SITUATING THE EARTH CHARTER:
AN INTRODUCTION

William S. Lynn

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History, despite its wrenching pain,
Cannot be unlived, and if faced
With courage, need not be lived again.
Lift up your eyes upon
The day breaking for you.
Give birth again
To the dream.
From Maya Angelou, The Rock Cries Out To Us Today, 20 January 1993

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In the Spring of 2002, an international group of scholars and advocates gathered at the Pocantico Conference Center outside New York City to discuss the Earth Charter (hereafter 'Charter'). Represented at the seminar were members of the Earth Charter Initiative (based in Costa Rica) and Earth Charter USA (hosted by the Humane Society of the United States), the two main advocacy groups promoting the Charter in the Western Hemisphere. Also attending was a distinguished group of interdisciplinary scholars specializing in the human, animal and ecological dimensions of global ethics. The purpose of this "Earth Charter Ethics Seminar" was to probe how global ethics and the Earth Charter were mutually informing. Participants focused on clarifying the global ethics embedded in the Charter, specifying its policy implications, and exploring its uses in global ethics education. As its main outcome, the seminar aimed to inform citizens, non-governmental organizations (NGOs), corporations and governments how to better understand and use the ethical insights of the Charter.

Brief presentations made by participants at the seminar served as points of departure for a dialogue that was both appreciative and critical of the intentions, process, and content of the Earth Charter. One outcome of the conference was a renewed understanding of the importance of the Charter, alongside a deeper awareness of its silences and elisions. As editor of the international and refereed journal *Worldviews*, Clare Palmer (Philosophy, Lancaster University) invited

manuscript submissions for publication. William S. Lynn and Ronald Engel (both research scholars at the Center for Humans and Nature) served as guest editors. Through the course of editing, several other authors provided additional manuscripts. The articles in this special edition of *Worldviews*, "Global Ethics and the Earth Charter", are the result of these labours.[1]

The articles in this edition are informally grouped in two parts. The first group critically elucidates the Charter, by exploring its history, structure and norms, as well as making the link to the larger world of global ethics. The articles by Lynn, Dower, Engel, Hessel, and Bosselmann are amongst this first group. The second group addresses specific issues of concern in the Charter, probing its values and mapping their implications. The topics of ecological integrity, population, wildness, militarism and biotechnology are explored by Mackey, Donnelley, Lucier, Davion and Taylor, respectively. These articles demonstrate how the ethical principles of the Charter can inform our understanding of global problems. All the articles offer a welcome depth of insight and breadth of knowledge. Even so, our collective interpretation of the Charter is (perhaps inevitably) partial and incomplete. This edition is short on voices from the 'developing' world, as well as strong critics of the Charter. This lacuna is in part an artifact of a small seminar held in North America, as well as our ongoing need to develop better contacts and networks that manifest the polyvocality of our world. It is for these reasons that we are planning additional fora in which the Charter and its implications are discussed by a wide array of global citizens.

Historical Context—Developing the Earth Charter

The Earth Charter is "a declaration of fundamental principles for building a just, sustainable and peaceful global society in the 21st Century." (Earth Charter Initiative 2000: Introduction). The Charter is intended as an ethically grounded vision for a sustainable global society that protects and defends its citizens and the earth. Drafted in a ten year cross-cultural conversation of global reach, the Charter articulates a set of sixteen widely shared ethical principles. These principles, grouped into four sections, are intended to promote Respect and Care for the Community of Life (Part I), Ecological Integrity

(Part II), Social and Economic Justice (Part III), and Democracy, Nonviolence and Peace (Part IV). The first four principles found in Part I are the broadest in scope and concisely summarize the Charter's ethical vision. The subsequent twelve principles in Parts II–IV deepen and specify the moral vision of Part I. Even so, the Charter is not a rulebook, and its principles are not hard and fast. Rather they are "rules of thumb" to help civil society (e.g. individuals and NGOs), corporations, governments and international bodies develop best practices and policies while traveling the road towards sustainability. In this sense, the charter is not a dogmatic text, but a document subject to ongoing interpretation (see Clugston 1997; Rockefeller 2001).

The Charter is, in one sense, the answer of global civil society to the challenge of defining sustainable development in terms of global ethics. This challenge was laid down by J. Ronald Engel in the early 1990s.

> Before we accept 'sustainable development' as a new morality as well as a new economic strategy, we need to know what ecological, social, political and personal values it serves, and how it reconciles the moral claims of human freedom, equality and community with our obligations to individual animals and plants, species, and ecosystems. Most important, if we are morally serious, we must know on what grounds it may be said that sustainable development is a true ethic for human beings on planet Earth. (Engel 1990: 1).

