

Earth Charter in Kazakhstan

by Marina Bakhnova and Sergey Shafarenko

There exists a legend in the East about imaginary and real values—the imaginary power of gold and a true value of clean and fresh water. Water quenches thirst, gives life to man, and a tree and to every living being on the Earth. A greedy and powerful khan put gold above everything, as so many rulers had done before him! He ordered his people to look for this metal everywhere, made them dig the fertile soil, destroy their crops, pollute all the rivers and sacred springs, which then turned to marshes, stank and dried up.

The hot wind rushed over the Earth and covered everything up with sand. People left this barren kingdom and its khan. Nobody was left to serve khan. He was thirsty and had to look for water. He was slow and clumsy, restricted by heavy golden bangles on his arms and legs. Massive golden chains on his neck and golden earrings in his ears weighed him to the ground. He was very weak after the long search and he fell onto the sand, and couldn't stand up any more. Only then it dawned upon him to part with his gold. The unhappy man, taking off his jewelry, prayed to heaven but it was too late. The merciless sun, the gust of wind, and the hot sand were the only replies to his prayer. Many years after the greedy khan died in the man-made desert, the passers-by could see those glittering heaps of gold guarded by a skeleton, but then, who needs gold in the desert?

Unfortunately this legend turned out to be prophetic. Many powerful people of our planet have been destroying Mother-Nature in their endless pursuit of a material gain, thus bringing us now to a time of global catastrophes.

It's time for humankind to make a lot of serious decisions and prove itself worthy of survival, and the Earth Charter is one of the ways to change our whole perception of our place and role on this planet.

Though the people of Kazakhstan learned the text of the document only in the spring of 1999, they readily identified themselves with the moral



values and principles of the Earth Charter. Kazakhstan, like many other newly independent states of the former Soviet Union, suffers from the impact of global and national environmental problems, such as devastation and destruction of forests, pollution of rivers and lakes, soil and air. Many kinds of plants and animals are now under the threat of dying out. Even after independence, during the period 1997-1998, 40 percent of all forests were burnt down in eastern Kazakhstan, where half of all Kazakhstan's forests are growing. Kazakhstan has its own share of ecological disasters, such as the Aral Sea and Semipalatinsk Nuclear Testing Site and the toll of these disasters is still very heavy in spite of multiple conferences and workshops, international forums and business-meetings aimed to improve these situations.

Even as you are reading this now, radioactive salt is being mined on the grounds of the Semipalatinsk Nuclear Testing Site. Local peasants bring their cattle to graze there, as the site is neither fenced nor guarded. Large oil and mining plants and metal chemical plants are still there and the building of the "The Black Irtysh-Karamay" canal in China can lead to a global environmental catastrophe, which can be compared with the Aral Sea tragedy.

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Back in 1989, the Ecological Movement in Kazakhstan started to grow and the first nongovernmental environmental organizations were founded. Their main aim has since been environment protection, and now there are more than 2,000 environmental NGOs in the Republic. In 1997 the first Environmental Forum of NGOs was conducted, the coordinating council was founded, and an intensive effort was made to establish cooperation with the Ministry of Natural Resources.

Sustainable development and effective solutions to environmental problems are the main challenges for the Kazakh civil society. A lot of organizations are committed to the solution of environmental problems within the context of economic and social background and particularly, that of consciousness, culture and education. That is why it's necessary to change our priorities, values and our attitude towards the environment, to find a

solution to environmental, social and economic problems. A new global ethics of relationships between humankind and Nature is necessary.

This was the very reason why the Kazakh's civil society took an active part in the multiple discussions of the Earth Charter as a document that grows from internal to the international spread of new attitudes that help to keep life on the planet. Discussions of the document in Kazakhstan began in May of 1999 within ecological NGOs. Nearly 15 organizations took part in it. The document was also sent to the Kazakhstan Parliament. Additions and changes were suggested. Apart from ecological organizations, other NGOs, and different stakeholders of our civil society, as well as individuals joined this process.

