



## EEASA 2003 Keynote Address The Earth Charter: Possibilities for ethical policy in practice

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### *Editors' Note*

*The EEASA Journal will publish a keynote address from the annual EEASA Conference and workshops on an annual basis, as a feature of this journal. In 2003 we were privileged to have had Peter Blaze Corcoran with us at the EEASA Conference held in Windhoek, Namibia. Peter's paper opens this journal with a perspective on policy-in-practice which takes us beyond the often legalistic and structurally inspired national and governmental policy frameworks, into the realm of 'people's policy making' with possibilities for action and participation at both local and global scales. It creates the scope for EEASA members and readers of this journal to consider policies which are ethically inspired, in search of a more equitable world and a better quality of life for all.*

### *Introduction*

I am pleased to share the Earth Charter with you. I believe this people's treaty speaks to our needs at this moment of division by culture, by religion and by race, and at this moment of unprecedented human impact on Earth. Never has so much depended on our wisdom, insight and passion as environmental educators. I offer you the Earth Charter in the hope that it might strengthen your work as environmental educators, and in the knowledge that you will best discern what its potential might be for environmental education in southern Africa.

One of the ways in which the Earth Charter might serve environmental education in the region is by offering possibilities for ethical policy in practice. Policy guided by Earth Charter ethics can lead to action toward justice and sustainability.

As environmental education is reoriented towards sustainability, I believe the Earth Charter's explicit and integrated concerns for respect and care for the community of life, ecological integrity, social and economic justice, and democracy, nonviolence and peace (see Appendix 1) can help us in defining sustainability. In doing so, it offers exciting possibilities to reconceive policy toward an ethic of ecological sustainability. Such a reconception is important when confronting both public policy problems, such as globalisation, and educational policy problems, such as curriculum formulation. This is a critical time to strengthen the capacity of environmental education to respond to the challenge of building a culture of social and economic peace. The Earth Charter can serve as an inspiration and guide to the connectedness, interdependence and, even, indivisibility of the kindred fields of sustainable development and

environmental education. It can bring a critical ethical dimension to public policy and to educational policy as practiced in these fields.

In this address, I describe the participatory process through which this people's treaty came to be written. I explain the provenance of the Earth Charter – the sources of its ideas.<sup>1</sup> I offer examples of its use in public policy and in educational policy at various levels. Finally, as a model of the people's policy in practice, I introduce the problematics of its use in policy and its hopeful possibilities.

### *Process*

In 1987, the World Commission on Environment and Development (WCED) made several significant contributions to the understanding of our responsibilities to future generations. *Our Common Future* introduced the vocabulary of sustainable development to a broad audience. Brundtland (WCED, 1987) defined sustainable development as development which 'ensure[s] that it meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs' (p.8). The WCED also called for 'a new charter' to consolidate and extend relevant legal principles creating 'new norms...needed to maintain livelihoods and life on our shared planet' and to 'guide state behaviour in the transition to sustainable development' (p.332).

The Earth Summit in Rio de Janeiro in 1992 heard calls from the WCED, NGOs, governments and the religious and spiritual community to draft an Earth Charter. However, while consensus had gradually begun to emerge as to the content and structure of an Earth Charter as a statement of fundamental ethical principles widely 'shared by people of all races, cultures, religions and ideological traditions' (Rockefeller, 2002:23), many governments disagreed with the idea of an ethical commitment – and efforts within the United Nations structure were ended. The consensus among participants was that the Earth Charter was ahead of its time.

Subsequently, in 1994, a civil society initiative was launched to advance the development of a people's charter of ethical principles for sustainability. Under the leadership of Mikhail Gorbachev and Canadian Maurice Strong, who had chaired both the Stockholm and Rio conferences, the Earth Council was established. The major unfinished business of the 1992 Earth Summit was the further development of the Earth Charter. The Earth Council decided to conduct consultations 'throughout the world in an effort to promote the global dialogue on common values and to clarify the emerging worldwide consensus regarding principles of environmental protection and sustainable living' (Earth Charter International Secretariat, 2000b:22). The first consultation, held in 1995 at the Peace Palace in The Hague, involved over 70 organisations from 30 countries. A study of over 50 international law instruments, entitled *Principles of Environmental Conservation and Sustainable Development: Summary and Survey* (Rockefeller, 1996), was prepared and circulated as a resource for those contributing to the consultation process. The outcome was a set of criteria for the proposed Earth Charter. It was agreed that the content of the Earth Charter should be a set of ethical principles for environmental conservation and sustainable development. The principles should be of enduring

significance and held in common by people of all races, cultures, religions and ideological traditions. The document should present a holistic perspective and a spiritual and ethical vision adding to what had already been presented in related and relevant documents (Earth Charter USA, n.d.).