Read as a whole, the Charter attempts to answer this challenge. While the Charter allots a special place to the protection of nature, its inclusive ethical vision seeks to integrate the well-being of human beings with that of the planet. The Charter assumes (for good social and scientific reasons) that "environmental protections, human rights, equitable human development, and peace are interdependent and indivisible" (Earth Charter Initiative 2000, Introduction). Thus while the first four principles of the Charter demand that we "Respect and Care for the Community of Life", the Charter specifies this demand in a series of principles and maxims that stress the fflourishing of humans as well as the natural world. The first four principles illustrate this dialectic.

1. Respect Earth and life in all its diversity.
    a. Recognize that all beings are interdependent and every form of life has value regardless of its worth to human beings.

     b. Affirm faith in the inherent dignity of all human beings, and in the intellectual, artistic, ethical, and spiritual potential of humanity.

2. Care for the community of life with understanding, compassion, and love.
     a. Accept that with the right to own, manage and use natural resources comes the duty to prevent environmental harm and to protect the rights of people.
     b. Affirm that with increased freedom, knowledge, and power comes increased responsibility to promote the common good.

3. Build democratic societies that are just, participatory, sustainable, and peaceful
     a. Ensure that communities at all levels guarantee human rights and fundamental freedoms and provide everyone an opportunity to realize his or her full potential.
     b. Promote social and economic justice, enabling all to achieve a secure and meaningful livelihood that is ecologically responsible.

4. Secure Earth's bounty and beauty for present and future generations.
     a. Recognize that the freedom of action of each generation is qualified by the needs of future generations.
     b. Transmit to future generations values, traditions, and institutions that support the long-term flourishing of Earth's human and ecological communities.

(Earth Charter Initiative 2000: Principles 1-4)

This fluid shifting of normative gaze from earth to humanity and back again is repeated throughout the Charter. While some readers may find the non-linear arrangement confusing at first, the analogical resonance of normative claims for the long-term, mutual flourishing of humans and nature is an intentional outcome of its narrative structure. When an inter-textual reading places the principles and maxims alongside each other, one's attention is directed to the health and well-being of the planet as a whole, not simply with the natural world.

The roots of the Charter lie in numerous declarations, petitions and social movements. Each of these in some way expresses the deep-seated longing for a world conducive to the flourishing of planetary life, human and non-human. The immediate precursor was a report by the World Commission on Environment and Development entitled *Our Common Future* (1987). So serious were the Commission's concerns about environmental degradation and equitable human development, they called for a new moral paradigm centered on the earth and sustainable development—"human survival and well-being could depend on success in elevating sustainable development to a global ethic." (World Commission on Environment and Development

1987: 308) But the Charter had other and equally important sources of inspiration as well. These included the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948), the Stockholm Declaration of the Human Environment (1972), The World Charter for Nature (1982), *Caring for the Earth* (1991), and the declaration of the Parliament of World Religions (1992). Perhaps the most significant "companion" document is the Draft International Covenant on Environment and Development. The Covenant provides a legal framework for transforming the principles of the Charter into concrete and legally binding regulations, policies and treaties (see Burhenne and Irwin 1983; Engel 2002; Kung and Kuschel 1993; IUCN Commission on Environmental Law 1995; World Commission on Environment and Development 1987; World Conservation Union et al. 1991). Because of opposition from several national governments in both the "developed" and "developing" worlds, a charter was not adopted as planned at the United Nation's 1992 Earth Summit held in Rio de Janeiro. What passed instead was the Rio Declaration on Environment and Development and Agenda 21, documents with overt moral implications, but little in the way of robust, ethically based norms for global sustainability (Brown and Quiblier 1994; United Nations 1992).

Believing that the Charter was still an important vision for ethics and sustainability, Maurice Strong and Mikhail Gorbachev joined forces to launch the Earth Charter Initiative in 1994. The Initiative began drafting the current Earth Charter in 1997, the final version of which was announced at the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) headquarters in Paris in March 2000 (Earth Charter Initiative 1995, 1997, 1999, 2000a). The Charter garnered considerable support at the United Nations' 2002 World Summit on Sustainable Development (also known as Rio+10), with its concepts and concerns being debated and in some measure incorporated into the Summits final declarations. (Rockefeller 2002) In addition, endorsements of the Charter by individuals, municipalities, NGOs, corporations, national governments and international agencies continue to grow, a testament to its ongoing appeal (see the listing of endorsements at www.earthcharter.org). For example, UNESCO formally recognized the Charter at its Thirty Second General Conference in October of 2003 (see www.unesco.org/education). Moreover, during its 2004 triennial congress in Bangkok (Thailand), the IUCN/World Conservation Union, is set to adopt the Charter as a moral compass for its operations and program. This is especially

significant as the IUCN is itself a mini-United Nations of conservation, with national and civil society representatives. (Holdgate 1999; McCormick 1989) Adoption of the Earth Charter by the IUCN will place the discussion of ethical principles for sustainability on the plates of national and international conservation institutions.

