

## **The Earth Charter: Building a Global Culture of Peace\***

*by Steven C. Rockefeller*

September 11. We have come together for these Earth Charter community summits at a time of shock and grief in America and with a new awareness of the grave dangers that we face as a nation and a free society. This is a time that will test our courage and commitments as individuals and as a nation. In the midst of the suffering in New York, Washington, and Pennsylvania, there have been many examples of bravery and self-sacrifice among fire fighters, police, doctors, nurses, and many others. Inspired by these men and women, we must rededicate ourselves to the highest ideals of our nation—to freedom, respect for diversity and the rights of the individual, solidarity in the midst of adversity, and the democratic way.

Terrorism is a form of criminal activity and barbarism that strikes at the very foundations of civilization. President Bush has wisely called on the nations of the world to unite together with the United States in the campaign against terrorism. It appears likely that military action will be necessary to bring to justice those responsible for terrorist acts and to defend our nation against future attacks. However, as the Bush administration has pointed out, it is also essential to use diplomatic, legal, financial, and economic tools in the effort to end terrorism, and these means may prove to be the most effective. We should be supportive of the caution and restraint that our leaders are showing in the use of military force.

Moreover, we make a mistake if we believe that terrorism by itself is the major global challenge we face today. Terrorism is a deadly threat, but it is only one part of a much larger complex of problems. This becomes clear if we consider the global situation and take a long-term view. Looking at the bigger picture can put the struggle against terrorism in perspective, and it can

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\* *Editor's note:* This article and the article by David Korten in this issue were first presented as speeches given in Tampa, Florida, on September 29, 2001, in connection with a national program of Earth Charter Community Summits.



help us as individuals, organizations, and local communities find intelligent and compassionate ways to respond to the crisis immediately at hand. I want to take the approach of using the Earth Charter as a guide and a source of hope.

### **A Global Culture of Peace**

The only long-term answer to the problem of terrorism is to build a global culture of peace. Again, this requires a world-wide partnership of all nations and all peoples. If this is our long-term objective, we must ensure that whatever military or other action we take to combat terrorism will prove in the long run to be a means to the end of creating a planetary culture of peace. The ends—no matter how noble—do not justify any means, in part because the means we use determine the nature of the ends we will actually achieve. Just as one cannot preserve and build a free and democratic society by using authoritarian and undemocratic means, so one cannot build peace if your primary means is war and violence. Military action may be necessary in certain situations to defend against the aggression of another state or to stop terrorism and genocide, but other creative means are required to build peace.

Here lies the relevance of the Earth Charter to the events of September 11 and the challenges of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. The Earth Charter culminates with a vision of peace, and the principles in the Earth Charter identify the essential elements of a culture of tolerance, nonviolence, and peace. The Earth Charter, for example, recognizes that there will be no peace without social and economic justice. This includes the urgent need to eradicate the poverty in which 1.3 billion people live hopeless and desperate lives. A war on terrorism must include a war on global poverty if it is to have any chance of lasting success.

We must also recognize that 85% of the world's resources are in the hands of 20% of the world's people, and the gap between the rich and the poor continues to widen. Such conditions generate resentment and anger that make young people easy targets for religious fanatics, revolutionaries, and terrorists.

Another condition of enduring peace is democracy. Democracy gives a voice to the people and opens the door to participatory decision making. It involves creating the kind of vibrant civil society that finds expression in

gatherings such as these Earth Charter community summits. It provides a social and political environment in which women and men can secure their human rights and fundamental freedoms. The spread of democracy and its triumph over fascism and communist totalitarianism throughout much of the world may well be the most significant human achievement of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Building a global culture of peace means renewing our own democratic institutions at home and supporting other peoples in their efforts to create democratic institutions appropriate to their distinct cultures. It means making more democratic the international institutions that govern world trade and international relations.