Early in 1997, the Earth Charter Commission was formed to give oversight to the drafting process and an international drafting committee was created. In 1997, a benchmark draft emerged from the Rio +5 forum, a meeting organised as part of a worldwide review of the progress that had been made towards sustainable development since the Rio Earth Summit in 1992. From 1997 to early 1999 many conferences, held on several continents, led to the development of Benchmark Draft II. During the consultation process that followed this second draft, and which led to the issuing of the final version in March 2000, the views of experts from various fields, including a team of international lawyers specialising in environmental law, and representatives from grassroots communities were sought. Online conferences, multi-stakeholder fora, presentations and workshops (including one in Cape Town, South Africa) were organised to discuss the text and make recommendations, bringing together members of 45 Earth Charter Committees and representatives of all world regions and from all sectors of society.<sup>2</sup> Tens of thousands of individuals and hundreds of organisations from diverse cultures, geographics, ages and sectors of society contributed. They included indigenous peoples, grassroots activists, governmental officials, students, religious leaders and experts in many fields. This process, and the thoughtful intellectual and spiritual foundations on which the Earth Charter was built, led to a text which can lay claim to being a people's treaty. A claim to people's policy would be to claim action guided by the politics and ethics of the process.

### *Provenance*

The contributions to the substantive content of the Earth Charter were derived from extensive research and a prodigious array of sources. These ranged from the global ethics movement to sacred texts of the world's major religions, from international law documents to new thinking in the sciences of physics, cosmology and evolutionary biology. The Earth Charter Initiative has also worked especially closely, and continues to work, with a number of indigenous peoples groups, including the Indigenous People's Program at the Earth Council, the Indigenous Peoples Consultative Council, the Inuit Circumpolar Conference and the Russian Association of the Indigenous Peoples of the North (Earth Charter Initiative International Secretariat, 2002b:16). As a result, the world views of the first peoples infuse the document with traditional wisdom.

As a way of identifying and explaining the sources of the ethical values in each principle, an 'Earth Charter Commentary' is being written by Steven C. Rockefeller, Chair of the drafting committee, and Johannah Bernstein, an international lawyer who was involved throughout the drafting process. The explanation of each principle includes its definition and meaning, its origin and, in some cases, why a specific language was chosen. The commentary includes a section on law which relates the specific principle to an array of international declarations, treaties, United Nations commission reports and, occasionally, existing national laws.

The document is built on a wide and deep foundation of powerful sources. Such diverse provenance, thoughtfully constructed through a participatory process that included ideas and stakeholders rarely included in such policy development, gives validity to the claim that the Earth Charter is a people's charter.

### *Policy*

We urgently need a shared vision of basic values to provide an ethical foundation for the emerging world community. Therefore, together in hope we affirm the following interdependent principles for a sustainable way of life as a common standard by which the conduct of all individuals, organisations, businesses, governments and transnational institutions is to be guided and assessed. (Earth Charter, 2000: Preamble)

The Earth Charter can serve as a guide in the many aspects of policy that relate to the emerging sustainable global society. Because of the process by which it was created, it is an important expression of the hopes and aspirations of the global community.

Since the final version of the document was released by the Earth Charter Commission in March 2000, it has been circulated throughout the world in an effort to promote awareness and commitment to a sustainable way of life. The major objectives of the Earth Charter Initiative are:

- To promote a worldwide dialogue on shared values and global ethics.
- To set forth a succinct and inspiring vision of fundamental ethical principles for sustainable development.
- Circulate the Earth Charter throughout the world as a people's treaty, promoting awareness, commitment and implementation of the Earth Charter values.
- To seek endorsement of the Earth Charter by the United Nations General Assembly.

The principles in the Charter are fundamental ethical guidelines. The Charter does not attempt to describe the mechanisms and instruments required to implement its principles. This is a task for other international legal instruments and for national and local sustainable development plans.

