Agenda 21. As mentioned before, the idea of Earth Charter principles was very much to align with the ICED, so that they support each other: the Earth Charter providing a solid and broad ethical foundation and the ICED providing a framework for a legally binding international law instrument. Since it is still during its draft stages, it is yet to be seen how the Earth Charter is positioned in the ICED.

The IUCN Commission on Environmental Law has used the Earth Charter to promote ethical guidelines within environmental law, in recognizing its importance, to address global ecological challenges and fostering sustainable development. The Biosphere Ethics Initiative (BEI), initiated in 2010, to build a movement of global solidarity for the future of life, was inspired and informed by the Earth Charter (Biosphere Ethics Initiative, 2010). This included acknowledgement of the interconnectedness of biodiversity, sustainability and social justice – principles of the Earth Charter.

This is further seen in the IUCN's resolution of 2012 (WCC-2012-Res-004-EN) on Establishment of the Ethics Mechanism, where the resolution of the endorsement of the Earth Charter is noted. It is in the same resolution that it is pointed out that *"Concerned that, to date, the application of IUCN's many ethics-based resolutions and mandates has been scattered across IUCN, and that IUCN needs to find a practical and coordinated methodology to make operational its endorsement of the Earth Charter as a guide to policy and programme, the World Charter for Nature, as well as IUCN's many further commitments that endorse ethics as central to its entire programme;"* This World Conservation Congress of the IUCN, in this resolution, requested the Director General and IUCN Commissions to essentially support further development and implementation of the BEI and the Relato Methodology (a local-to-global approach to practical ethical engagement, which facilitates the ethical decision making by engaging stakeholders) as a method for ethical engagement. A point to be noted here is that despite of the fact that it is noted that the IUCN itself has endorsed the Earth Charter as the ethical guide for IUCN policy, and that BEI is inspired and informed by the Earth Charter, there is no request to the Director General and IUCN Commissions to support the Earth Charter resolution and implement Earth Charter,

nor does the list of requests in the resolution point out the need to operationalize the Earth Charter endorsement, despite it being mentioned in the resolution. Is this because there is a need to have a programme within IUCN to push for this particular cause?

It should also be pointed out that in 2011, IUCN South American Regional Office published “Protected Areas of Latin America: Current Situation and Future Perspectives”, where they suggested the internalization of the Earth Charter as an ethical framework to create more sustainable societies (Earth Charter website). With the backdrop of the IUCN resolution in mind, it makes one ponder whether the Earth Charter principles are in fact being used or implemented, internally and externally, by IUCN.

At the 4th IUCN World Conservation Forum, held in Barcelona in 2008 the Earth Charter International provided workshops related to education for sustainable development, EC Assess and youth empowerment. This was built upon the IUCN endorsement of the Charter and organized to show how members of the IUCN can use the Earth Charter and EC Assess as an instrument and part of their work, in their spheres of influence and by this implement the IUCN endorsement of the Earth Charter (Earth Charter International Contributions to the United Nations Decade of Education for Sustainable Development, Report 2005-2014).

It is also important to mention that recently, in the year 2020, the Commission for Education and Communication of IUCN utilized Earth Charter as the guiding principle for Education for Conservation to focus on stewardship and values to guide individuals towards respect for nature and humanity, solidarity and intergenerational responsibility (Strategy on education for Conservation (EfC), 2020, IUCN CEC and FLEDGE).

The Earth Charter International, which operates in close collaboration with UNESCO and has established a UNESCO Chair on Education for sustainable development, to, among other things, help implement two UNESCO resolutions on the Earth Charter (UNESCO General Conference, 2019, 40 C/80). Through the Earth Charter Centre for Education for Sustainable Development, educational resources, curriculum guidelines and teacher training to integrate Earth Charter Principles into sustainability education

have been developed. Similarly, it would be ideal that IUCN's educational and advocacy efforts, which particularly emphasize on sustainable development ethics and transformative learning, are greatly influenced by the Earth Charter and collaborated with the Earth Charter International Educational Centre.

The use of Earth Charter principles by the IUCN can be seen as a part of a broader strategy to foster eco-social learning that emphasizes universal responsibility in sustainable development education in the report titled 'Ecosystem Human Health Consciousness, An Earth Charter based social learning strategy'. Another way is by launching three IUCN Arabic translated publication on ecosystem management, on the 10th anniversary of the Earth Charter (IUCN Press Release, 08 Nov, 2010). Either of the ways, it can be seen that IUCN was far more indulgent with the Earth Charter's principles during the early years of the Charter, among all segments of society and create a 'commitment' to implement those principles in different aspects of life. There can be seen a gradual decline in the inter-twining of the two over the years.

It can also be seen that IUCN Expert Commissions, specifically World Commission on Environmental Law and Commission on Education and Communication have made some efforts to take the Earth Charter as an ethical guide and incorporated it into their work. The Members at the World Conservation Congress have also recognized the Charter as an ethical policy. However, it seems the secretariat of IUCN is yet to find a way to incorporate the Earth Charter in order to oblige the Resolution.

