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Earth Charter: The Moral Compass the World Needs Now

A Publication of the United Nations Association of Australia Queensland (UNAAQ) Earth Charter Commissioner, Fien Van den Steen. Brisbane 2026

"We stand at a critical moment in Earth's history, a time when humanity must choose its future."

— Earth Charter Preamble, 2000

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1. Editorial Foreword

Twenty-five years ago, a document was born from the ashes of history and the hope of a generation. Today, its words ring more urgent than ever. This special edition of HOPE introduces the Earth Charter to Hope members and explores why this remarkable ethical framework is more necessary in 2026 than it was the day it was launched at the Peace Palace in The Hague on 29 June 2000.

These words from the Earth Charter's Preamble could easily have been written today: *"We stand at a critical moment in Earth's history, a time when humanity must choose its future. As the world becomes increasingly interdependent and fragile, the future at once holds great peril and great promise. Yet they were written a quarter of a century ago. History, it seems, has a habit of repeating.*

Today, the world is once again deeply divided. Interdependence is more pronounced than ever, yet so too are vulnerability, polarisation, and mistrust. COVID-19 reminded us how connected we are. The rapidly shifting geopolitical landscape reminds us how fragile that connection can be. The algorithms that shape how we access information, including search engines, social media, AI platforms, are built on a foundation of confirmation bias: they show us what we already believe. The result is that we each see only a fragment of reality, and we mistake that fragment for the whole. We talk past one another instead of with one another, divided into opposing camps rather than united on common ground.

And yet the crises we face, such as climate disruption, biodiversity collapse, rising inequality, the erosion of democratic trust, and escalating conflict, do not respect those divisions. They are interconnected emergencies requiring interconnected solutions. You cannot solve climate change without addressing social justice. You cannot protect biodiversity without tackling economic inequality. You cannot build peace without restoring ecological integrity. These are not separate problems with separate answers. They are symptoms of a deeper, systemic failure: one that demands not just better policies, but a transformation in how we think, how we value, and how we relate to one another and to the Earth. That transformation is precisely what the Earth Charter offers.

I came to this understanding through years as an international investigative environmental journalist, and it is what has driven me to work within the United Nations Association of Australia Queensland (UNAAQ), and as Australian Earth Charter Commissioner. Because eighty years ago, after the world had endured the most devastating period in European history, the global community chose to unite: to create the United Nations, to declare human rights, to build institutions for peace, justice, and cooperation. That same spirit of courage, solidarity, and shared responsibility is what we need today. After all, what unites us is far greater than what divides us. We all breathe the same air. We all depend on water, on nourishment, on safety and belonging. We are part of one living planet. And it is time to act like it.

This edition will walk you through three interconnected journeys: the history of why and how the Earth Charter was created; what the Earth Charter is, an ethical framework and moral compass, not environmental law, and **how** you can enact its principles in Australia today.

Key takeaways: The Earth Charter was born from the same impulse that created the United Nations: the recognition that humanity must act collectively. In a world of compounding crises and deepening polarisation, its vision of reconnection, shared responsibility, and ethical leadership is not nostalgic idealism. It is the most pragmatic path forward we have. The articles that follow will show you why, and what you can do about it.

Extra reading: [Earth Charter Preamble \(earthcharter.org\)](https://earthcharter.org) | [United Nations — Why the UN Matters \(un.org\)](https://un.org)

Figure 1: From Left to Right Former Australian Earth Charter Commissioner Clem Campbell, Current Australian Earth Charter Commissioner Fien Van den Steen and Semisi, Queensland and Pacific Climate Youth Activist at the UN Youth and Earth Charter Ocean COP workshop in Brisbane in 2025.



2. Why We Need the Earth Charter Today

We live in a time when every major global challenge is connected to every other. Climate change, biodiversity loss, inequality, conflict, and democratic erosion are not separate emergencies. They are expressions of a single systemic failure. Written in Australia in 2026, this article examines why a 25-year-old ethical document may be the most urgently needed tool in our collective toolbox, and why ethics, not just policy, is the missing link.

We are living through an extraordinary, and extraordinarily dangerous, period in human history. The Sustainable Development Goals, the world's most comprehensive blueprint for a better future, are dramatically off track. According to the United Nations' official *Sustainable Development Goals Report 2025*, only 35 per cent of SDG

targets are on track or making moderate progress, while nearly half are moving too slowly and 18 per cent have regressed. The independent *Sustainable Development Report 2025* is even starker: none of the 17 Goals are currently on course to be achieved by 2030, with conflicts, and structural vulnerabilities impeding progress in many parts of the world.

This is not merely a technical or financial failure. It is a civilisational one. As the Earth Charter's co-author Fritjof Capra and philosopher Jeremy Lent argue in the 2025 Earth Charter volume *Envisioning and Evaluating Our Contributions to Planetary Well-Being*, none of the interconnected crises we face can be understood in isolation. They share a common root: a worldview that treats humans as separate from, and superior to, nature; that sees the Earth as a resource to extract, and other people as commodities to exploit. This worldview has shaped a global economy built on perpetual growth, resource extraction, and the accumulation of wealth at the expense of planetary health.

The numbers speak for themselves. GDP continues to grow even when forests are destroyed, rivers polluted, and communities fractured. As the late David Korten observed, money, not human or ecological wellbeing, has become the defining measure of value. The result, as Capra and Lent describe it, is a civilisation accelerating toward ecological overshoot and social fragmentation. We are shortening our runway.

And yet, in this very moment of compounding crisis, geopolitical polarisation is pulling people apart rather than together. Wars are being fought over the same soils that feed us, the same waters that sustain us, the same air that connects us. This is the central paradox of our time: we are most divided precisely when we can least afford to be, and when we are most connected.

Figure 2: The Sustainable Development Report (formerly the SDG Index & Dashboards) is a global assessment of countries' progress towards achieving the Sustainable Development Goals. It is a complement to the official SDG indicators and the voluntary national reviews. All data presented on this website are based on the publication [Sachs, J.D., Lafortune, G., Fuller, G., Jablonovski, G. \(2025\). Financing Sustainable Development to 2030 and Mid-Century. Sustainable Development Report 2025. Paris: SDSN, Dublin: Dublin University Press. DOI: https://doi.org/10.25546/111909](https://doi.org/10.25546/111909)



Why Ethics Matter: The Ideational Force of Change

So why the Earth Charter? Why not more policies, more laws, more targets? The answer lies in what international relations theorist Robert Cox identified as the three forces driving systemic change: material forces (economic and technological pressures), institutional forces (laws, governance structures, international agreements), and ideational forces (values, ethics, worldviews). These three forces are so interconnected that they strengthen or weaken one another. And as the experience of the last three decades makes painfully clear, it is the ideational force, ethics, that often determines whether real transformation happens or stalls.

Consider this: as the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) has consistently noted, there is a dramatic gap between the environmental laws that exist and the environmental action that follows. Governments have ministries. Nations have signed agreements. The Paris Agreement, the Convention on Biological Diversity, countless national climate laws; the institutional architecture is there. And still, planetary wellbeing declines. This is because laws alone cannot shift a worldview. Without an ethical foundation, institutions lose direction, and material incentives drag us back into old patterns.

Ethics fill this gap. Ethics shapes what societies believe is legitimate, desirable, and morally necessary. They guide how communities define progress. They determine whether a leader sees themselves as a steward or an owner of the Earth. The Earth Charter is precisely this kind of ideational catalyst. It is a tool for shifting mindsets, reorienting priorities, and inspiring collective action from within, rather than imposing compliance from above.

We already see how this works in practice. The recognition of the Rights of Nature in Ecuador's constitution, the legal personhood of the Whanganui River in Aotearoa New Zealand, and Costa Rica's pioneering environmental governance all began as ethical ideas, as shifts in how people understood their relationship with the natural world, before they became legal realities. Ethics can be the pulling force for institutions.

The Earth Charter reframes sustainability as an ethical commitment to interdependence, justice, and shared responsibility. It insists that planetary wellbeing and human wellbeing are inseparable. It calls on us to focus not on *having more* but on *being more*. This shift from anthropocentrism to ecological consciousness, from transactional thinking to relational ethics, creates the moral imagination needed to reimagine and redesign our institutions and policies.

Without ethical change, material and institutional reforms remain superficial, requiring policing rather than nurturing. With ethical change, those same reforms become powerful levers for genuine planetary wellbeing.

Key takeaways: The SDGs are off-track. Every major global crisis is interconnected. Policy and law alone are not enough to drive the transformation we need, because laws do not always shift a worldview. The Earth Charter provides what is missing: an ethical foundation that aligns human values with planetary reality. This is not a soft supplement to hard policy. It is the ideational engine that enables policy. In the articles that follow, we trace how this remarkable document came to be — and why its moment has finally, urgently, arrived.



Figure 3: In 2025, the United Nations Association of Australia Young Professionals Queensland under guidance of the Australian Earth Charter commissioner participated in the Global Ethical Stocktake preceding the COP30 in Brazil, exploring the ethical issues that undermined and could enable progress on the SDGs.