Given this, how has the Earth Charter been used in policy? How has the sagacity of the Earth Charter guided educational policy? How might the Earth Charter provide a method of action in public policy?

### *Public Policy*

#### **Public policy at the intergovernmental level**

One of the hopes for the Earth Charter is that it will provide an Earth-wide code of conduct for sustainable development. Acknowledgement by the United Nations would lead to the Earth Charter becoming a soft law document. In this sense, it is a people's treaty, not a true treaty. This creates fascinating possibilities, and perhaps problems, for policy. A soft law is a declaration of aspirations and intentions. It is not legally binding, as is international law negotiated by sovereigns and committed to by national representatives. Soft law can evolve into

hard law over time. It can infuse international policy and law. Donald Brown (2000) draws an analogy with past soft law:

If the Earth Charter were so adopted, it would play the same role in guiding nations to adopt sustainable development as has the United Nations Declaration on Human Rights played in enhancing recognition of human rights (United Nations, 1948). Many NGOs have held nations accountable for non-compliance with the United Nations Declaration on Human Rights and thereby have been successful in changing national policy, although because this document was a soft-law document, legal suit could not be brought against nations for non-compliance. Those who advocate on behalf of the Earth Charter argue that such a document is now needed given the global environmental threats that have been emerging. It is believed that the transition to sustainable development requires basic changes in the attitudes, values and behaviour of all people in order to achieve social, economic and ecological equity and security in the context of the globe's limited resources (p.1).

Perhaps the Earth Charter, given its popular birthright and given the urgency of the global environmental crisis, could be a people's public policy widely-accepted and used as a template for governmental and intergovernmental policy development. Brown (*ibid.*) raises a critical question, 'What difference in world's affairs would be entailed if the Earth Charter were adopted', and answers it in terms of global warming:

Here the Earth Charter is quite relevant. It spells out a strong duty to set environmental policy that will give protection not only to humans but also to plants and animals with whom we share the planet. ... What can be seen at the heart of the Earth Charter is an ethic that sees value in plants and animals that is much greater than their utilitarian use to humans as resources. For this reason, if the Earth Charter were to be adopted and applied to the global warming problem it would provide a non-anthropocentric set of goals to be achieved in interpreting the UNFCCC (United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change). Clearly the Earth Charter acknowledges a biocentric or ecocentric ethic on which to base public policy.

This is, in this writer's view, the important significance of the Earth Charter for the climate change debate (2000:4).

#### **Public policy at the republican level**

In one case, the verification of Earth Charter principles has taken place at the republican level. The State Council of the Republic of Tatarstan voted unanimously in 2001 to adopt the Earth Charter. This followed a comprehensive review of Tatarstan national policies and practices with regard to the extent to which they conformed to the Earth Charter (Earth Charter Initiative International Secretariat, 2000b:36). The process of making a policy for a culture in transition from state socialism has been well served by the Earth Charter. The Earth Charter has provided an ideological framework for the Republic itself.

Tatarstan is located 700km east of Moscow. It is a leading oil and gas producer. The population of four million is a diverse mix of Moslem Tatar and Russian Orthodox people. Mongol Asians came this far west creating a rich Euro-Islamic tradition. The cultural traditions from all directions blend. As Roustem Khairov has written:

[We have] expectations – to regard the Earth Charter as a salutary method in forming a new civilisation of the XXI century; a guide to action; manifesto which reflects current dramatic situation and specifies the ways of solving complicated problems of the present; panoramic document adequate to the threshold of centuries and millenniums. These expectations are felt the most acutely in the countries experiencing the so-called “transition period”, for example, in Russia and the CIS countries. The results of public hearings and numerous consultations on the Earth Charter in Russia have revealed that in the situation of lack of clear ideological conception and model of social structure the Earth Charter is becoming a document of special political sound. So, the theses reflected in the principles of the culture of peace, tolerance, non-violence, social justice, democracy, should be understood exactly in this context. (Earth Charter Commission [Tatarstan], 2000:55)

#### **Public policy at the municipal level**

The city of San Jose, Costa Rica, has formulated a local vision of the Earth Charter in order to integrate ethical principles and values into the daily work life of the city employees. This is an innovative example of people’s policy inspiring people’s work toward sustainability and ethical practice. About 1 800 sanitation, health, police and infrastructure employees participated – this was 80% of the workforce.