In addition, the only firm foundation for justice, economic well-being, democracy and peace is ecological security. Earth's ecological systems provide us with clean air, fresh water, the food we eat, other essential natural resources, and the natural beauty that gives us artistic and spiritual inspiration. In the most comprehensive study<sup>1</sup> to date of the health of the biosphere, an international team of scientists sponsored by the United Nations, the World Resources Institute, and the World Bank reports that human beings are degrading all of Earth's basic ecological systems at an accelerating rate. If this trend is not soon reversed, it will have a devastating impact on the human community, the larger living world, and future generations.

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Much has been done over the past thirty years to address our environmental problems. However, in general our response has been at best half-hearted and woefully inadequate. The warning signs are everywhere. A massive extinction of species is underway. Global warming is occurring. Ocean levels are rising, threatening low lying cities and villages. The water table in many regions of the world is dropping rapidly. Tropical and temperate rain forests that produce goods and services essential to the well-being of life on Earth are being burned and cut down. Major ocean fisheries have collapsed. Half of the world's coral reefs are dying. The scarcity of essential resources like water is increasingly a cause of conflict and violence. What kind of world do we want to leave for our grandchildren?

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<sup>1</sup> *World Resources 2000-2001: People and Ecosystems: The Fraying Web of Life* (World Resources Institute, 2000).



In our interdependent world, then, as we mount a campaign against terrorism, we must remember that the long-range goal is a world-wide partnership for peace. Enduring peace means promoting environmental protection, the eradication of poverty, democracy, human rights, gender equality, respect for cultural and religious diversity, and nonviolent conflict resolution. This is the message of the Earth Charter.

The meaning and importance of this message will become clearer if we consider more closely some of the major ideas that have shaped the document.

### **Interdependence**

One way of understanding the Earth Charter is to think of it as a declaration of global interdependence and universal responsibility. When this nation was founded, we issued a Declaration of Independence. Over 200 years later, we confront a very different world, and we urgently need a national and international declaration of interdependence. World-wide interdependence is to a large degree the result of American technology, industrialization, and trade. Our nation has been the leader in the process of globalization, and yet, we have not fully understood the ethical implications and practical consequences of living in the world we ourselves are actively creating.

The reality is that we have entered a planetary phase in the development of civilization—what the historians call an era of global history. Diverse communities, nations, and cultures have their own stories, but more and more all of our lives are also part of one story. We are a proud and free people and a mighty nation, but we must also recognize today that we are an interdependent member of the larger human family and the greater community of life. With this interdependence goes a vulnerability we cannot escape. As the Earth Charter puts it: In the midst of our cultural diversity, we are “one human family and one Earth community with a common destiny.”

Our global interdependence is ecological, economic, political, cultural, and spiritual. There is not one major problem that we face—whether it be environmental protection, economic prosperity, the control of infectious disease, crime and drugs, or terrorism—that a community or nation can manage alone. Global cooperation is absolutely essential. Furthermore, if we want other nations to help the United States address problems like terrorism

about which we are especially concerned, then we must be willing to work more collaboratively with them on other critical global problems like poverty, economic opportunity for all, global warming, and arms control. Isolationism and unilateralism in our international policy is short-sighted and self-defeating. It is in our national interest to be caring global citizens, who work cooperatively with others for the common good.

In addition, we must recognize that none of the fundamental problems that face our communities, our nation, and the world can be effectively addressed in isolation. This, too, is part of the meaning of interdependence. Our environmental, economic, social, cultural, and spiritual challenges are interconnected. Poverty, for example, is both a cause and a consequence of environmental degradation. Our economy is a subsystem of the planet's ecological system, and environmental degradation and the depletion of resources will eventually undermine our best efforts to build healthy economies. When our ethical and spiritual life are weak and confused, our economic and social life are left without meaning and purpose. In the light of these considerations, holistic thinking, interdisciplinary collaboration, and integrated problem solving are essential.