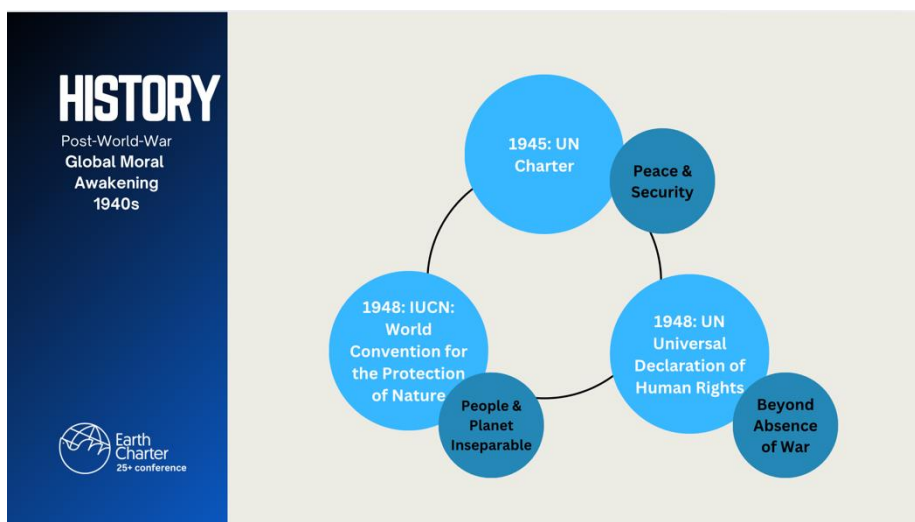
Extra reading: [UN SDG Report 2025 \(unstats.un.org\)](https://unstats.un.org) | [UNEP: Environmental Rule of Law \(unep.org\)](https://unep.org) | [Rights of Nature \(earthlaw.org\)](https://earthlaw.org)

3. The Roots of the Earth Charter: Post-WWII Global Moral Awakening (1940s)

In the rubble of World War II, something remarkable emerged: a global moral awakening. Nations battered by conflict chose not simply to rebuild armies, but to build institutions of conscience and connection. This is where the Earth Charter finds its deepest roots: in the 1940s, when humanity first dared to imagine a world governed not by force alone, but by shared values and universal principles.

The story of the Earth Charter does not begin in 1994, when Maurice Strong and Mikhail Gorbachev relaunched the initiative, nor even in 1972, when the Stockholm Conference first placed environment on the global agenda. It begins much earlier, in the ashes of the Second World War. This war was so catastrophic, so morally obscene, that the world was forced to ask a question it had never seriously confronted before: what values must a civilised humanity share in order not to destroy itself?

Out of that question came the United Nations in 1945, an institution built not merely on the balance of military power, but on a Charter that declared the UN's mandate to maintain international peace and security. Three years later, in 1948, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights expanded that mandate further, asserting that peace and security must mean more than the absence of war. It means dignity. It means freedom. It means the recognition that all human beings are born with equal and inalienable rights. These documents were revolutionary not because they described reality as it was, but because they articulated reality as it ought to be. They were, in the deepest sense, ethical declarations, ideational forces of change written into the architecture of global governance.



In that same year, 1948, a third milestone in the Earth Charter's *Figure 4: the three milestones in the 1940s of global moral awakening post-World War II.*

genealogy took place, one less celebrated but no less significant: the founding of the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN). Established as the world's first global environmental network, the IUCN introduced a concept that was, for its time, almost revolutionary: a World Convention for the Protection of Nature. For the first time at this global level, an institution was formally asserting that humanity's fate and nature's fate were inseparable. That the health of ecosystems was not merely a technical or economic matter, but a moral one.

This insight that the wellbeing of people and the wellbeing of the planet are intrinsically connected, echoed something that Indigenous communities around the world had known and lived for thousands of years. The Earth Charter would later draw deeply on these traditions, recognising that the wisdom of First Nations peoples offered exactly the kind of relational, long-term ecological thinking that modern industrial civilisation had so dangerously suppressed.

It would take decades for these seeds to fully germinate. The Cold War would slow the process. National sovereignty would complicate it. Economic interests would resist it. But the seeds were planted in the 1940s: the idea that humanity has a shared ethical responsibility not only to one another, but also to the Earth. That idea would grow, slowly and eventually into the Earth Charter.

Key takeaways: The Earth Charter's roots lie in the post-WWII moral awakening that gave us the UN, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, and the IUCN's World Convention for the Protection of Nature. These were not merely political agreements. They were ethical commitments, declarations about what kind of world humanity wanted to build. The recognition that human rights and ecological health are inseparable, which took centre stage in the IUCN's early vision, would become foundational to the Earth Charter fifty years later. The lesson for today is both sobering and hopeful: transformative ethical frameworks are born in moments of crisis. We are in such a moment now.

Extra reading: [UN Charter \(un.org\)](#) | [Universal Declaration of Human Rights \(un.org\)](#) | [IUCN History \(iucn.org\)](#)



Figure 5: Julian R. Caceres, Ambassador to the United States; and Chairman of the Delegation from Honduras, signing the United Nations Charter at a ceremony held at the Veterans' War Memorial Building in San Francisco, California, USA, on 26 June. The United Nations officially came into existence four months later on 24 October 1945. UN Photo/McLain [un.org/en/about-us/history-of-the-un](#)

4. Acceleration: Two Decades of Global Environmental Policymaking (1972–1992)

Between 1972 and 1992, the world moved from vague ecological anxiety to the first serious architecture of global environmental governance. From Stockholm to Rio, this was the era when sustainability moved from the margins to the mainstream of international affairs, and when the foundations of the Earth Charter were laid, one landmark report, one declaration, one commission at a time.

It took more than two decades after the founding of the UN and the IUCN before the interconnectedness of human and planetary wellbeing made it onto the global political stage. When it did, in June 1972, it arrived with a force that would reshape the course of international affairs: the United Nations Conference on the Human Environment in Stockholm.

This was the first major UN gathering devoted to environmental issues, and its significance is difficult to overstate. For the first time, environmental protection was declared not merely a technical matter of resource management, but a human rights issue. Stockholm's opening principle declared the right to a healthy environment, forging the first formal link between human rights and the state of the natural world. The environment was now, officially, a moral question.

Stockholm was also powerfully shaped by a report that had been published just weeks before the conference, with deliberate strategic intent: *The Limits to Growth*, produced by the Club of Rome in 1972. Commissioned as a scientific wake-up call for the global community, the report used systems modelling to demonstrate, for the first time quantitatively, that unchecked population growth and industrial expansion would exceed the Earth's carrying capacity within a century. The message was stark and unfamiliar: there are limits to growth, because endless expansion on a finite planet is not just unsustainable, it is physically impossible. This report was intentionally timed to precede Stockholm, to spark precisely the kind of debate about the dominant development model that the conference needed.

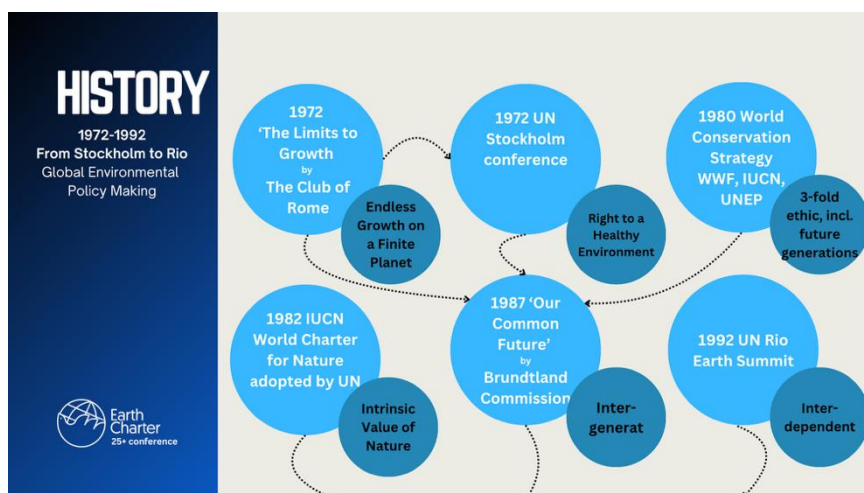


Figure 6: Two decades of global environmental policymaking.

In the decade that followed Stockholm, the momentum continued to build. In 1980, the IUCN, WWF, and UNEP collaborated on the World Conservation Strategy, the first global document to formally introduce the concept of sustainable development. It articulated a threefold ethical responsibility: toward fellow humans, toward other species, and toward future generations. This was a profound widening of the moral circle, one that the Earth Charter would later expand further still.

Two years later, in 1982, the IUCN drafted the World Charter for Nature, which was adopted by the UN General Assembly. Its preamble stated boldly that all of nature has intrinsic value: value independent of its usefulness to human beings. This was the first major environmental ethical principle ever recognised at the international level. Tragically, many governments walked away, unwilling to accept its implications. The Charter was adopted but effectively shelved. Yet its core insight, that nature has value in and of itself, not merely as a resource, would prove impossible to suppress entirely. It would resurface, with renewed force, in the Earth Charter.

The culminating document of this era was the 1987 Brundtland Commission report, *Our Common Future*. Produced by the World Commission on Environment and Development, chaired by former Norwegian Prime Minister Gro Harlem Brundtland, the report gave the world one of its most quoted definitions: sustainable development is "development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs." It brought intergenerational responsibility and the eradication of poverty to the centre of the sustainability conversation. Crucially, it also acknowledged its own limitations: sustainable development, as defined, still lacked the ethical framework to make it a reality. The Commission therefore explicitly recommended the creation of a new charter: a "universal declaration" to define a "global ethic" for sustainability. That recommendation planted the most direct seed of what would become the Earth Charter.

By 1992, when the world gathered at the UN Conference on Environment and Development in Rio de Janeiro, the largest intergovernmental conference in history to that date, attended by representatives of more than 98% of the world's nation, the intellectual and ethical foundations for the Earth Charter had been laid. Rio produced Agenda 21, the Framework Convention on Climate Change, and the Convention on Biological Diversity. But it did not produce the ethical charter the Brundtland Commission had called for. That task remained unfinished due to the geopolitical climate of the last two decades, as described in the next article.