#### ***Educational Policy***

From the beginning, the themes and perspectives of the Earth Charter have been viewed as efficacious of education of all kinds and at all levels. *The Earth Charter Briefing Book* states:

The Earth Charter is a valuable resource... Discussion of the Earth Charter in classrooms, conferences and workshops can heighten awareness of the basic challenges and choices that face humanity. It can help people learn to think globally and holistically. It can focus attention on fundamental ethical issues and their interconnectedness. It can serve as a catalyst for cross-cultural and interfaith dialogue on shared values and global ethics. It can be used to generate in individuals and communities the kind of internal reflection that leads to a change in attitudes, values and behaviour. (Earth Charter Initiative International Secretariat, 2000a:18)

This can happen in the hands of caring and skilled educators using heuristic methodology. In what ways can it also take place at the policy level? How can the ethical principles of the Earth Charter and philosophically-consistent methods of teaching them influence educational policy?

Given the vital importance of the cultural context of education, the Earth Charter Initiative has formed a diverse Education Advisory Committee to suggest ways to conduct values education. The members are experts in many dimensions of teaching and learning and are drawn from many cultures and organisations. Two Earth Charter Commissioners are members: Henriette Rasmussen, teacher, journalist and member of the Greenland Home Rule Parliament; and Wangari Maathai, biologist in the department of anatomy at the University of Nairobi and founder of the grassroots Green Belt Movement in Kenya.

In August/September 2001, members of the Advisory Committee participated in an online forum to consider the philosophy and methodology of the use of the Earth Charter in education. The discussion included perspectives on the role of the Earth Charter in 'values education'. In a recent summary of the conclusions and recommendations from that forum, Brendan Mackey (2002: 9), the Chair and Director of the Earth Charter Education Programme, writes:

Values education is an often-contested theme in education due to legitimate concerns about 'which values' and 'whose values' are being promoted. These concerns can be accommodated as long as the values represent core values that are life-affirming, promote human dignity, advance environmental protection and social and economic justice, and respect cultural and ecological diversity and integrity. The Earth Charter can validly claim to represent such a core set of values, particularly given the participatory and multicultural process that underpinned the drafting of the document. Given this, the Earth Charter provides critical content for development of curricula with the educational aim of teaching values and principles for sustainable living.

From this perspective, the Advisory Committee recognised two key roles for the Earth Charter in education: first, as a framework and source of content for education for sustainable living; and second, as a catalyst for promoting an ongoing multi-sectoral dialogue on global ethics. The Advisory Committee also agreed on four principles consistent with the spirit of the Earth Charter to be used to guide the development of Earth Charter education materials and programmes. These principles include action research, experiential learning, transdisciplinarity and collaboration (Mackey, 2002).

The need for education to move humankind toward a more just, peaceful and sustainable path is urgent. I believe common values across cultures, generations, national interests, faith traditions and ecological divisions can only be achieved through education. According to the needs statement in the Earth Charter Initiative education proposal, education is the key to assisting people in the difficult tasks of re-examining their values, creating guidelines for encouraging the adoption of more sustainable practices by individuals, organisations and governments, and generating the individual motivation and political will to make the shift to sustainable development (Mackey, 2002).

Partners as widespread, diverse and pedagogically-distinct as Yerevan State University in Armenia, the School Sisters of Notre Dame, the Jane Goodall Institute and the City of San Paulo, Brazil have implemented the Earth Charter in educational activities and materials by using it as inspiration for process, as content, and as policy in practice.

### **Educational policy at the theoretical level**

In Brazil, the Paulo Freire Institute has contributed significantly to interpreting the Earth Charter and uses its principles as the basis for conscientisation. According to Moacir Gadotti, Director of the Institute, the Earth Charter's value lies in the contribution it makes to an ethic that will strive against the social injustice and inequality that currently prevail in the world. Gadotti notes that in the book *Pedagogy of Earth* the need for an Earth Charter associated with a peace process is defended. And, since the Earth Charter is an ethical document, it requires education to become better known. The Paulo Freire Institute has created an international network of educators in 24 countries who are involved in the implementation of Earth Charter principles. The Institute has undertaken research on Earth Charter pedagogy and is developing the educational theory of ecopedagogy. The discourse and practice of ecopedagogy is a rich example of a people's policy, the Earth Charter, in practice and in praxis. Teachers, theorists and students are seeking a new pedagogy that is not anthropocentric but biocentric and based on planetary consciousness.