Geopolitical Context—Sustainability in A World of Terror

Most commentators place the Charter in the context of the debate over sustainable development. This is indeed the focus of the Charter, although dissatisfaction with mainstream theories and methods of development led the drafters to recast the language of sustainable development, with the goal of "sustainable communities" and the broader norm of "sustainability." Mainstream discourses of sustainable development emphasize sustaining growth to alleviate poverty, and include a nod towards conservation. In the Charter, sustainability becomes a moral imperative to remove the cultural, social, economic and political causes of injustice and privation, while simultaneously valuing the creatures and resources on which human flourishing depends. The Charter is thus principally concerned with securing ecological integrity and equitable human community, especially in the face of undemocratic and inegalitarian trends in globalization (on the latter, see Tomlinson 1999). By broadening the largely economistic and technocratic notion of sustainable development into the moral-political concept of sustainability, the drafters of the Charter were able to emphasize the ethical dimensions that give meaning and direction to human development and environmental protection (see Clugston 2003; Rasmussen 2001).

As important as sustainability is, world events have created new contexts in which the Charter must be situated. Without implying that there is only one context of preeminent importance, I want to focus on the geopolitical issue of terrorism. Whether carried out by nation-states or underground organizations, terrorism has implications for the health and well-being of people, animals and the rest of nature. Since the Charter speaks to our long-term social and moral responsibilities to human communities and the natural world, terrorism (broadly construed) is unavoidable as a subject of scrutiny. And more to the point, the Charter is a potent vision of a world without terror, whether political, economic or military.

"9-11"—the 11 September 2001 attack against the United States by the terrorist organization Al Qaeda. The loss of lives was a tragedy. The criminal hatred that motivated the planning and execution of this and other attacks is reprehensible. But there are other tragedies connected with 9-11 and the subsequent "war on terror," tragedies which many in the world community (especially the residents of the United States) ignore at their peril.

One tragedy is the injustice, poverty and ethnocentrism that pervade our world and constitute the roots of anger, hatred and zeal that produce terrorists and terrorism. As part of a broader pattern of Eurocentric imperialism, colonialism and militarism of the modern age, the foreign policy of the United States has substantially contributed to the misery and oppression of tens of millions of people, especially in the developing world. The United States has thereby been fertilizing the ground for the very organizations of terror that strike against its citizens and interests. Without shying away from this culpability, the full truth of terror is more complex than I can sketch here. Every culture realm has manifested despots and regimes of oppression. And every oppressed people, whether through military occupation or economic privation, has its cadre of co-opted local elites that profit handsomely from such injustice. Terrorism grows in this milieu, and rears its head in virtually every corner of the world. Movements for human rights, peace, environmental justice, sustainability, and anti-globalization have been at the forefront of calling attention to this tragedy. Many of these movements are partially rooted in Europe and North America as part of a broader struggle for global justice and well-being. We cannot simply assign blame to a limited set of actors in a foreshortened period of time. The Charter makes clear the universal if differentiated responsibility of all humankind for the resolutions of these problems, and strongly urges a global collaboration for social and economic justice, democracy, and nonviolent means of conflict resolution, as the best guarantors of long-term peace and security.

Another tragedy is the militaristic response to the attack of 9-11. On the heels of the attack, there was an outpouring of sympathy for the victims, and support for strong multilateral action against terrorism. As a world power and victim of terrorism, the United States was expected to play a central role in such actions. Indeed, even as a proponent of non-violent action (which should not be confused with pacifism), I fully supported the intervention in Afghanistan. To

my mind, this was not military aggression, but a police action against
thugs, a distinction that non-violent theory has long championed (see
Sharp 1973, 1978). Simultaneously, there was also an opportunity
to galvanize the world community to address the roots of intoler-
ance and misery that encourage terrorism. Enhancing national and
global security through democracy, human rights, women's equity,
fair trade, environmental technologies, distributive justice, regional
conflict resolutions, and strengthened global institutions were subjects
of public discourse and necessary international action. Regrettably,
both the initial support and opportunity for international action in
defense of *collective* security was squandered. The government of the
United States, along with a few allies such as Great Britain, charted
a unilateralist course in international affairs. Instead of uprooting ter-
rorism by addressing its social and cultural roots, these governments
have by and large sought to treat its symptoms—violence—with a
military response. One does not have to oppose the use of military
forces in police actions to foresee the short-sightedness of this response.