Key takeaways: The twenty years between Stockholm and Rio represent one of the most consequential eras in the history of global environmental governance. They gave us the concept of sustainable development, the recognition of nature's intrinsic value, and the formal acknowledgement that human rights and ecological health are inseparable. They also revealed the limits of top-down intergovernmental processes: transformative ethical frameworks cannot be imposed from above. They must be built from within. The stage was now set for a different kind of initiative: the Earth Charter.

Extra reading: [Stockholm 1972 \(un.org\)](#) | [The Limits to Growth \(clubofrome.org\)](#) | [Our Common Future / Brundtland Report \(un.org\)](#) | [Rio 1992 \(un.org\)](#)



Figure 7: Group photo of world leaders meeting at the 'Earth Summit' in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, 13 June 1992. UN Photo/Michos Tzovaras <https://www.un.org/en/conferences/environment/rio1992>

5. Cold War Geopolitics and the Rise of Global Environmental Policy: Insights for Today

The 1972 Stockholm Conference and the 1992 Rio Earth Summit did not happen in a political vacuum. They were shaped, and constrained, by the Cold War's ideological divisions and its aftermath. Understanding this political context is essential to understanding both why global environmental policy advanced as it did, and what those lessons mean for today's fractured geopolitical landscape.

The emergence of global environmental governance between 1972 and 1992 unfolded against one of the most turbulent backdrops in modern history: the late Cold War and its dramatic conclusion. Environmental diplomacy did not develop in isolation. It was shaped at every stage by prevailing geopolitical tensions, ideological rivalry, and shifting conceptions of sovereignty and international cooperation.

The 1972 Stockholm Conference took place at the height of Cold War bipolarity. The Soviet Union and most Eastern Bloc states boycotted the meeting, while many developing countries, acutely aware of economic power imbalances, feared that environmental regulation would impede their development and replicate the unjust global structures they were already struggling against. These North-South tensions were as consequential as the East-West divide. Nonetheless, Stockholm produced the Stockholm Declaration and led to the creation of the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP), institutionalising environmental issues within the UN system for the first time.

Throughout the remaining Cold War years, environmental cooperation remained fragmented. Scientific awareness of transboundary problems, including acid rain, ozone depletion, and deforestation, grew steadily. But national sovereignty and ideological competition constrained comprehensive global action. Environmental governance advanced cautiously, often framed as apolitical technical cooperation to avoid exacerbating geopolitical tensions.

The end of the Cold War fundamentally altered this landscape. By the early 1990s, a brief and precious period of geopolitical optimism made unprecedented multilateral cooperation possible. This shift culminated in the 1992 United Nations Conference on Environment and Development (UNCED) in Rio de Janeiro, which produced landmark outcomes such as Agenda 21, the Rio Declaration, and the creation of the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) and the Convention on Biological Diversity. Scholars have since noted that this breadth of agreement would have been politically inconceivable during the Cold War period.

Yet Rio also exposed enduring fractures. The North-South tensions that had complicated Stockholm had not been resolved; they had merely been managed. Unresolved questions around responsibility, financing, and development priorities would persist for decades. It was precisely these

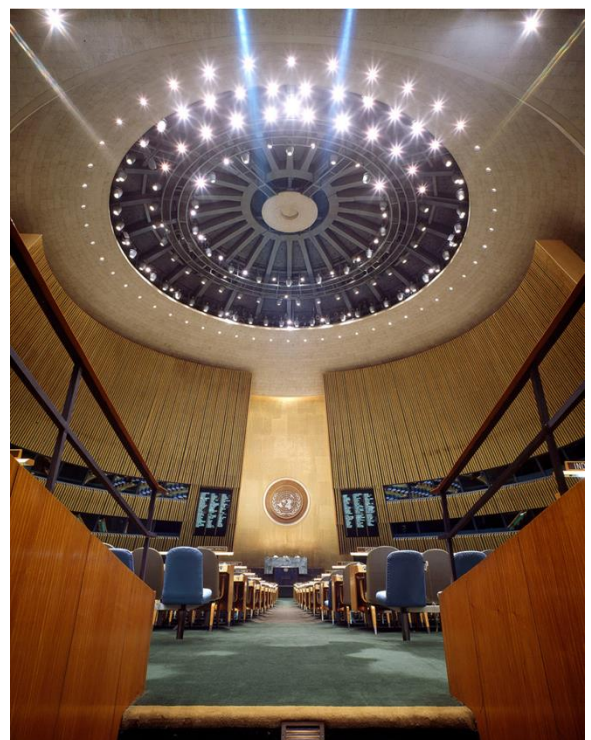


Figure 8: View of the empty General Assembly hall from its main aisle. UN Photo <https://www.un.org/en/ga/>

ethical limitations of what intergovernmental consensus could achieve at Rio that helped motivate the Earth Charter initiative. As Earth Charter International's own history notes, the Charter was developed during the 1990s in part as a response to what formal diplomatic processes had been unable to deliver: an ethical foundation for sustainability.

The Lessons for Today

Today's global environmental policymaking operates in a markedly different, and in some respects more difficult, political climate. Contemporary geopolitics is characterised by renewed great-power rivalry, economic fragmentation, and weakened multilateral institutions. SDG 16 (Peace, Justice and Strong Institutions) and SDG 17 (Partnerships for the Goals) are among the most off-track goals globally, facing major challenges and showing very limited progress since 2015.

The contrast with the post-Cold War optimism of 1992 is stark. Then, there was a political moment, although fragile and imperfect, in which nations found common ground. Today, that common ground seems harder to find. This is precisely why the Earth Charter matters more than ever. It does not depend on state-level diplomatic consensus. It was built through civil society, through grassroots consultation, through the kind of bottom-up ethical agreement that governments alone cannot generate. It offers a foundation for cooperation that transcends geopolitical rivalry, because it speaks not to national interests, but to shared human values.

Rio teaches us that global environmental progress is fundamentally political. It also teaches us that politics changes, and that when it does, windows of opportunity open. Policymakers, civil society leaders, and citizens must be prepared to act decisively in those moments, with the Earth Charter as an ethical compass.

Key takeaways: Global environmental governance has always been shaped by geopolitics. The post-Cold War window that enabled the extraordinary achievements of Rio 1992 is not the world we live in today. But the lesson of that era is not despair, it is preparation. Ethical frameworks like the Earth Charter build the values base that makes political action possible when the moment arrives. In a fractured world, civil society's commitment to shared principles is not a substitute for political action. It is what makes political action, eventually, possible.

Extra reading: [Stockholm 1972 Declaration \(un.org\)](#) | [Sörlin et al., "The Great Dispersal," Ambio 2025 \(link.springer.com\)](#) | [Global Environmental Politics amid Geopolitical Turbulence \(direct.mit.edu\)](#)

6. The Promise of an Ethical Framework (1992–1994)

The 1992 Rio Earth Summit was the largest intergovernmental gathering the world had ever seen. It produced landmark agreements. But it did not produce the ethical charter its architects had envisioned. Two years later, two extraordinary individuals, Maurice Strong and Mikhail Gorbachev, decided to finish the unfinished business of Rio. What followed would change the course of global ethics.

The 1992 United Nations Conference on Environment and Development, the Rio Earth Summit, was, by any measure, a historic event. Attended by representatives of more than 98% of the world's nations, it produced Agenda 21 (a comprehensive program for sustainable development in the 21st century), the Rio Declaration (affirming that "the integral and interdependent nature of the Earth, our home" was fundamental to global policy), the Framework Convention on Climate Change, and the Convention on Biological Diversity. All approved by consensus and representing a degree of global cooperation that seems, from the vantage point of 2026, almost miraculous.

At Rio, then-UN Secretary General Boutros Boutros-Ghali argued for a new "ethical and political contract with nature." He was right that such a contract was needed. But the time, he acknowledged, was not yet ripe. Governments approved Agenda 21 but not an ethical charter. The world had agreed on what needed to be done. It had not yet agreed on the values needed to underpin the doing. That gap between environmental policy and the ethical foundation necessary to enact it is what Maurice Strong and Mikhail Gorbachev set out to fill.

In 1994, Strong, who had chaired the Rio Earth Summit, and Gorbachev, who had led the Soviet Union through its final years and had become a passionate advocate for environmental action through his organisation Green Cross International, relaunched the Earth Charter initiative. Both were members of the Club of Rome, the same group behind *The Limits to Growth* report that had helped define the Stockholm agenda two decades earlier. This time, they chose a different approach: not top-down intergovernmental negotiation, but a bottom-up civil society process, supported by the government of the Netherlands, driven by communities, educators, Indigenous leaders, youth, scientists, and spiritual thinkers from every corner of the world.



Figure 9: Mr. Boutros Boutros-Ghali became the sixth Secretary-General of the United Nations on 1 January 1992, when he began a five-year term. [https://www.un.org/sg/en/former-sg/boutros-boutros-ghali](https://www.un.org/sg/en/former-<u>sg/boutros-boutros-ghali</u>)

What followed was one of the most remarkable democratic processes in the history of international ethics. An independent Earth Charter Commission was convened, bringing together global leaders including Nobel Peace Prize laureate Wangari Maathai, former Dutch Prime Minister Ruud Lubbers, Professor Steven Rockefeller, Princess Basma Bint Talal of Jordan, Brazilian liberation theologian Leonardo Boff, and youth advocate Severn Cullis-Suzuki. Their mandate was not to negotiate a compromise between governments, but to listen deeply and widely to the ethical values and principles that people around the world held in common.