Observations and Recommendations

Clearly, there have been some attempts to integrate the Earth Charter into the policies of IUCN by using it as an ethical framework. However, it somehow seems that the full potential of this integration is still not achieved. It is also observed that the resolution is vague, yet astute, and thereby places the Earth Charter in the eyes of the structural pillars of IUCN, for them to see the potential and strengthen their ethical grounding, broaden the influence and work towards global conservation.

In order to make soft laws such as Earth Charter into binding obligations, especially after such a significant resolution adopted by the IUCN, there is a requirement of follow-up mechanisms to encourage compliance. It should be remembered that Mr.

Parvez Hassan emphasized at the official launch of the Earth Charter at the Hague in June 2000, “... *I hope that it does not take the international community eighteen years to transform the principles of the Earth Charter into binding obligations of states and societies... It is only when the lofty principles of the Earth Charter become binding legal obligations and are implementable by people all over the world, will the Earth Charter have achieved its full potential.*”

It is evident that the Earth Charter needs to be embedded more deeply into the IUCN's strategic framework and programmes. By doing so, IUCN can not only concretely implement the Earth Charter resolution but also support global and regional bodies in implementing stronger ethics based environmental policies. The more Earth Charter is recognized and pointed out with a more intentional and direct manner, that there is an ethical framework which is being used to formulate strategies by the IUCN, the more there is acceptance of the ethical frameworks themselves in the environmental conservation and sustainable development policies. This merely requires awareness, good will and resolve. This type of thinking, of explicit naming of ethical frameworks in the works of organizations/ unions/ institutions, strengthens these strategic frameworks, that if, there is something which might be unclear in future policies, depending upon how complex environmental conservation becomes in the future, these principles could serve as a base line. The Earth Charter principles would also be helpful in changing the narratives of the future policies or strategic frameworks, if they are woven into the IUCN's strategic planning and programming. It can be recommended that IUCN incorporates the Earth Charter explicitly within its programmes. One way to do so could be through increasing collaboration on integrating Earth Charter principles, and refer to it, in environmental law, educational and policy development.

The IUCN secretariat could start implementing the Earth Charter principles in their work. By explicitly integrating these principles, IUCN secretariat can enhance their capacity building further. This could include encouraging IUCN regional, outpost, country and project offices to internalize values of ecological integrity, social justice, cultural respect and collective action, leading to a workforce committed to ethical environmental stewardship and use the Earth Charter as a reference. For this, regular

trainings could be offered on IUCN vision and the Earth Charter and their application, while equipping the secretariat with tools to implement the principles in their work.

To take this a step further, it is advisable that IUCN establishes an Internal Earth Charter Review Committee to systematically assess its policies, projects and institutional practices, recommending enhancements to strengthen alignment with Earth Charter values. This Review Committee could be provided with an Earth Charter Policy Compliance Requirement as a standard review measure for all draft policies which would formalize the ethical oversight of IUCN's governance frameworks. Additionally, fostering research that centers on Earth Charter principles would solidify IUCN's commitment to these ethical frameworks.

It would also be suggested to have clear communication between the IUCN secretariat, the Ethics Specialist Group and Earth Charter International secretariat. As IUCN is constantly developing new policies and recommendations, the Earth Charter secretariat together with the IUCN Ethics Specialist Group can provide them with different ways in which the Earth Charter principles can be incorporated to ensure that all of their initiatives adhere to their shared core values, and establish an exchange platform between each others' network or organizations and individuals, to educate people about environmental sustainability and social justice, and bring key players together to facilitate dialogue.

Conclusion

The relationship between the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN) and the Earth Charter underscores a shared commitment to ethical and sustainable environmental governance. The Earth Charter's principles, grounded in human rights, ecological integrity, and social justice, provide a comprehensive framework that resonates immensely with IUCN's mission of protecting nature and promoting sustainable development. While the Earth Charter is a soft law instrument, its influence is profound, offering a universal set of guidelines that align with the IUCN's conservation objectives. The endorsement of the Earth Charter by IUCN is a testament to the growing recognition of the need for ethical underpinnings in the conservation movement, yet the full implementation of its principles as well as awareness of the existence of this broad ethical framework remains a challenge. Despite the IUCN's

ongoing efforts to integrate sustainability and social justice into its policies, more consistent and direct incorporation of Earth Charter principles into IUCN's strategic documents, programs, and operations is necessary to elevate the framework from endorsement to active practice. It is the author's strong belief that when new instruments are solidified, they are required to be built on already existing frameworks, and with the empowerment of these new instruments, these existing frameworks grow their credibility and reach. Thus, having IUCN demonstrate its own commitment, good will and resolve in moving forward with its own adopted resolution, is a good way to show consistency in its own decisions. It is only by pointing out these already existing frameworks in these new instruments, both the new instruments and the existing frameworks, become stronger, through working together and be recognizing each others' importance, potential and value.

About the Author

Deeksha Aggarwal is an international lawyer specializing in environmental law, human rights, and sustainability advocacy. With a master's in International Law and Human Rights from the University for Peace, she has advanced impactful legal solutions at the Supreme Court of India and various High Courts. Her work spans landmark cases addressing environmental justice, women's rights, and animal protection, including banning Jallikattu and advocating sustainable agricultural practices. Deeksha combines rigorous legal expertise with a commitment to social justice and environmental sustainability, aiming to drive global policy reform and meaningful systemic change.

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