### **Educational policy at the institutional level**

The Earth Charter provides a policy framework for 'an Integrated Model for Peace, Democracy and Sustainable Development', developed by Ablardo Brenes at the University for Peace in Costa Rica. The model is based on the assumption that there are universal values that constitute the foundations of a culture of peace, but that these values have a unique reflection within cultures (Brenes, n.d.). The model was developed within the political context of civil strife, violence and authoritarianism in recent Central American history and with the aim of helping people in the region to realise that these conditions are not inevitable. A broad goal is to enable them 'to realise that they have powers to create aspirations to live in peace, this can be a solid starting point for a process of transformation based on the empowerment of their aspirations by generating corresponding values, norms, and life practices' (Brenes:1).

A possibility for the Earth Charter to be used in educational policy in South Africa emerged in recent discussions and a workshop held in June 2003. The National Environmental Education Project of the Department of Education of the Republic of South Africa hosted a workshop on the use of the Earth Charter in the national curriculum. The workshop theme was 'Earth Charter as a tool for enhancing the values component in the Revised National Curriculum Statement'. Representatives of stakeholders in environmental education, including governmental units and NGOs, explored the possibilities for Earth Charter ethics in learning area groups.

In this case, the Earth Charter would be used to support existing institutional educational policy. The principles of the Revised National Curriculum Statement have been based on the Republic of South Africa's Constitution. They reflect the principles and practices of social justice, respect for the environment and human rights as defined in the Constitution. These are also articulated in the Earth Charter in ways that may serve educators well – both in their specificity and in their origins in the body of environmental law and policy. The democratic vision of society embodied in the South African curriculum is a synergistic match with the Earth Charter's vision of a just, sustainable and peaceful society.

### **Education policy at the grassroots level**

In Kenya, the Earth Charter is used in community development and forest conservation programmes. The Earth Charter serves as a values framework for the Green Belt Movement which is now active in 12 African countries. The grassroots civic education programme of the Green Belt Movement has as its objective to enhance knowledge, attitudes and values that support sustainable socio-economic and ecological welfare. These educational initiatives are focused on care for people and holding the government accountable. According to the founder and coordinator of the Green Belt Movement and Earth Charter Commissioner, Wangari Maathai, 'there are enormous thought provoking words in this document and what we should do is instead of just reading through, reflect on what these words mean so that we can be moved to action' (Earth Charter Initiative International Secretariat, 2001:55).

The Earth Charter can also serve informally as a values framework at the grassroots level. In the township of Diepsloot, near Johannesburg, the Earth Charter is an inspiration for the work of local youth in community education. Here, youth associated with Zizanani, an independent project for women and youth, take the Earth Charter as an impetus in their work on HIV/AIDS, protection from abuse, unemployment and violence. These young people studied the Earth Charter when the Ark of Hope visited their community prior to the World Summit on Sustainable Development. The Ark, carrying the Earth Charter and the books inspired by it, 'slept' in the community surrounded by the young men and women who later carried it through the streets of Johannesburg and into the Summit. There, they talked about their daily lives in the informal settlements and about their fears and hopes. Samuel Sebataolo Moyo says the Earth Charter discusses issues that 'very effect us'. Regarding the issues that concern him, protection of human rights and toxic hazardous substances in the community, 'how to handle it is difficult' but the Earth Charter 'shows you your rights'. He says when he is 'feeling a bit distressed', he rereads the Earth Charter on his bedroom wall (pers comm., June 15, 2003).

### ***Conclusion***

From my experience, I believe the Earth Charter is a powerful, compelling and generative guide toward a better tomorrow, a wise vision of what might be in a troubled world. I believe that the ethical vision provided by the Earth Charter is the beginning of building another kind of world.

First, we must have a vision. We must be able to see it. The Earth Charter gives us such a hopeful vision. And hope is essential – we must be able not only to see a sustainable future, but to believe that it is possible. One of my students defines hope as 'seeing the possible in the impossible'. Herein lies the great value of the Earth Charter; in my experience it is a source of hope.