Seven Lessons from Rio for Today

Although Rio didn't birth the Earth Charter, it left a legacy of lessons that speak directly to the challenges facing global environmental governance in 2026. Rio's core insight that environment and development must be addressed together remains as true now as it was then. Climate and biodiversity policies fail when perceived as threats to livelihoods. The most just and durable solutions integrate environmental ambition with credible development pathways, especially for lower-income nations.

Rio also demonstrated that political consensus matters as much as scientific urgency. Scientific knowledge of environmental risk was not what made Rio possible; the favourable post-Cold War political moment did. Today, with scientific consensus stronger than ever but political conditions more fractured, progress depends on rebuilding coalitions of goodwill, even imperfect and partial ones.

The principle of common but differentiated responsibilities, that all nations share responsibility for the Earth but bear unequal historical culpability and capacity, remains as indispensable now as it was in 1992. So does the recognition, born at Rio, that non-binding frameworks can still be transformative. Many of Rio's outcomes were soft law, yet they profoundly shaped national policies, norms, and institutions over time.

Perhaps most relevantly for the Earth Charter's story: Rio showed that ethics and values cannot be sidelined. The limits of what intergovernmental compromise could achieve at Rio were precisely what motivated the Earth Charter initiative. Technical solutions do not drive societal transformation. Values, such as equity, intergenerational justice, care for the living world, shape the political will that makes transformation possible.

Key takeaways: Rio 1992 was a high-water mark of global environmental cooperation, one born of a rare geopolitical moment. Its unfinished business, the absence of a shared ethical framework, gave birth to the Earth Charter. Strong and Gorbachev's decision to pursue this framework through civil society rather than intergovernmental negotiation was not a retreat from ambition. It was a recognition that lasting ethical change must be built from within. The next article traces how that six-year process unfolded, and what it produced.

Extra reading: [Agenda 21 full text \(un.org\)](#) | [Rio Declaration \(un.org\)](#) | [Earth Charter History \(earthcharter.org\)](#)

7. The World's Most Inclusive and Participatory Process (1994–2000)

Between 1994 and 2000, something unprecedented happened in the history of international ethics: a global conversation. Thousands of people, from every region, culture, age group, and worldview, gathered to find common ground on the values needed to guide humanity toward a just, sustainable, and peaceful future. This is the story of how the Earth Charter was created, and why the way it was made is as important as what it became.

The Earth Charter draws its moral authority not only from its content, but also from its context. The drafting of the Earth Charter has involved the most open and participatory consultation process ever conducted in connection with an international document. Thousands of individuals and hundreds of organizations from all regions of the world, different cultures, and diverse sectors of society have participated. This is not a diplomatic boast. It is the literal truth of how the document came to be.

From 1994 to 2000, Earth Charter consultations unfolded across continents. The Earth Charter Commission's Secretariat, together with national committees and partner organisations, convened consultation meetings across the globe. The recommendations and comments generated by these consultations were forwarded to a drafting committee, formed in December 1996 and chaired by Professor Steven C. Rockefeller, who worked with a small team of experts to refine successive drafts.

These drafts circulated globally in multiple languages, inviting feedback from anyone who wished to participate. Consultations on the text engaged over 100,000 people in 47 countries, with over 5,000 experts from many disciplines, as well as individual citizens and students, submitting written comments. At key moments, diverse groups gathered to review these contributions and debate every word.

And the words mattered enormously. The process confronted the fact that language embodies unspoken worldviews. Should the document speak of "nature" or "Earth", with a capital E, as a name, or a lower e, as an object? "Creatures" or "living beings", given that "creatures" implies a creator, which would not sit comfortably

with all cultures? "Compassion," "respect," or "consideration"? Each choice carried ethical, philosophical, and cultural meaning. Getting it right required not just linguistic skill but profound intercultural understanding.

This was precisely why the process was so important, and why it succeeded where earlier efforts had failed. The top-down approach at Rio 1992 had not produced a charter. The UN's adoption of the IUCN's World Charter for Nature in 1982 had seen many governments walk away. The Earth Charter consultation, by contrast, was built on listening, deep, intercultural, intergenerational listening. Because finding common ground requires the humility to understand before being understood.



Figure 10: Jan Pronk, Mikhail Gorbachev, Ruud Lubbers, Maurice Strong and Mohammed Sahnoun. First Earth Charter Workshop meeting, Peace Palace, The Hague, Netherlands, May 1995. <https://earthcharter.org/about-the-earth-charter/history>

The result was language that could be embraced by Buddhists and Christians, by Indigenous communities and Western scientists, by women's organisations and conservationists. Like the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the Earth Charter was designed to be understandable, relatable, and meaningful across cultures and worldviews. This universality is, in the deepest sense, its source of power, because the Charter has no enforcement mechanism. Its authority rests entirely on the voluntary commitment of people and organisations who recognise themselves in its principles and choose to live by them.

The process moved through key milestones. In March 1997, the drafting committee began circulating drafts internationally. A Benchmark Draft was released following the Rio+5 Forum in Rio de Janeiro. In April 1999, a Benchmark Draft II was released and international consultations continued through Earth Charter National Committees and international dialogues. After numerous drafts and after considering the input of people from all regions of the world, the Earth Charter Commission came to consensus on the final text in March 2000, at a meeting held at UNESCO headquarters in Paris.

The Earth Charter was formally launched in a special ceremony on 29 June 2000 at The Peace Palace in The Hague, Netherlands, where it was first presented to Queen Beatrix of The Netherlands by a young girl. The choice of venue was deeply symbolic: the Peace Palace, home of the International Court of Justice, linking planetary wellbeing with the global pursuit of justice.

Key takeaways: The Earth Charter's participatory drafting process was not just procedurally remarkable; it was ethically necessary. A document calling for a shift in values cannot be imposed by experts and governments. It must be discovered together, through genuine dialogue across difference. This is what the Earth Charter's six-year consultation process achieved. It produced a document with a moral authority that no intergovernmental treaty, however legally binding, can fully replicate. That process of listening across culture, generation, religion, and worldview, is itself a model for the kind of engagement the world needs more of now.

Extra reading: [Earth Charter drafting process \(earthcharter.org\)](https://earthcharter.org/about-the-earth-charter/history) | [Earth Charter full text \(earthcharter.org\)](https://earthcharter.org/earth-charter-full-text) | [Earth Charter FAQs \(earthcharter.org\)](https://earthcharter.org/earth-charter-faq)

8. Earth Charter's Four Pillars and Sixteen Principles: A Framework for a Living Planet

The Earth Charter is sometimes described simply as an "environmental document." This misses almost everything important about it. The Earth Charter is a global ethical framework: a holistic, integrated vision of what it means to live well on a shared planet. Its four pillars and sixteen principles form a coherent architecture for justice, sustainability, and peace that is as relevant in 2026 as it was at its launch at the Peace Palace in 2000.

Understanding the Earth Charter requires understanding what it is not: it is not a list of environmental regulations, not a UN treaty, and not a technical sustainability standard. It is, in its own words, a moral compass, a set of shared values and principles that can guide the decisions of governments, businesses, communities, and individuals as they navigate the profound ethical challenges of our time. It fits into the soft law category.

The Charter's sixteen principles are organised into four interconnected pillars, each of which addresses a dimension of planetary and human wellbeing. Together, they form what the document's afterword calls "The Way Forward": an integrated vision for a just, sustainable, and peaceful world in which the flourishing of all life, human and non-human, is the ultimate measure of success.

Pillar One: Respect and Care for the Community of Life

This is the Earth Charter's grounding pillar, and its most fundamental departure from the dominant worldview of our time. It calls us to recognise that we are not separate from the natural world, not owners of it, but participants in a community of life that includes all beings. It invites reverence, a word chosen with care, reaching beyond respect and awe to something closer to a spiritual recognition that this community of life is existential to our own existence.

Principle 1a states: "Recognize that all beings are interdependent and every form of life has value regardless of its worth to human beings." This principle echoes the IUCN's World Charter for Nature from 1982, which had declared that all of nature has intrinsic value. That earlier declaration was adopted but largely shelved. The Earth Charter reclaims and deepens it, embedding the recognition of non-human value not as an addendum but as the foundation of the entire framework.

This pillar also calls for just and peaceful institutions and governance, not as separate concerns, but as expressions of the same ethical commitment. And it introduces a concept that runs through the entire document: the responsibility of present generations to future generations. Our decisions today have consequences for people not yet born. That is not merely a policy consideration. It is a moral one.

Pillar Two: Ecological Integrity

The second pillar grounds the Charter's ethics in ecological science. It reminds us that humanity depends, inescapably, on a healthy biosphere: fertile soils, clean water, pure air, functioning ecosystems. Protecting Earth's vitality, diversity, and beauty is not optional, it is a moral obligation and the foundation for all other forms of wellbeing.

This is ecological integrity as the planetary ceiling, the same concept that underpins Kate Raworth's Doughnut Economics, the SDG "wedding cake" model developed by Stockholm Resilience Centre, and the science of planetary boundaries. This insight is now mainstream sustainability advice.

Principle 6b introduces one of the Charter's most forward-looking legal principles: it places the burden of proof on those who argue that a proposed activity will not cause significant harm, rather than requiring those harmed to prove damage after the fact. This precautionary principle, embedded in environmental management, is now appearing in climate litigation around the world. The Charter was ahead of its time.

Principle 7 calls for regenerative, not merely sustainable, production and consumption patterns, connecting ecological health directly to human quality of life. It invites us toward what Earth Charter describes as the shift from *having more* to *being more*: from material accumulation to genuine wellbeing.