This process received an impetus in June 1999 during the Central Asian Earth Charter hearings organized and held by the Earth Council in Issyk-Kul, Kyrgyzstan. In July of the same year, the discussion of the Earth Charter was held among the teachers, students and Peace Corps volunteers at the ecological summer camp for children. Representatives from Ust-Kamenogorsk and Leninogorsk NGOs took part in it. Both young and grown-up participants noted the importance and the timeliness of the discussed documents. The children would say that the Earth Charter was the document belonging to the future, and if some people did not accept it now, they would accept it in the future. The students also expressed their concern about the bad treatment of animals and considered how cruelty was penetrating other spheres of their lives.

The young participants of the Earth Charter process from Ust-Kamenogorsk high-schools made posters "We are discussing the Earth Charter" and placed them all over the city, with the text of the document, the history of the subject, and a space for individual commentaries.

All three drafts of the Earth Charter have been discussed by the NGOs and governmental institutions of the Republic of Kazakhstan. Of course, the discussion through the Internet has its drawbacks, but it didn't prevent organizations from showing their interest in the work on the document.

At the end of 1999 and in the early part of 2000, a process of public hearings on the Earth Charter at the regional level began in five Kazakhstan cities. Among the participants in the hearings were the representatives of city



and regional maslikhats (local governments), social and environmental organizations, regional environmental protection governmental agencies, Departments of the National Ecological Center, teachers and students from high-schools and universities, city administrations and representatives of private business and media.

Articles were published and dedicated to the questions of public hearings on the Earth Charter in many newspapers. TV showed the reportings about the city and regional discussions of this document. The complete text of the Earth Charter was published in the official newspaper “Environmental Bulletin.”

The participants at public hearings in Uralsk, Karaganda, Leninogorsk, Semipalatinsk and Ust-Kamenogorsk endorsed the Earth Charter and contributed their comments and suggestions.

In February 2000, the process of national public hearings was summed up by the National Conference on the Earth Charter organized and held by the Earth Council in Almaty. Representatives of seven Kazakhstan regions, the Kazakh Government and Parliament, all took part in it. The Earth Charter National Committee was elected there and some additions and changes were made to the document. The National Committee consists of the representatives of Parliament, scholars, non-governmental organizations, the Council of the President, religious organizations and private business.

We at the Central Asian Earth Charter Council and in Kazakhstan came to a firm belief that not a single environmental problem can be solved if and when tackled only by scientific or technological means, without considering it to be a part of the global spiritual crisis of humankind, without considering the moral, cultural and ethical conditions of our civilization.

Global crisis is the crisis of priorities, values, and of individual consciousness. In the time of the industrial influence on Nature and the dramatic increase of the population of our planet, it is necessary to radically change our



attitudes towards the environment. It is necessary to promote the purification of the Earth's noosphere and accordingly treat our thoughts, which are the basis for our actions, more responsibly. This will lead to a total revisioning of our place within this wonderful gift of God, our world.

We need one common document for the whole planet, which will consist of main principals defining our behaviour and lifestyles. It can be modified, though, nationally and locally in terms of local cultural traditions and beliefs.

NGOs and governmental organizations of Astana, Almaty and Koktshetav took part in discussion of the Earth Charter. We hope that the process of discussing life and defining moral values and principals will spread throughout the Republic of Kazakhstan.

The text of the Earth Charter has been translated into the Kazakh language and distributed all over the country, including the Parliament of the Republic of Kazakhstan.

The National Committee offers a number of proposals:

- 1) To arrange correspondence on the Earth Charter by e-mail between the young people of different countries.
- 2) To conduct an informational campaign on the Earth Charter—publishing leaflets, booklets and issuing shirts. Creation of a film “Central Asia is welcoming the Earth Charter.”
- 3) To organize a festival of ecological songs and poems, which will be based on the text of the Earth Charter.
- 4) To carry out a competition on the development of Earth Charter symbols. This could be a flag, which could be raised along with the

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state flag in any county were the Charter is accepted as the symbol of the responsibility of the state.

- 5) To create a new tradition—to leave some time for a real practical action at each conference, seminar, meeting; let's just start with planting trees, bushes, flowers! If one takes into account the number of different meetings that are being held only in one country at this very moment, it is easy to imagine how many new forests will appear on the planet.

Without any exaggeration, we can call the Earth Charter the most human and progressive document in the world, the true test of the maturity of humankind. If this messianic document is endorsed by the United Nations and internalized individually, we may still hope to save our beautiful Mother-Earth for us and our grandchildren.