Penned well before 9-11, the Charter was not written with these
events in mind. Yet the roots of terrorism—poverty and intolerance
and violence—are directly addressed in the Charter. In essence, the
Charter views security not in terms of military preparedness *per se*
(although it does not rule this out), but as a shared responsibility for
the conditions and processes that ensure a just and flourishing human
community. There is no plan for fighting terror that is easily lifted
out of the Charter. Nonetheless, its principles provide a road map
of the direction the majority of our actions must take if we are to
end terrorisms threat to the global community.

Shifting Contexts: Hard Cases and the Future of the Earth Charter

The ecological imperative is clear and cruel: nature must be saved or
we humans will die. The single greatest threat to nature—menacing,
irreversible destruction of its regenerative powers—comes from 'devel-
opment.' This same 'development' is also the major culprit in perpet-
uating the 'underdevelopment of hundreds of millions. The task of
eliminating degrading underdevelopment imposes itself with the same
urgency, as does the task of safeguarding nature. These twin concerns
have spawned two ethical streams of protest among policy theorists
and development practitioners. One stream is concerned with pro-
tecting nature, the other with promoting economic justice. Almost

> always, the two streams have flowed in opposite directions. This is
> tragic because it is the identical pseudo-development, which lies at the
> root of both problems. (Goulet 1990: 36)

Denis Goulet paints a stark portrait of "development" and its rela-
tionship to the environment. While some would disagree with him,
he succinctly conveys the motivations that informed the creation of
the Earth Charter. Moreover, his statement foregrounds the inter-
nal tensions facing the Charter today. Sustainable development can-
not simply or primarily be about ending war, poverty and injustice.
It must also address the environmental degradation and abuse of
animals that are part of the causes and consequences of the spiri-
tual and material suffering of humanity. Each of these aspects is
linked to the other. So while it is certainly important for humanity's
sake to live within the carrying capacity of the planet, even a sus-
tainable ecological footprint *for humanity* is so vast as to threaten many
of the non-human life-forms who are co-residents on this earth.
(Catton 1982; Wackernagel and Reese, 1996). Their well-being ought
to count for its own sake alongside our own.

Thus another tragedy lies in our treatment of non-human nature.
While the planet's non-renewable resources are consumed at an
astonishing rate, the diversity of life is under assault from anthro-
pogenic causes, such as pollution, habitat degradation, infestations of
exotic species, urban sprawl, over-fishing and the bush-meat trade.
Billions of animals are inhumanely used and slaughtered each year.
Many of these animals are sapient and sentient, individuals living in
social groups and bearing their own brand of culture. Global cli-
mate change and a burgeoning human population make the surviv-
ing "refugia" of biodiversity vulnerable, while entrenching human
suffering. The very structure of life's evolutionary-ecological processes
are potentially threatened by irresponsible biotechnology that refuses
to recognize well-hone distinctions between traditional breeding and
genetic manipulation, and thereby act with precaution. None of this
is fanciful or an exaggeration.

This tragedy is, as it were, a third terror being visited on the
planet itself, not by individual human beings *per se*, but by our dom-
inant cultural systems and political-economic institutions across the
globe. Much of humanity is mired in an anthropocentric worldview,
a set of values and practices where humans are supreme by right of
a special creation, cognitive evolution, or technical power. In this

worldview, the Earth and its creatures are a stock of goods to be consumed, or a machine to be "remade" according to human desires. Whether this mindset is an outgrowth of religion, science, popular culture, or the postmodern "social construction of nature", the outcome is the same—the self-privileging of human individuals and our species over all others animals, species and ecosystems. It is a worldview that arrogates all rights to itself, without any sense of humility, limits or responsibility.[2]

Thus the really urgent questions are moral at heart. What will be the long term consequences for humans and nature of assaulting the geosphere? What are humanity's social and ethical responsibilities in light of this situation? What worldviews offer insights and alternatives to the callous moral blinkers of anthropocentrism? The Charter provides its own answers in the form of principles advocating care, integrity, justice and peace. These need not be the only answers to be answers worth hearing.

Yet when it comes to articulating humanity's specific responsibilities to animals and the rest of nature, applying the Charter is not so easy. The difficulties of application mirror those found in the real world of environmental politics, policy and management. For example, the Charter explicitly urges a precautionary approach to protecting and restoring the biodiversity of the earth. On the ground, however, there are hard choices to be made, times when the well-being of both humans and nature, much less of individual animals or species or biomes, cannot be simultaneously attained. What do we do when impoverished peoples need to clear and farm land that is the habitat of an endemic or endangered species? What are the responsibilities of urban settlement systems to the predators that prowl their suburban and exurban fringe? How is precaution exercised in these cases and others? What does it mean to care and respect both people and the earth in this and other instances?