Pillar Three: Social and Economic Justice

The third pillar affirms that societies and economies must operate within the limits of the biosphere while ensuring fairness, dignity, and opportunity for all. It recognises that environmental degradation and social injustice are not separate problems. They are intertwined. Communities experiencing poverty are most vulnerable to ecological collapse. Ecological collapse deepens poverty. The two are inseparable.



Figure 11: The Earth Charter exists out of 4 pillars of 16 interconnected principles. <https://earthcharter.org/>

Principle 9 frames the eradication of poverty as "an ethical, social, and environmental imperative." This language of ethics, not just development is characteristic of the Charter's approach. It does not merely describe what should be done; it asserts why it is morally required.

The pillar's emphasis falls not on equality, but on equity and diversity. Gender equality is recognised as a prerequisite of sustainable development (Principle 11). Indigenous peoples are acknowledged as facing specific vulnerabilities (Principle 12). And Principle 12 calls on us to "uphold the right of all, without discrimination, to a natural and social environment supportive of human dignity, bodily health and spiritual wellbeing." Note: this is not merely the right to survival, but to flourishing, a much higher norm.

Pillar Four: Democracy, Nonviolence, and Peace

The final pillar brings everything together in what is, for many readers, the most surprising dimension of the Earth Charter: its insistence that peace and democracy are not peripheral concerns, but central to sustainability. You cannot have ecological integrity without just institutions. You cannot have social justice without freedom of expression and participation. You cannot have either without peace.

Crucially, the Earth Charter defines peace not as the absence of war, but as "the wholeness created by right relationships with oneself, other persons, other cultures, other life, Earth and the larger whole of which all are part" (Principle 16f). This is peace as a relational quality, an expression of the kind of society that the Charter's other three pillars are working to build.

In a world experiencing a documented decline in democratic norms and a rise of authoritarianism across multiple continents, Principle 13's call to "strengthen democratic institutions at all levels, and provide transparency and accountability in governance, inclusive participation in decision-making and access to justice" carries extraordinary weight.

Key takeaways: The Earth Charter's four pillars are not four separate agendas. They are one integrated ethical vision. Ecological integrity cannot be achieved without social justice. Social justice cannot be sustained without ecological integrity. Neither can flourish without peace and democracy. And all of it rests on the foundational recognition of Pillar One: that we are one human family within one Earth community, sharing a common destiny. This is not an environmental document. It is a civilisational one, a compass for building a world in which all life can thrive.

Extra reading: [Earth Charter full text \(earthcharter.org\)](https://earthcharter.org/) | [Planetary Boundaries \(stockholmresilience.org\)](https://stockholmresilience.org/) | [SDG Wedding Cake model \(stockholmresilience.org\)](https://stockholmresilience.org/)

9. Earth Charter and the Sustainable Development Goals: The Compass Behind the Map

The UN's Sustainable Development Goals are the world's most comprehensive policy framework for a better future. The 2030 Agenda, with its 17 Goals and 169 targets, is a map without a compass. The Earth Charter is that compass. This article explores how the Charter's four pillars align with, enrich, and ultimately go beyond the SDGs.

The Sustainable Development Goals, adopted by all 193 UN Member States in 2015, represent a remarkable achievement in global governance. They are comprehensive, measurable, and universally accepted. They give the international community a shared language for progress: goals for clean water, quality education, climate action, gender equality, life below water, peace and justice. And yet, as the *Sustainable Development Goals Report 2025* makes devastatingly clear: "We are facing a development emergency," said UN Secretary-General António Guterres. The SDGs are not working. Not because the goals are wrong, but because the worldview driving their implementation remains largely unchanged.

This is precisely where the Earth Charter becomes essential. The SDGs provide the destination. The Earth Charter provides the values orientation needed to get there with integrity. Without this values orientation, we risk achieving some goals at the expense of others, improving some lives while degrading the ecosystems on which all lives depend.

Pillar One and the SDGs: Interconnectedness as the Foundation

The Earth Charter's first pillar (Respect and care for the community of life) finds its closest SDG expressions in SDG 17 (Partnerships for the Goals) and SDG 16 (Peace, Justice and Strong Institutions). In both frameworks, these goals are understood as foundational enablers: without partnerships and without just, inclusive governance, none of the other goals can be achieved.

But the Earth Charter goes further. Where SDG 11 calls for "Sustainable Cities and Communities," Earth Charter Principle 2 asks us to "Care for the community of life with understanding, compassion, and love." This is not

merely a semantic difference. It reflects a shift in worldview: from a technical to a relational approach; from managing systems to caring for communities.

Pillar Two and the SDGs: Ecological Integrity as the Planetary Ceiling

The Earth Charter's second pillar aligns directly with the SDGs' environmental goals: climate action (SDG 13), life below water (SDG 14), life on land (SDG 15), clean water (SDG 6). But while the SDGs treat these as separate goals to be achieved in parallel, the Earth Charter insists that they are intrinsically connected. You cannot restore ocean health without addressing land use. You cannot tackle climate change without protecting biodiversity. And you cannot address environmental systems separate from the social and economic ones that rely on them. The SDG framework risks creating harmful trade-offs by managing these systems in isolation. The Earth Charter prevents this by insisting on their interconnectedness.

The Earth Charter also advances a concept the SDGs do not fully embrace: regeneration, not merely sustainability. Sustainability implies maintaining the status quo. Regeneration implies actively restoring what has been degraded and going beyond. Given the state of the world's ecosystems in 2026, this distinction is no longer academic, but a matter of survival for many generations to come.

Pillar Three and the SDGs: Justice as an Environmental Imperative

The third pillar aligns with the SDGs' social and economic goals: poverty (SDG 1), health (SDG 3), gender equality (SDG 5), decent work (SDG 8), reduced inequalities (SDG 10). Its contribution to the SDG framework is the explicit recognition that these are not merely development targets. They are ethical imperatives rooted in the inseparability of environmental and social wellbeing.

The Earth Charter's framing of poverty eradication as "an ethical, social, and environmental imperative" represents a more ambitious moral claim than the SDGs' largely technical framing. It insists that the structural causes of poverty, including the economic models that create wealth for some by degrading the environment for others, must be addressed.

Pillar Four and the SDGs: Peace as the Context for Everything

SDG 16 (Peace, Justice and Strong Institutions) is, according to the 2025 SDG Index, one of the most off-track goals globally. The Earth Charter's fourth pillar illuminates why: we have treated peace as one goal among seventeen, rather than as the context within which all other goals must be pursued.

The Earth Charter's definition of peace as "the wholeness created by right relationships" with oneself, with others, with the Earth, suggests that peace is not an outcome to be achieved, but a quality to be cultivated. It is the result of the kind of society that the Charter's other three pillars are working to build. SDG 16 is a necessary target. Earth Charter Pillar Four is the ethical architecture within which that target makes sense.

The Earth Charter Beyond the SDGs

In sum, the Earth Charter does not compete with the SDGs. It completes them. It provides the ethical foundation, including the values, the relational worldview, and the sense of shared destiny, that the SDGs' technical framework alone cannot provide. Where the SDGs are a map, the Earth Charter is a compass. Where the SDGs tell us where to go, the Earth Charter tells us why it matters, and how to get there with integrity.

The SDGs aim to sustain. The Earth Charter aims to regenerate. That distinction, between maintaining a diminished present and restoring a flourishing future, may be the most important ethical question of our time.

Key takeaways: The Earth Charter and the SDGs are not in competition — they are complementary tools for transformation. The SDGs provide measurable targets for policy. The Earth Charter provides the ethical foundation for pursuing those targets with integrity, justice, and ecological wisdom. As the SDGs fall further off

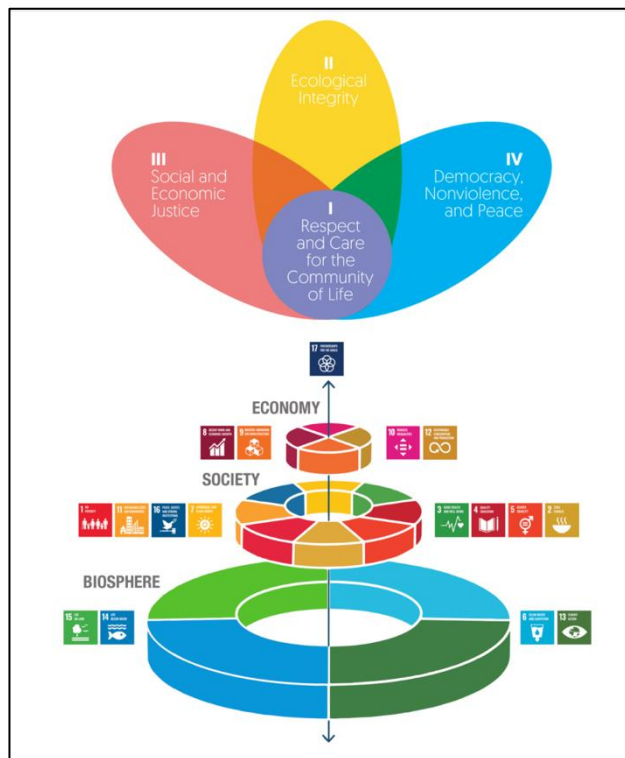


Figure 12: The Earth Charter pillars and the SDGs are complementary; the ethical framework (ethical force of change) and the policy framework (institutional force of change). With the Earth Charter connecting all principles more holistically than the SDGs do.

track, the need for the Earth Charter's deeper ethical grounding becomes more urgent, not less. The compass is most needed when the path is hardest to follow.