## **Global Ethics**

In an interdependent world where cooperative problem solving is a prerequisite for progress, agreement on common goals and shared values is necessary. Effective international and cross-cultural collaboration requires a new global ethics. We urgently need a shared vision of basic values that will provide a basis for world-wide partnership and an ethical foundation for the emerging world community.

The mission of the Earth Charter initiative is to help establish such a foundation. The Earth Charter endeavors to make clear that in the final analysis the problems the world faces are ethical ones. If we are to create a secure world and better future for all, we must revise our idea of the good life and our understanding of right conduct, and we must do this together as global citizens. The objective is not to impose the values of one culture or tradition on everyone else or to create some new monoculture. The goal is to learn from one another and to find common ground through dialogue in the midst of our rich cultural diversity.




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The Earth Charter is a demonstration that we can meet this complex challenge. It is a product of a decade-long, world wide, cross-cultural, interfaith dialogue on shared values. This dialogue went on in face-to-face encounters in local, national, and international meetings, in a series of internet conferences, and by e-mail and fax. Hundreds of organizations and thousands of individuals were involved. The Earth Charter sets forth a consensus on ethical values that is taking form in the

emerging global civil society. In the course of the global dialogue that generated the Earth Charter, there were often significant differences, but what impressed me most was the good will of all the participants and their determination to find common ground in the midst of difference.

### **Sustainability**

The ethical principles of the Earth Charter are described as “interdependent principles for a sustainable way of life” that provide a common standard for individuals, organizations, communities, and governments. The concept of a sustainable way of life and of sustainable development has become a new, powerful organizing idea like freedom or democracy. The concept of sustainability has a narrower and a broader meaning. An activity is sustainable if it can be continued indefinitely. Patterns of production and consumption are considered to be ecologically sustainable if they respect and safeguard the regenerative capacities of our oceans, rivers, forests, farmlands, and grasslands. However, using the term in the broader sense, one can talk about building a sustainable global society. In this connection, sustainability includes all the interrelated activities that promote the long-term flourishing of Earth’s human and ecological communities. The principles of the Earth Charter provide an inclusive definition of sustainability in this broader sense.

Finding our way to a truly sustainable way of living together is our hope for the future. It is the path to building a culture of nonviolence and peace.

### **An Ethic of Respect and Care**

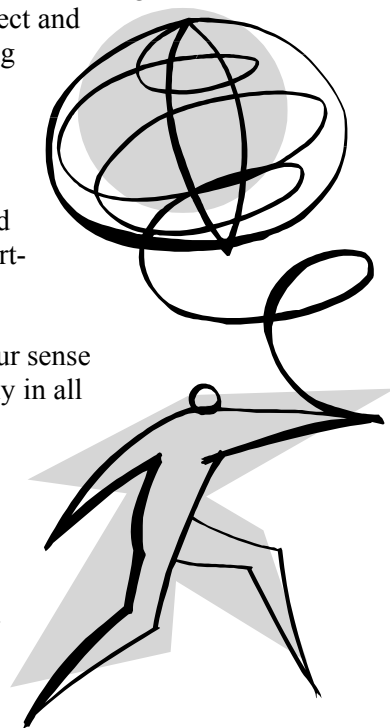
At the heart of the Earth Charter vision is an ethic of respect and care for all life forms and the greater community of life, of which humanity is an

interdependent part. This ethic of respect and care is articulated in the first two principles of the Charter—“Respect Earth and life in all its diversity” and “Care for the community of life with understanding, compassion, and love”—and all the other principles follow from and elaborate the meaning of these first two.

The sense of ethical responsibility begins with an attitude of respect. Respect involves recognition and appreciation. What is worthy of respect also warrants moral consideration. The Earth Charter challenges us to expand our moral awareness and to respect and value all life forms and Earth, our planetary home that has made the development of life possible. Before the awesome mystery of life, respect can deepen into a reverence for life.

