

Welcome to Turning Conscience Into Action, the Earth Charter podcast. Join Mirian Vilela, Earth Charter International Executive Director, in her fascinating conversations with great thinkers, scholars and activists from around the world who are working in the fields of sustainability, ethics, education and social transformation. Our purpose is to generate new insights on how to face current global challenges and inspire Informed Action.

Over the years, I have been interested in the meaning of ecological integrity, given that there is a whole section in the Earth Charter that is called ecological integrity.

In this context, I have been following the wonderful work of the Global Ecological Integrity Group that brings together academics and activists from different fields and regions of the world. For more than 20 years, these group of experts have come together once a year for meetings convened by Laura Westra. They have come together to share their research work. As a result, they have published many books, one nearly every year, with a collection of very interesting and useful essays. Quite often, these meetings have dedicated a space in the agenda for a dialogue on the Earth Charter.

So, for this podcast episode, I have invited Laura Westra. Laura is the founder and director of the Global Ecological Integrity Group and is Professor in META at the University of Windsor, Canada. Thank you, Laura, for joining us today. Thank you for inviting me. So the first question I would like to ask you is, how did you come across the Earth Charter and what sparked your interest in it? Okay. I have been puzzling. I met the foundations of the Earth Charter, shall we say, long before it came into being.

Ron Engel chaired a meeting in Montreal. And he had several people involved. I've been puzzling to try and figure out which year this was. But it was a long, long time before the Earth Charter came into being, that's for sure. And I remember attending. How I knew about it, I cannot tell you, but I remember attending. And he mentioned the name of several people. And I remember being there and saying, excuse me, I'd like to add something. You have no women connected to this meeting on the Earth Charter.

I fully remember that. I was there. I remember. Oh, well, there you go. I was there. It was in the IUCN Congress meeting workshop as part of that, I guess. After that, there was another IUCN meeting. And this time it was in Costa Rica. And I finally met Rockefeller. And we had tea. But that led to him inviting myself and my husband to a workshop that he had on the Earth Charter. And after that, the interest in the Earth Charter remained through, again, Ron Engel, who was a steering committee member originally of our group when we started having meetings.

That was the steering committee of the IUCN Ethics Specialist Group. And what sparked your interest in those days on the Earth Charter that was back in the late 90s? Well, of course, integrity. The fact that integrity was there because I saw, I can't say I foresaw everything, but I certainly became aware of the tremendous potential it had. It started, don't forget, words on water. That was a US document. And the person that picked it up was one of the founding members, if not the founding member, James Carr.

He even designed an IBM, an index of biotics. An IBM, sorry, an index of biotic integrity. Thank you. Now, about 20 years ago, I came across a book of yours, which I still have here in my hands. It's a book you published in 1998 called *Living in Integrity, a Global Ethic to Restore a Fragmented Earth*. In this book, you link concerns about the environment with great theories of moral philosophy. Can you share with us the key ideas you articulated in this book and what were the linkages you identified between caring for the environment and our moral obligation to that?

Well, of course, natural law, St. Thomas, was certainly there in my mind, as well as the Spanish school at the time of the conquest of America, where the priests of the Spanish school essentially started international law by respecting each and every individual. They said, they were considered, the natives were considered like animals of the forest. It took the Spanish school, of course, sparked by the thinking of Thomas Aquinas to say, no, these are human beings. They might be misguided. It might be better if they had a religion, our religion, but on the other hand, they have their own little nations.

They have their own ways of governing marriages and deaths and all succession for one thing and so on. But most of all, I got interested in agribusiness because that's the time when they started fooling around with developing GMOs. I consider those one of the worst things that has ever happened to us and they are the reasons

on which I explain in great detail in further books why the Amazon is burning, essentially, because it's growing animals in a way that is not natural. But a much better book is my 2016 book on ecological integrity and global governance.

That is a book from Earthscan, where I talk about all of this stuff in updated detail. I also discuss very briefly the first people in Ciclico in 2015, *Laudato Si*,

that goes back to St. Francis and defense integrity throughout. I cite every place where the Pope talks about integrity, all throughout the book. So you have researched extensively, you have written extensively on ecological integrity. So for those people who have not heard of it or don't really understand what it is, what would you say in terms of what does it mean ecological integrity in theory and in practice? Well, it basically means not interfering with nature, to let nature do its own thing and only interfere, shall we say, in a case of need to defend yourself. In other words, the sort of thing that we do when we automatically swat a mosquito that is by digas, that could be carrying all sorts of things. Actually, Klaus Bosselmann has written on this.