Extra reading: [UN 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development \(un.org\)](https://un.org) | [SDG Index 2025 \(dashboards.sdgindex.org\)](https://dashboards.sdgindex.org) | [SDG Wedding Cake \(stockholmresilience.org\)](https://stockholmresilience.org)

10. Ongoing Relevance: Twenty-Five Years of the Earth Charter (2000–2025)

Launched at the Peace Palace in The Hague on 29 June 2000, the Earth Charter has spent a quarter century growing from a civil society declaration into one of the most widely supported ethical frameworks for sustainability in the world. This article traces that journey through endorsements, educational programs, governance frameworks, and the extraordinary 25th anniversary gathering in The Hague that reaffirmed the Charter's urgency for our troubled times.

When the Earth Charter was formally launched at the Peace Palace on 29 June 2000, presented to Queen Beatrix of the Netherlands by a young girl named January Juliao, it was both an ending and a beginning. The ending of a six-year global consultation process. The beginning of a movement.

Over the following five years, a formal endorsement campaign attracted over 2,000 organizational endorsements, representing millions of people, including numerous national and international associations, and ultimately global institutions such as UNESCO and IUCN. Today, with more than 7,000 organisational endorsements and tens of thousands of individual supporters across more than 90 countries, the Earth Charter has become one of the most widely embraced ethical frameworks in the history of international civil society.

UNESCO formally recognised the Charter in 2003 as an essential ethical guide for sustainable development, a recognition that opened doors for its integration into educational curricula, teacher training programs, and national sustainability strategies worldwide. In 2004, the IUCN World Congress endorsed the Charter and committed to using it as a guide for the organisation's policies and programs. These were not merely symbolic endorsements. They embedded the Earth Charter's principles into institutions that shape environmental policy, conservation science, and sustainability education globally.

The Charter's influence has extended across governance, legal frameworks, business, and community practice. Its principles have informed peace negotiations, guided corporate sustainability commitments, shaped university curricula, and anchored grassroots community initiatives from Brazil to Bangladesh, from Costa Rica to South Korea. The Earth Charter Secretariat, now based at the United Nations University for Peace in Costa Rica, coordinates approximately 100 affiliated organisations and 120 young leaders in over 90 countries.

The +25 Conference: Hope, Action, and Global Solidarity

In July 2025, the Earth Charter movement marked its 25th anniversary with a remarkable gathering in The Hague, returning, symbolically, to the city where the journey began. Over three days, 340 participants from 35 countries, including 92 speakers, convened around the Earth Charter's vision of justice, peace, and ecological integrity.

This was not a nostalgic commemoration. It was, by all accounts, a living expression of the Charter's continuing urgency. Despite, and because of, the turbulent global moment in which it took place, the conference radiated what one participant described as "rooted hope": not naive optimism, but a clear-eyed commitment to action grounded in shared values. The gathering produced renewed commitments, new partnerships, and a renewed sense of momentum for a movement that remains stubbornly relevant precisely because the crises it was



Figure 13: When the Earth Charter was formally launched at the Peace Palace on 29 June 2000, presented to Queen Beatrix of the Netherlands by a young girl named January Juliao.
<https://earthcharter.org/launch-earth-charter-2000>

designed to address have not been resolved; and the geopolitical landscape is requiring even more shared commitment, connections and action than when it was created.

The 2025 publication *Envisioning and Evaluating Our Contributions to Planetary Well-Being through the Lens of the Earth Charter*, edited by Mirian Vilela, Rick Clugston and Deeksha Aggarwal, captures this moment with intellectual force. In his foreword, Francisco Rojas Aravena describes a world suffering from "a loss of compass", where crises deepen because humanity lacks the narratives, tools, and moral imagination to prevent them. The Earth Charter, the book argues, is exactly the compass that is needed.



Figure 14: The Earth Charter +25 Conference in 2025 in The Hague, attended by the Australian Earth Charter Commissioner Fien Van den Steen.

The same volume features contributions from Fritjof Capra and Jeremy Lent, who make the case that the

transformation required, what they call the move toward an "ecological civilisation", is as profound as the Agricultural Revolution or the Scientific Revolution. It requires not just new policies, but a new ethical foundation. Not incremental adjustment, but a shift in consciousness. That shift is precisely what the Earth Charter was designed to catalyse. And 25 years on, with the urgency of that catalysis undeniable, the Earth Charter movement is more alive, and more necessary, than ever.

Key takeaways: Twenty-five years after its launch, the Earth Charter is not a historical document. It is a living movement, adopted by thousands of organisations across more than 90 countries and embedded in educational, governance, and sustainability frameworks worldwide. Its 25th anniversary conference reaffirmed both its relevance and its urgency. In a world experiencing "a loss of compass," the Earth Charter offers exactly what is needed: a shared ethical foundation for navigating the most important challenges of our time. The next article asks what that means for the world today, and the one after that asks what it means for Australia.

Extra reading: [Earth Charter International Secretariat \(earthcharter.org\)](https://earthcharter.org) | [Earth Charter +25 Conference \(earthcharter.org\)](https://earthcharter.org) | [Envisioning and Evaluating Our Contributions to Planetary Well-Being \(earthcharter.org\)](https://earthcharter.org)

11. Beyond 2025: Earth Charter's Relevance Today

In 2026, the world stands at an intersection of crisis and possibility. Old certainties are collapsing. New frameworks have not yet fully emerged. It is precisely in this interregnum, the space between the old world and the new, that the Earth Charter's call for ecological and ethical literacy is most urgent. This article explores three paradigm shifts I deem necessary to enact the vision of the Earth Charter; paradigm shifts that are not just desirable but necessary.

Antonio Gramsci wrote from prison that "the old world is dying, and the new world struggles to be born", he called it the interregnum, a period with great signs of morbidity, think collapsing systems, stagnating progress, and overall decline. He was writing in the 1930s, the interregnum between the two world wars, however little did he know a new world war was about to break out. His words painfully resonate today. We are living in an interregnum, a period of turbulent transition in which old structures are failing, and new ones have not yet fully emerged. Political extremism, institutional distrust, ecological crisis, social fragmentation: these are the "morbid symptoms" Gramsci described. They are symptoms not of an incurable disease, but of a civilisation in the painful process of transformation.

The Earth Charter does not offer an escape from this difficulty. It offers something more valuable: a set of orienting principles for navigating it. And it suggests that the leadership required for this moment must be

grounded in ecological and ethical literacy, I see this materialised in a set of three paradigm shifts that enable the capacity to think in futures, in systems, and in values.

Shift One: From Presentism to Futures Thinking

The first blockage is what philosophers call presentism: the inability to imagine a radically different future. Trapped in the present, its emergencies, its algorithms, its 24-hour news cycles, we are paralysed by the belief that tomorrow can only look like today. This paralysis fuels despair, short-termism, and an ever-shortening political horizon. Futures thinking breaks this paralysis. It teaches that the future is not fixed but shaped by our choices today. By imagining multiple possible futures, including the ones we most fear and the ones we most desire, we regain agency. We shift from resignation to responsibility.

This kind of thinking was central to the UN Summit of the Future in 2024 and the resulting Pact for the Future, in which UN Secretary-General António Guterres acknowledged that the UN was no longer fit for the purpose of addressing present and future challenges, and called for structural reform. The Earth Charter's emphasis on intergenerational responsibility, on making decisions today with the wellbeing of future generations in mind, is a specific, practical expression of futures thinking applied to governance. This is echoed in recent years where governments across the world, not just the United Nations, are looking for representations of future generations at the table, although they are physically not there, such as the Future Generations Commissioner in Wales.

Shift Two: From Commodification to Systems Thinking

The second blockage is what Aldo Leopold identified in *A Sand County Almanac*: "We abuse land because we regard it as a commodity belonging to us." This dominant linear, commodifying worldview has shaped an economic system that values perpetual growth over planetary health, GDP over genuine wellbeing, and extraction over regeneration. It treats people, nature, and time itself as resources to be used.

Ecological and ethical literacy enables systems thinking: the recognition that life is not a collection of separate, manageable parts, but an interconnected web of relationships. Systems thinking reveals interdependence, feedback loops, and the relational nature of wellbeing. It shifts us from ownership to stewardship. From extracting value to creating conditions for flourishing.

As Steven Rockefeller, who chaired the Earth Charter drafting committee, reminds us: "What happens to nature will happen to all of us." This is not a metaphor. It is an ecological and social fact. When we undermine the capacity of the Earth to sustain life, we undermine our own survival. Systems thinking makes this visible and, once visible, it changes how we act. Systems thinking enables us to make synergies between ecological, social and economic goals instead of trading them off, whereby gains in one domain create losses in another.

Shift Three: From Prescriptive Policies to Normative Ethics

The third blockage is the assumption that better rules are sufficient to change behaviour. They are not. The SDGs provide a coherent policy framework with clear technical targets. But as Plato understood, and as decades of environmental governance have confirmed: rules address the rational mind. Values address the heart. And it is from the heart that lasting change flows.

The Earth Charter provides precisely this: a normative ethical vision that speaks not just to what we should do, but to why it matters and who we want to be. It articulates a foundational ethical insight, as Steven Rockefeller has described it: "When basic needs have been met, human development is primarily about being more, not having more." This principle aligns with the world's wisdom traditions, with modern systems science, and with the growing body of research on wellbeing, meaning, and flourishing.

The Leadership We Need Now

In short, the Earth Charter calls for a shift in leadership: leadership grounded in ecological and ethical literacy. Leaders who think in futures, not just in the present. Who think in systems, not in silos. Who act from values, not just from rules.

This is not abstract philosophy. It is practical wisdom for a world that urgently needs it. It is the foundation for the kind of decision-making that can navigate genuine complexity, the kind of complexity that climate change, biodiversity loss, inequality, and democratic erosion represent. It is also, importantly, the kind of leadership that builds bridges rather than walls: that sees shared humanity as a resource, not a threat.