### **The language is inspiring**

The saga of the Earth Charter, the public embodiment of the most open and participatory process of any international agreement, is an inspiration.

Ethics has the power to bring out the best in the human spirit. It helps us to say what it means to be human in dark times. The ethical framework for sustainability provided by the Earth Charter helps us to know that sustainable development is possible.

Then, after we have the vision and after we believe it to be possible, we must find the path to it. The Earth Charter principles result from a successful process of convergence on norms that are widely shared. These core values so clearly articulated in the Earth Charter principles, give us much to go on as we work to bring ethical policy into practice.

### **They are sustainable and specific**

Earth Charter principles articulate common ethical values that are compatible with many indigenous beliefs, world views, religions and secular philosophies. They help us interpret our beliefs in light of the perilous trends of our development path. They express these values as a global, civic ethic of specific rights and responsibilities.

In my experience, the Earth Charter does the following:

- By articulating common concerns and common values, it gives us a rich vision.
- By being part of a fulfilling, participatory, open-ended process, it gives us a hope that the vision is viable.
- By articulating an ethical vision of sustainable, ecologically sound, equitable development, it gives us a path to take.

I trust you will find in the Earth Charter ethics hope and optimism in spite of the present difficulties, and that they will assist you in the very important work you are doing as environmental educators. And I hope the Earth Charter will serve environmental education in Southern Africa.

### ***Acknowledgements***

Much of the background on the historical development and intellectual history of the Earth Charter used here will be published in a chapter invited by editor Anita Wenden for *Education Toward a Culture of Social and Ecological Peace* to be published by SUNY Press (in press, 2003). The chapter 'The Earth Charter as an Integrative Force for Peace Education and Environmental Education', in turn, relies on a detailed account 'History of the Earth Charter' by Steven C. Rockefeller *et al.*, which was published in *Earth Ethics* (Clugston & Clugston, 2002). My accounting of the history depends heavily on this description and on conversations with Earth Charter Commissioners, Steering Committee Members and Earth Charter Initiative staff. These include Steven C. Rockefeller, Kamla Chowdhry, Mirian Vilela, Brendan Mackey and Rick Clugston. I am grateful for their scholarship and their stories.

### ***Notes on the Contributor***

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### *Endnotes*

1. For a detailed and thoughtful account, see 'History of the Earth' by Steven C. Rockefeller and others in *Earth Ethics* (Clugston & Clugston, 2002).
2. See Earth Charter USA, n.d., for specific details about these events.

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### ***Personal Communication***

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# Appendix 1

## Main Principles of the Earth Charter

### **I. Respect and Care for the Community of Life**

1. Respect Earth and life in all its diversity.
2. Care for the community of life with understanding, compassion, and love.
3. Build democratic societies that are just, participatory, sustainable, and peaceful.
4. Secure Earth's bounty and beauty for present and future generations.

### **II. Ecological Integrity**

5. Protect and restore the integrity of Earth's ecological systems, with special concern for biological diversity and the natural processes that sustain life.
6. Prevent harm as the best method of environmental protection and, when knowledge is limited, apply a precautionary approach.
7. Adopt patterns of production, consumption, and reproduction that safeguard Earth's regenerative capacities, human rights, and community well-being.
8. Advance the study of ecological sustainability and promote the open exchange and wide application of the knowledge acquired.

### **III. Social and Economic Justice**

9. Eradicate poverty as an ethical, social, and environmental imperative.
10. Ensure that economic activities and institutions at all levels promote human development in an equitable and sustainable manner.
11. Affirm gender equality and equity as prerequisites to sustainable development and ensure universal access to education, health care, and economic opportunity.
12. Uphold the right of all, without discrimination, to a natural and social environment supportive of human dignity, bodily health, and spiritual well-being, with special attention to the rights of indigenous peoples and minorities.

### **IV. Democracy, Non-violence, and Peace**

13. Strengthen democratic institutions at all levels, and provide transparency and accountability in governance, inclusive participation in decision making, and access to justice.
14. Integrate into formal education and life-long learning the knowledge, values, and skills needed for a sustainable way of life.
15. Treat all living beings with respect and consideration.
16. Promote a culture of tolerance, nonviolence, and peace.

(The full version of the Earth Charter can be found at <http://www.earthcharter.org>.)