His work has been foundational to this because he is actually bringing ecological integrity

to the UN. He did, as long as he could. Right now, he has not been able to travel this last year. But that is where essentially our work now is divided in two. We have a meeting that allows all people who have new ideas, new ways of dealing with integrity. For instance, integrity has been always based on water. But just in 2019, a man from Czechoslovakia, Zeleni, and that is in one of my books, the latest collection, and found a way of discussing integrity on a land-based way. That's completely new, and that's where people who are interested in saying something new about integrity can speak.

So that is the foundational part. And then we have the group with lawyers. I'm not a lawyer, you see. I have two PhDs, but I'm not a lawyer. So I have the lawyers of our group,

Katie Gwiazdon, Klaus Bosselmann, of course, first of all, and others, that disseminate

and talk about what we actually find in our meetings. So it's almost a two-pronged operation. Okay? And if people want to really understand it, they're going to have to read. Sorry, you can't sum it up in a word. But can we say that ecological integrity then means just leaving nature and not intervening on it or in it, respecting it as a whole? Exactly. And that means not only nature as a whole, but also biological integrity of single organisms. In other words, our understanding of integrity and the one from James Carr promulgates the belief that interfering with single organisms such as seeds, such as all sorts of things that are in nature is wrong. And it's amazing that this has been a position taken not only certainly by people with my particular inclination and background, but by people from different religious groups, but religious in their background, religious from what my husband used to be, for instance, was a Dutch reform. I have a journal from 1995 where I came across it by, you know, surprisingly, they talk about interfering with nature is interfering with the work of God, not Catholics, but Dutch reformed people.

So it's very interesting that this respect for integrity can be found pretty much everywhere. And it has been our effort to let it grow and to understand all the possible implications ever since we started meeting 27 up 28 years ago. But you have been for almost three decades, you have been working quite extensively on this very concept of ecological integrity. Do you think the concept of ecological integrity has evolved and advanced in international law? And how would you wish to envision that in the future?

Well, in the future, as I said, as long as we can move again, meet again, etc. I am sure that the group led by Klaus Pleyer is available at Amazon at the end of November.

But now I am working on a book on migrants and refugees and how badly they are impacted by the fact that there has been no respect for the nature where they live in small little areas. Because we are concentrating myself and another Italian professor, we are going to be concentrating on the Mediterranean Basin this time in the Mena region. So this leads me to the next question, which is what are the linkages between ecological integrity and human health? I think this is very much part of your research interest.

Very, very much. Because it is the same thing. When you interfere with our organism in one way or another, our integrity is lost. I used to say, a person say, like Peter, who had been in a concentration camp, etc., etc., and in Indonesia. And he was treated and not fed enough and so on. The bones in the front of his mouth, he lost his teeth not because four or five teeth just went because of that. Well, you could say that at that time when Peter was still healthy, that he was healthy. But he was not, his body did not have integrity because he had something else that was not his in the mouth. The same with people who have other things inside their body. This is a way of understanding it. Of course, when what is inside our body is something as dangerous as what has been spread by Monsanto, now there, as glyphosate, which thanks God, I participated in a meeting where

they talked against it and their beliefs that everything was fine and it was perfectly safe was debunked. It's one of the most dangerous things that we face and that corrupts the environment, but also the physical health of human beings. So it's totally related, when the environment is contaminated, when the environment is corrupted and loses its integrity, it affects human health. Exactly, exactly. When the environment is so badly polluted, the food that we eat is polluted. You cannot eat corn anymore because it's made by Monsanto bear. You cannot, mind, I just take a train to Montreal, but for her it's a different story. So I don't know, but Vandana Shiva certainly has talked about this in great detail and she has been a wonderful source for us too. Why do we need a non-anthropocentric approach to environment protection?

Well, because unfortunately we are totally tied to the environment. I mean, it's not us in the environment. There's something green out there or I don't know where. You see, we are part of it. We are human animals. So we simply cannot separate one from the other. We are part of what you call the environment needed in order to survive. Can you comment on how do you see the Earth Charter? How does the Earth Charter articulate ecological integrity? Does it help or adds value to raising awareness and helping people to understand what ecological integrity is? How important is it? Just look at what it has been, but what it can be in the future.

What do you think, how can we move ahead with regards to ecological integrity?