Key takeaways: The Earth Charter's relevance in 2026 is not despite the world's current difficulties, it is because of them. It calls for three paradigm shifts: from presentism to futures thinking, from commodification to systems thinking, from prescriptive policies to normative ethics. These are not optional refinements for a better world. They are survival skills for this one. The Earth Charter is not a relic of post-Cold War optimism. It is a living framework for a world that has never needed its insights more.

Extra reading: [UN Summit of the Future and Pact for the Future \(un.org\)](https://www.un.org/en/development/desa/summit/2024/) | [Steven Rockefeller on the Earth Charter \(earthcharter.org\)](https://www.earthcharter.org/) | [UNEP: Global Environmental Outlook \(unep.org\)](https://www.unep.org/)

12. The Australian Journey: From Canberra 1999 to Queensland Today

Australia has had a meaningful, if sometimes quietly overlooked, role in the Earth Charter's global journey. From an inaugural national forum in Canberra in 1999 to parliamentary advocacy, educational programs, and the ongoing work of the UNAA Queensland and other NGOs Australia's Earth Charter story is one of strong civil society leadership, early elite engagement, and long-term educational commitment.

Australia's engagement with the Earth Charter began not after its launch, but before it, during the very process of its creation. By the late 1990s, as the Earth Charter Commission's global consultation process entered its final phase, Australian universities, environmental organisations, faith leaders, and Indigenous representatives were actively participating in shaping the draft text. Australia was not a passive recipient of the Earth Charter. It was a contributor to its making.

This engagement crystallised in a remarkable event: the Inaugural Australian National Earth Charter Forum, held in Canberra on 5 - 6 February 1999. Organised by the Australian National Committee for the Earth Charter and hosted with support from the ACT Government, Australian National University (ANU), and the Queensland Government, the forum gathered an extraordinary assembly of voices. Sir William Deane, then Governor-General of Australia, delivered the opening address. Maurice Strong, Co-Chair of the Earth Charter Commission and the man who had relaunched the initiative in 1994, attended in person. Professor Steven Rockefeller, Chair of the international drafting committee, presented the emerging text. Mick Dodson represented Indigenous perspectives on justice and sustainability.

This gathering formally positioned Australia as a serious contributor to the Charter's ethical and political development. Crucially, it embedded Indigenous voices in the Australian Earth Charter discourse from the very beginning, a recognition, consistent with the Charter's deepest values, that First Nations wisdom about custodianship, interconnectedness, and long-term responsibility has much to teach a world in ecological crisis.

After the Launch: Civil Society Leadership

Following the Earth Charter's official launch in June 2000, Australian organisations moved quickly to endorse and apply it. Environmental NGOs, churches, local governments, and educational institutions adopted the Charter as a values framework. The **United Nations Association of Australia (UNAA)** became the central institutional home for Earth Charter work nationally, particularly through its state divisions and education initiatives.

Within the UNAAQ, the Earth Charter Australia Committee is an affiliated group advocating for the adoption of the Earth Charter as the national sustainability charter. Other key Australian organisations involved with Earth Charter include: the Australian National University which is involved in academic initiatives regarding the Earth Charter, dr. Brendan Mackey, who was involved in the drafting process, and the Australian Earth Laws Alliance (AELA), an affiliate and national not-for-profit focused on educating and implementing Earth-centered law, ethics, and sustainability.

Although Australia did not formally endorse the Earth Charter at the federal government level, its principles increasingly informed sustainability education and civic engagement programs, especially in Queensland, which became a hub of Earth Charter activity. Various large-scale events were held in Brisbane, including the Asia Pacific Earth Charter conference (2001) and the Asia Pacific Earth Charter Festival (2011) among other events.

The Chapter of HOPE

Over the years, HOPE did not only issue social media posts, write articles, give short presentations, distribute Earth Charter material regularly at information displays, and now [publishes this special edition newsletter](#). They also organised an Earth Charter Forum in 2006. This one-day forum on the Earth Charter Initiative was held in Toowoomba on Saturday 5 August 2006 at the Allison Dickson Lecture Theatre at the University of Southern Queensland (USQ). Eight speakers presented papers on the four major principles of the Earth Charter Initiative. There were 24 eager participants in attendance. Although the audience was small, the forum was successful for a number of reasons.

Firstly, the organizing work group learnt a lot from the process of staging such an event. The guidance and direction given by co-hosts Dr. Karey Harrison, USQ, and Clem Campbell and Louise Erbacher, Qld Earth

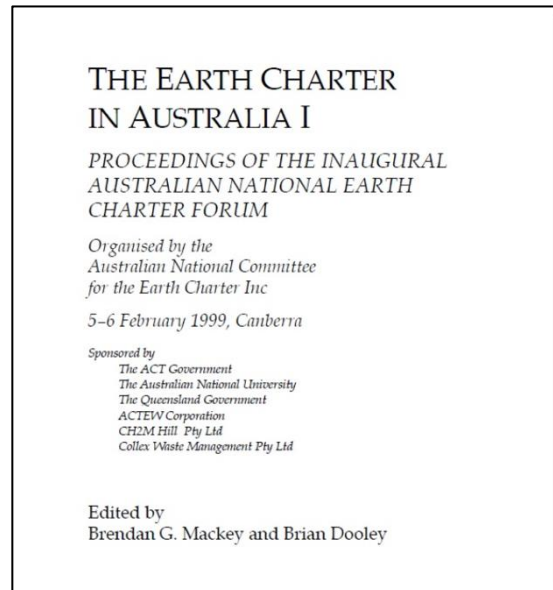


Figure 15: The 1999 Earth Charter in Australia forum. <https://earthcharter.org/library/the-earth-charter-in-australia-i-proceedings-of-the-inaugural-australian-national-earth-charter-forum/>

Charter Committee, was most appreciated. Organizing speakers for the program was challenging and interesting, especially as there were some late changes! The forum chairperson, Dr. Geoff Cockfield, USQ, kept the program flowing allowing and the day's program was completed on time.

HOPE was grateful for the in-kind contributions of the university in providing the venue free of charge, the guest speakers who gave freely of their time, and Toowoomba City Council who provided morning tea. Financial support was provided by Ergon Energy, Green Harvest and Ian Macfarlane MP, Federal Member for Groom.

In addition,

Parliamentary Advocacy

The Earth Charter entered Australian parliamentary debate in June 2005, when Senator Bob Brown encouraged Australian governments to formally endorse the Charter as an aspirational ethical framework. The following year, in April 2006, Earth Charter Australia, chaired by Clem Campbell, who would serve as the country's Earth Charter Commissioner for many years, made a formal submission to a House of Representatives inquiry into a Sustainability Charter for Australia. The submission recommended adoption of the Earth Charter as a national guiding document for sustainability governance. While the recommendation was not adopted, the submission marked the Charter's most direct engagement with Australian federal policymaking. For Clem, working with the Earth Charter is a logical step, after all, he quotes David Suzuki: "We have failed to address the fundamental truth: Endless growth is impossible in a finite world".

Education, Youth, and Queensland's Leadership

From the 2010s onward, Earth Charter activity in Australia consolidated around education and youth leadership. The UNAA's Queensland divisions embedded the Earth Charter within Global Citizenship Schools Programs, linking it explicitly to the UN Sustainable Development Goals and empowering young people to understand global challenges through an ethical lens.

They organised various large-scale Earth Charter events in Brisbane, bringing together the Asia-Pacific community around Earth Charter.

Today, the Australian Earth Charter Committee continues this legacy, with leadership passed from Clem Campbell to Fien Van den Steen as Australian Earth Charter Commissioner, a role she holds alongside her position as sustainability lead in the UNAA Queensland Young Professionals (UNYP) and UNAAQ Secretary. Under this leadership, the Earth Charter is being integrated into UNAAQ, UN Youth and UNYP activities, sustainability workshops, and seminars, ensuring that the Charter continues to serve as a living, practical tool for Australia's next generation of ethical leaders.

Australia's Earth Charter Character

Australia's Earth Charter history reflects a distinctive political trajectory: strong civil society leadership, early elite engagement (at the Governor-General level, no less), parliamentary advocacy without formal federal adoption, and sustained educational application. This mirrors Australia's broader sustainability governance culture: values-driven, internationally engaged, and institutionally cautious.

But caution is not indifference. Australia has consistently produced Earth Charter champions, educators, policymakers, Indigenous advocates, young professionals, and NGOs, who have carried the Charter's principles into classrooms, boardrooms, and communities across the country.

Key takeaways: Australia's Earth Charter journey is a testament to what civil society commitment can achieve even in the absence of formal governmental endorsement. From Canberra 1999 to Queensland today, Australian organisations and individuals have been genuine contributors to a global movement for ethical leadership. The work continues and the opportunities to deepen it have never been greater. The next article explores exactly what those opportunities look like.

Extra reading: [Earth Charter in Australia \(earthcharter.org\)](http://earthcharter.org) | [Australian National Earth Charter Forum Proceedings \(earthcharter.org\)](http://earthcharter.org) | [UNAA \(unaa.org.au\)](http://unaa.org.au) | [Earth Charter Australia brochure 2017 \(earthcharter.org\)](http://earthcharter.org)

13. Earth Charter in Australia Today: What Can We Do?

The Earth Charter is not simply a document to be read and endorsed. It is a movement to be joined and a framework to be lived. In Australia in 2026, with the SDGs off track and the need for ethical leadership more urgent than ever, here is a practical, grounded guide for how every individual, organisation, and community can bring the Earth Charter's principles to life.