It would be grossly unfair to expect this Charter or any other document to provide answers to our everyday problems. At best the Charter may guide us through individual reflection and collective deliberation on how we ought to live on Earth, and in what direction lies not only a better way of life, but one that nurtures human and non-human life alike. It is through the difficult circle of reflection, deliberation, action and re-interpretation that we may find creative ground for win-win solutions to seemingly intractable problems. But an honest evaluation of the Charter must foresee times, perhaps

most, when the Charter is of limited help in resolving hard conflicts between animal, human and environmental well-being. Recalling that perfection is the enemy of the good, the Charter need not be successful in all cases to be of use in many. (Earth Charter Institute 2000b; Earth Charter USA 2000; Ferroro and Holland 2002).

What the articles in this edition of *Worldviews* demonstrate is that the Charter is a living document. The Charter summarizes a widely shared set of moral values, articulates a vision of a just world that values and protects nature, and provides a set of principles that deepens our practical response to questions of sustainable environments and communities. Whether or not this or another "charter" is adopted by the United Nations is not, to my mind, the critical issue (many will disagree). Rather, if the principles espoused by the Charter can serve as an educational tool, catalyze a dialogue on global ethics, inspire efforts towards sustainability, and inform national and international conventions, treaties and laws, then we will be well served. And to the degree that all these elements of the Earth Charter remain open to critique and affirmation, they will continue to function as points of departure for a substantive ethical exchange about how to live well, and in right relationship, on the Earth.

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NOTES

1. Co-organized by Dieter Hessel (Program on Ecology, Justive and Faith) and Ron Engel (Center for Humans and Nature), the "Earth Charter Ethics Seminar" was held at the Pocantico Conference Center of the Rockefeller Brothers Fund from 5-7 April 2002 in Tarrytown, NY, USA. Representing the Earth Charter Initiative and the Earth Charter USA were Richard Clugston (Executive Director, Center for Respect of Life and Environment, HSUS), Brendan Mackey (Geography, Australian National University), and Mirian Vilela (Executive Director, Earth Charter International). Scholars attending the seminar included Donald Brown (Legal Counsel, Pennsylvania Consortium for Interdisciplinary Environmental Policy), Abelardo Brenes (Professor of Peace Studies, University of Peace in Costa Rica), David Crocker (Fellow, Institute of Philosophy and Public Policy, University of Maryland), Strachan Donnelley (President of the Center for Humans and Nature), Nigel Dower (Philosophy, University of Aberdeen), Ron Engel (Research Associate at the Center for Humans and Nature), John Hart (Theology, Carroll College), Lori Knowles (Bioethics, The Hastings Center), William Lynn (Research Scholar, Center for Humans and Nature), Clare Palmer (Philosophy, Lancaster University), Kusumita Pedersen (Religious

Studies, St. Francis College), Larry Rasmussen (Social Ethics, Union Theological Seminary), Nicolas Robinson (Law, Pace University), and Laura Westra (Philosophy, University of Windsor).

2. The literature on *anthropocentrism* is large and growing (for a classic defense, see Passmore 1980). While the defense of anthropocentrism is biologically, ethically or philosophically suspect (see Soule 1995; Rolston 1994), its defenders are moving into the humanities and social sciences under the banner of the "social construction of nature" (see Pepper 1996). Meanwhile, the alternatives to anthropocentrism tend to divide themselves into the worldviews of *biocentrism* and *ecocentrism* Biocentrists assert the moral value of individual creatures, e.g. a human child, a wolf (see Taylor 1986). Ecocentrists value living systems as objects of moral concern, e.g. the species *Canis lupus*; temperate rainforests (see Eckersley 1992). Both perspectives recognize the moral standing of human beings, but they seek to expand the moral community by recognizing the ethical significance of other creatures and ecosystems. Since both camps have good arguments, the trick is applying their insights in situated ways so as to value individuals and communities (human and non-human) at multiple scales. I call this perspective *geocentrism* (for an introduction, see Lynn 1998). In addition, the fields of animal ethics, animal geography, and animal studies more generally, are hybridizing ethological, ethical and social theories and contributing exciting new insights that transgress the settled categories of anthropocentrism's ossified vision of the social and natural worlds (see Lynn 2002, 2003; Midgley 1984; Noske 1997).

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