

## Notable events leading to the creation of the Earth Charter

The 1950s saw a rising interest in the topic of climate change and the effects of greenhouse gases on our planet. In 1957 oceanographer Roger Revelle warned of humanity conducting a “large-scale geophysical experiment” by releasing greenhouse gases into the atmosphere. His colleague David Keeling then set up the first continuous monitoring of CO<sub>2</sub> levels in the atmosphere, which found a regular year-on-year rise.

In 1979 the First World Climate Conference highlighted climate change as a major issue and called on governments “to foresee and prevent potential man-made changes in climate.”

In 1985 a major international conference on the greenhouse effect took place in Austria and warned that greenhouse gases will “cause a rise of global mean temperature which is greater than any in man’s history.” Researchers predicted that this could cause sea levels to rise by up to one metre.

In 1987 the World Commission on Environment and Development launched the ‘Our Common Future’ Report which called for a charter to focus on more sustainable development internationally. Subsequently in 1994, Maurice Strong, Secretary-General of the Rio Earth Summit and Mikhail Gorbachev, former leader of the Soviet Union and founder of Green Cross International sought to develop an Earth Charter, beginning the lengthy drafting and consultation process. In 1997 an independent Earth Charter Commission was formed to oversee the development of the text, analyse international consultation outcomes and to come to an agreement on a global consensus document. In 2000 the final version of The Earth Charter (the Charter) was approved at the Hague.



## The Earth Charter principles



Thirteen years in draft produced a well-crafted document urging people to unite for a more sustainable global society. The Charter highlights the importance of “preserving a healthy biosphere with all its ecological systems... fertile soils, pure waters, and clean air” to maintain the resilience and well-being of humanity. The Charter highlighted major environmental issues including:

- environmental devastation, depletion of resources, and mass extinction of species caused by over-production and consumption;
- human suffering created by the widening gap between rich and poor, injustice, poverty, ignorance, and violent conflict; and
- the burden on ecological and social systems caused by the rapid rise in the human population.

The Charter speaks of universal responsibility and the need for a common set of principles to guide individuals, organisations, businesses, and governments to a more sustainable future. This was intended as an educational tool, a guide to sustainable living, an ethical and values framework and a ‘soft law’ instrument. To date the Charter has not been accepted by the United Nations due to conflicting ideologies with the Charter being environmentalist at its core and the UN anthropocentric and economic in its values. The Charter’s principles observe both humanitarian and environmentalist values, encouraging leaders to improve the living conditions for all - humans, wildlife and the environment equally. The four principles are discussed below.

### Principle 1: Respect and care for the community of life

The word community is used to describe both nature, wildlife, flora, fauna and humans who are interdependent and deserving of respect. This principle speaks of respecting earth and life in all its diversity to care with understanding and compassion.

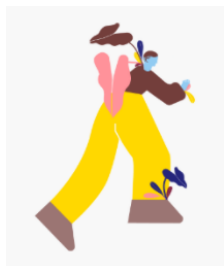
This principle promotes the idea of building democratic societies that are just, participatory, sustainable and peaceful. Such societies are seen to ensure human rights and fundamental freedoms as well as social and economic justice.

Lastly the principle acknowledges the need to protect the earth and its ecology for future generations. While extinction of species continues at an exponential rate, the last five years has seen a decrease in deforestation rates by about 5 million ha per year compared to previous years (Ecosystem Marketplace, 2021). The decrease has been a result of international initiatives and increased corporate commitments to reduce deforestation, as well as improved forest monitoring tools and changes in consumer behaviour with a reduction in meat consumption.



## Principle 2: Ecological integrity

This principle is more assertive directing businesses, organisations and governments to protect and restore ecological systems, prevent harm and adapt production chains that safeguard earth's resources, ecology and human rights. The principle encourages scientists and businesses to study ecological sustainability and support open information sharing - pertinent to research on human health, environmental protection and sustainability.



Preserving traditional knowledge and spiritual wisdom that protects the environment and its people is also seen as being a part of ecological integrity. This is seen in the slower deterioration of land belonging to indigenous people which is 35% of global land area currently (IPBES report, 2021).

## Principle 3: Social and economic justice

The third principle target governments, employers and human rights activists to eradicate poverty, promote equal and sustainable human development, ensure gender equality and access to education and healthcare. Here achieving gender equality is synonymous to ending violence against women and promoting active participation in decision making in all aspects of societal living. These principles aim to ensure that the most basic human needs are met, such as clean drinking water and air, secure food sources, shelter, education and sanitation. However, some basic needs are still inaccessible to 107 developing countries (World Vision, Global Poverty: Facts, FAQs, and how to help, 2021).



The principle also points to the importance of dignity and the support of bodily health, spiritual wellbeing and the rights of indigenous peoples and minorities. Specifically eliminating discrimination based on race, sex, sexual orientation, religion, social and ethnic background. The principle affirms the rights of indigenous people to their practices of spirituality, lands and resources.

## Principle 4: Democracy, nonviolence and peace



While the word 'democracy' appears first and foremost the emphasis of this principle is on access to information, education, participation and informed decision making. The Charter suggests that environmental education should begin early in life and should be taught through art, science, humanities, spirituality and be promoted in social media.

The Charter tells governments to take non-provocative defense postures, eliminate nuclear, biological and toxic weapons to avoid mass destruction and resolve environmental conflict peacefully.

The last principle demands all beings to be treated with respect by preventing animal cruelty domestically and through inhumane methods of hunting and fishing and catching nontarget species. Unfortunately, as the human population has increased in the last twenty years so has over-fishing, an issue being tackled by more regulated sustainable fishing practices worldwide (MSC insights, 2021).

The Charter is a passionate and compelling document - the values of which are hard to dispute. I hope that we continue to see the practice of these four principles spreading with changes in consumer behaviour forcing businesses and production chains to put the environment first, and pressure on governments to adhere to the UNFCCC Paris Agreement.

*(Written by Anna Kula, HOPE researcher Qld)*