The Earth Charter's ultimate purpose has never been to gather signatures from governments. It has been to transform the way people think, decide, and act, individually and collectively, in their daily lives, their professions, their communities, and their institutions. As Steven Rockefeller, who chaired the drafting committee, put it: the goal is not for organisations to endorse the Charter, but for people to internalise its vision, so that it becomes a guide for education, business, governance, and individual leadership.

That internalisation requires more than belief. It requires a shift from belief to what might be called ecological and ethical literacy: the capacity to think in futures, in systems, and in values. It requires what the Earth Charter itself calls a "change of mind and heart."

Three practical thinking frameworks can help translate this into action.

Systems Thinking: Understanding Where We Are

Before we can move toward a better future, we must understand the present with clear eyes. Systems thinking helps us zoom out, to see the interconnections, the feedback loops, the underlying patterns that connect apparently separate crises. It is the antidote to the silo mentality that allows us to solve one problem while creating several others.

Applied to sustainability work in Australia, systems thinking means asking not just "How can we reduce emissions?" but "How does our energy system connect to our economic model, which connects to land use, which connects to Indigenous sovereignty, which connects to social cohesion?" It means seeing the whole, not just the parts.

Futures Thinking: Imagining Where We Want to Go

Once we understand the present, we can imagine the future differently. Futures thinking liberates us from the tyranny of the present: the assumption that tomorrow can only look like today. It teaches us that the future is not a destination we are moving toward, but a space we are actively creating through the choices we make today.

In practice, this means inviting communities, organisations, and young people to imagine multiple possible futures, desirable and undesirable, and to identify what values, decisions, and actions would lead to one rather than the other. It is futures thinking that transforms despair into agency, and agency into responsibility.

Design Thinking: Creating the Path Forward

With a clear understanding of the present and a vision for the future, we can begin designing the steps forward. Design thinking starts with empathy, with the lived experiences of the people most affected by the challenges we are trying to address. It focuses on solutions that are relational and real, not transactional and theoretical. It embraces iteration: progress over perfection.

Together, these three frameworks, systems, futures, and design thinking, form the practical toolkit for turning the Earth Charter's principles into action.

How You Can Be Involved: Practical Steps for Australian Members

- Share and Promote: Introduce the Earth Charter to friends, colleagues, students, and community groups. Encourage your organisation, school, local government, or business to formally adopt its principles. Share it through social media, newsletters, or local events.
- Learn and Teach: Enrol in Earth Charter International courses or attend their events. Use the Charter as an educational tool to explore global challenges and ethical choices. Integrate it into school curricula, workshops, or training programs. Subscribe to newsletters from both Earth Charter International and the UNAAQ to stay connected.



Figure 16: Applying the 3 mindsets and the Earth Charter to design the COP we need at the Oceans COP Workshop with UN Youth and Earth Charter in 2025.



Figure 17: Using the Earth Charter as a compass at the Oceans COP Workshop with UN Youth and Earth Charter in 2025.

- Facilitate Dialogue: Start a study group. Use the Charter as a basis for reflection on values and ethics within your community or organisation. Host cross-cultural, interfaith, or multi-sector dialogues inspired by the Charter's principles. The Charter's most transformative work happens in conversation, and Australia's multicultural society is an extraordinary resource for exactly this kind of dialogue.
- Collaborate and Build Community: Connect with Earth Charter partners, affiliates, and local networks. Participate in community-based sustainability or regeneration initiatives grounded in the Charter's principles. Attend UNAAQ events where the Earth Charter informs programs on SDGs, sustainability, and global citizenship.
- Apply the Charter Professionally: Use the Earth Charter as a framework for designing sustainable and regenerative policies or organisational plans. Apply its principles in your business, school, or community organisation. Incorporate it into professional codes of conduct or accountability systems. Use it as a soft-law ethical foundation when shaping environmental or sustainability-related policies.
- Support the Movement: Contribute financially to Earth Charter International initiatives. Volunteer your time or skills to support local or global projects. Participate in the UNAAQ's Earth Charter program, sustainability workshops with UNYP, and contributions to summits and conferences.

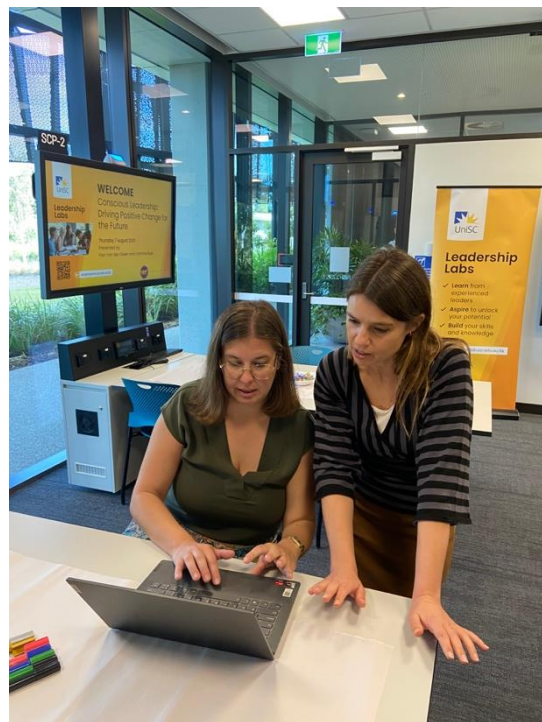


Figure 18: A leadership lab workshop organised in the University of the Sunshine Coast around ecological and ethical literacy by Fien Van den Steen and Carmine Buss.

Through the UNAA Family in Australia

For members of the UNAA Queensland Chapter and the Young Professionals division, the Earth Charter is already being woven into your regular activities. Look for Earth Charter updates in each edition of the UNAAQ newsletter, sustainability workshops through the Young Professionals and Youth Network, and upcoming events linking the Charter to the SDGs and to the specific challenges and opportunities facing Queensland and Australia. The next workshop is on 25 June.

Key takeaways: The Earth Charter gives us more than a set of principles. It gives us a way of thinking, a way of acting, and a way of being: one oriented toward the future we need. In Australia, in 2026, we have every reason and every resource to bring these principles to life: a vibrant civil society, a multicultural community with deep reserves of ethical wisdom, First Nations custodians who have lived these values for millennia, and a young generation of leaders who are ready for a different kind of future. The Earth Charter is not waiting for the right moment. It is inviting us to create it.

Extra reading: [Earth Charter Action Guidelines \(earthcharter.org\)](https://www.earthcharter.org/) | [Earth Charter Educational Resources \(earthcharter.org\)](https://www.earthcharter.org/) | [UNAAQ \(unaa.org.au\)](https://www.unaaq.org.au/) | [Earth Charter Queensland Global Citizenship Schools Programme \(earthcharter.org\)](https://www.earthcharter.org/)

14. Additional Resources and Further Reading

The following resources provide deeper access to the ideas, people, and movements explored in this special edition. All are drawn from UN bodies, Earth Charter International, peer-reviewed sources, or credible NGO grey literature.

Earth Charter International

- Earth Charter Australia events: <https://events.humanitix.com/host/earth-charter-australia>
- Earth Charter full text: earthcharter.org/the-earth-charter
- History of the Earth Charter: earthcharter.org/about-the-earth-charter/history
- Earth Charter and the SDGs: earthcharter.org/library/earth-charter-and-the-2030-agenda
- Educational resources: earthcharter.org/education
- Action Guidelines: earthcharter.org/use-the-earth-charter/action-guidelines

United Nations

- UN Charter: un.org/en/about-us/un-charter
- Universal Declaration of Human Rights: un.org/en/about-us/universal-declaration-of-human-rights
- SDG Progress Report 2025: unstats.un.org/sdgs/report/2025
- UN Summit of the Future: un.org/en/summit-of-the-future
- Stockholm Conference 1972: un.org/en/conferences/environment/stockholm1972
- Rio Earth Summit 1992: un.org/en/conferences/environment/rio1992

Brundtland Commission Report

- Our Common Future (1987): sustainabledevelopment.un.org/content/documents/5987our-common-future.pdf

Sustainable Development Reports

- SDG Index and Dashboards 2025: dashboards.sdgindex.org
- WEF SDG Progress 2025: weforum.org/stories/2025/09/sdg-progress-report-2025

Planetary Boundaries and Ecological Science

- Planetary Boundaries (Stockholm Resilience Centre): stockholmresilience.org/research/planetary-boundaries.html
- UNEP Global Environmental Outlook 6: unep.org/resources/global-environment-outlook-6

IUCN

- IUCN History: iucn.org/about/iucn-history

Australian Resources

- United Nations Association of Australia: unaa.org.au
- UNAAQ Global Citizenship Schools Programme: earthcharter.org/queensland-global-citizenship-schools-programme
- Australian Parliament Earth Charter submission (2006): aph.gov.au

Rights of Nature

- Earth Law Center: earthlawcenter.org/rights-of-nature

Geopolitics and Environmental Governance

- Sörlin et al., "The Great Dispersion," *Ambio* (2025): link.springer.com/article/10.1007/s13280-025-02177-x
- Sun et al., "Global Environmental Politics amid Geopolitical Turbulence," *Global Environmental Politics* (2026): direct.mit.edu/glep/article/26/1/255/135064

This Special Newsletter for HOPE was written by the United Nations Association of Australia, Queensland Chapter and Earth Charter Commissioner, Fien Van den Steen. For more information on Earth Charter events in Queensland, view <https://events.humanitix.com/host/earth-charter-australia>

"Let ours be a time remembered for the awakening of a new reverence for life, the firm resolve to achieve sustainability, the quickening of the struggle for justice and peace, and the joyful celebration of life."
Source: Earth Charter, The Way Forward