The ethical life begins with an attitude of respect for life, but it only takes form when respect develops into a deep sense of caring. Respect and care together create an ethically responsible human being. The attitudes and values associated with caring are a foundation upon which to build our public as well as private lives. Caring involves feeling as well as thinking and acting—our whole being. “To care for” means to respect and value. It means to prevent harm and to promote healing and well-being. Our caring is most profound and effective when it is inspired and guided by the integration of the head and the heart, knowledge and compassion, science and love. Communities that have lost their capacity for care show the environmental and social effects of indifference, narrow self-interest, short-term thinking, neglect and abuse.

At this juncture in human evolution, extending our sense of respect and care to embrace the whole human family in all its diversity, the greater community of life, and future generations has become an ecological and social necessity. In the vision of the Earth Charter, caring for people and caring for Earth are two interrelated aspects of one great task. Only such an expansion of our moral consciousness will transform industrial-technological civilization and lead toward a genuinely sustainable way of life and peace on Earth.





We all have a role to play in implementing the ethic of care, in achieving just and sustainable communities, and in building a global culture of peace. This is the meaning of universal responsibility in an interdependent world. Looking forward from September 11 in the spirit of the Earth Charter, what can you and I do?

- In times like these, we need the wisdom that flows from a clear mind and a pure heart. Taking time to center ourselves through prayer, meditation, and being with family, friends, and members of one's faith community can be a great help. Remember that the goal is to decrease hatred and violence and to build peace. This cannot be achieved with hatred and violence, but only through a life-affirming ethic of care. As we struggle to protect ourselves from terrorism, we must also, if we want long-term solutions, seek to understand and address the conditions and causes that produce hatred and violence at home and abroad.
- There is an urgent need for a new and deeper dialogue between Western culture and the Middle Eastern Islamic world. This is a good time for interfaith dialogue involving Christians, Jews and Muslims and members of other religious traditions as well. The Earth Charter can be used as a catalyst for exploring common ethical values in these exchanges. We can also demand that throughout the world our religious leaders take strong measures to prevent religion from becoming an instrument of hate.
- We must let our government leaders know that we support a spirit of collaborative engagement in world affairs—not just with regard to terrorism, but on the many fronts required to build a global culture of peace. In this regard, we must give the United Nations strong and consistent support, financially, diplomatically, and morally. The United Nations was founded first and foremost to prevent war and to promote peace, and it is absolutely essential at this stage in human history. A year from now, the United Nations will convene the World Summit on Sustainable Development, and our government representatives should know that we want the United States to play a creative leadership role at this critical world meeting.



- All of us can work to alter our lifestyles and to implement those Earth Charter principles that are relevant to our organizations, businesses, and local communities. Share the Earth Charter with teachers in your local schools and with government officials and business leaders. Use it to generate discussion and debate on the major challenges and choices we face. Urge your local governments to use the Charter as a guide to sustainable development and as a tool to assess progress toward that goal.
- Thousands of local, national, regional, and international organizations have now endorsed the Earth Charter. The most recent endorsement has come from the Parliament of the World's Religions. Invite your organization to consider endorsing the Earth Charter, if you have not already done so. The more support we have from civil society and local government, the greater the chance of endorsement by the United Nations General Assembly in 2002.
- The emerging global civil society, of which all of us here are a part, has become a third force shaping world affairs along with government and business. Through the ballot box and our purchasing power in the marketplace, we have the collective ability to influence profoundly government and business. There are many encouraging examples of such activism.

In my home state of Vermont, the Earth Charter is being transported across the state from town to town in a beautiful, handcrafted Ark of Hope by people walking in a spirit of peace. In addition to the Earth Charter, the Ark of Hope contains the prayers and poems of many Vermonters. The global challenges before us are great, but if we unite behind the kind of vision affirmed in the Earth Charter, there are grounds for hope. Humanity has the knowledge, technology, and financial resources required to protect Earth's ecological systems and to make progress in creating a just and peaceful world. With reverence for the mystery of being and with reverence for life, let us resolve here today to commit ourselves anew to this Great Work.