How can we move ahead? Again, I extend my invitation to you,

anybody from the Earth Charter, to participate in our meetings and then see whether there is anything there. It's not easy to take time to follow so many discussions, but that's why I'm doing this recording interview with you is to capture your knowledge in a moral and ethical angle too. I mean, that's great. Well, thank you very much, Mirian, and let me hope that maybe I'll see you again. Let me ask you another question. One more. Can you comment on the meaning of the right for a healthy environment for future generations, for present and future generations, the right for a health environment? You have written extensively on the right of future generations of a healthy environment. Can you share with us in terms of what you mean by that and how that idea is articulated also in your shatter and in your writings, the right for a healthy environment for present and future generations? Yeah, that is a very complex argument, and that was the topic of my book 46, which I sent you, The Flyer, and that is because those who harm our rights, as a matter of fact, escape both state control and international control. They, and when I say they, they are non-state actors, which include among them corporations as the worst and others, okay, they are nothing but mafias. You know what the mafia is. That too operates at a level where somehow you can catch them, of course, but they pop up somewhere else, all right.

They have a system of self-protection, which allows them to operate free from the controls of state law, but also free from the control of international law. They sort of live in a special area, okay, and there has been transnational legal regimes attempted to control some of these, but it's insufficient, and what my last book suggests to look at is something else, supranational law. That is the law that hits them where they are, because you can see in Italy, mafia, cosonotra, come already depending on the areas, sure, they get a few,

they send them to jail, but somehow they have a way of existing and reproducing, shall we say, like rabbits in different areas, and they pop up somewhere else where they never had been before.

So that's what I think. Yeah, so the right for future generations of our healthy environment is we can find it in several constitutions or not so many. No, the constitution, unfortunately, would protect us if they worked, but both corporations and mafias of various kinds have found a way to evade those, okay, and it just simply, they cannot be stopped unless the law changes, and I cite famous scholar Antonio Casseza who has said that the law, especially the international law, is at its early stages, believe it or not, and it needs to develop into something that it is not, so these are very, very difficult things, so when you start applying integrity fully, especially thinking of human rights, you are in a very, very difficult

area. Yeah, but it's important to make those linkages and bridges between human rights. Absolutely, absolutely. That's what I try to do, you know, that's what I try to do, but you know, I'm not, I don't go, that's the way it is. You are doing an amazing work, Laura, incredible. What do you think is the value of environmental ethics or global environmental ethics? How can we move that ahead? I think that has lost its direction, okay. I used to belong to the society that I, since ethics is not something like law or medicine that gives you a profession,

people who work on ethics are keen to make a career, and so they establish their career by, you know, they used to attack me constantly, and I said at a certain point, I said, you know what, I am going to quit environmental ethics and turn to law, because lawyers have a great thing. They accept arguments that may advance their case wherever they come from.

When I attended law school, I mean, it was a discovery for me, and so I've completely dropped environmental ethics, and I think they've lost their direction. Except for Holmes Rolston, he still has something important to say, and he never stopped, actually.

Would you share with me what is your current research focus? What are your current interests? As I said, it's migrants. Migrants and refugees at the borders, and I've just finished doing a short sum up of some of the things that the new people in Ciclico, Fratelli Tutti, which means brothers all, says about that. It's a lot about it and what people find at the borders, especially in the area of Italy and the Mediterranean basin, that's what we are working on, and the ME&A region, so a little further east, there's even been, believe it or not, a resurrection of fascism in Italy to try and keep the migrants off. It's amazing, but that's not only in Italy, but almost everywhere. There you go. Because they're receiving a lot of migrants, that's what's happening. I know, I know, and that's what the Pope says, I mean, don't forget,

as he says, brothers, as St. Francis used to say, everybody was a brother, also the sun and the moon and the earth, but in this particular Ciclico, Fratelli Tutti, that just came out October 3rd,

that's what it is. So that's what I'm working on, on the life of migrants faced by climate change, the ruins, the earth where they live, people that had, that were there and owned the little countries, and then they changed the way things were there, so their own ecology is no longer the way they used to be, and they sold whole areas to China, etc., without counting the US continuous effort to sell armaments in the area and to make sure that they have fights ongoing, conflicts all the time. So, and then of course, COVID-19 to cap it all. So that is the focus now, what migrants find at the border, and as you said, all over Europe, but in Italy we've had a resurgence of fascism that I would have never expected to see. Don't forget, I lived at the moment, I was in Milano when they hung him upside down, and threw tomatoes at him. Oh my gosh, so amazing, so amazing.

Well, yeah, I'm old here. So in terms of helping to change people's mindset and consciousness regarding all these issues, you think moving ahead on the track of international environmental law is the best way to go? Yeah, yes, definitely. I said the environmental ethics, with the exception of Homes, Charleston, and Health Services direction, and they are just fighting one another to see who can sort of make his own niche, and that's it, but it's not that they look in general at the plotters, for sure. Very good, very good. Well, Laura, thank you so much for your willingness to share your knowledge with us. I'm certainly yearning all in admiration for the huge work you have done in the field of ecological integrity, environmental law, and also environmental ethics. Thank you so much for your contributions.

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