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The Earth Charter Legacy

Contribution to GTI Forum [Toward a Great Ethics Transition](#)

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First of all, I want to thank Brendan Mackey for his excellent opening [essay](#) on the urgent need for global ethics and the Earth Charter and his call for “a renewed global ethics dialogue” with a focus on updating the Earth Charter vision. Mackey was among the most deeply engaged members of the drafting committee, and he served as the committee’s chief science adviser. My comments are focused on his call for “a renewed global ethics dialogue.”

One of the most significant developments since World War II has been the emergence through international, cross-cultural dialogue of a growing vision of widely shared, fundamental values set forth in international charters and declarations. It is vitally important to the advance of justice, sustainability, and peace that the dialogue on universal spiritual and ethical values be expanded and deepened for all the reasons Brendan and others have cited. The Earth Charter is both a product of and contribution to this dialogue, and it can be used to promote the ongoing conversation. However, the idea of making changes in the text of the Earth Charter itself would not be advisable. The existing text has been endorsed by over 7,000 organizations worldwide and has been printed in numerous books and brochures and appears on various websites. Making changes after twenty years could create much confusion about just what text constitutes the official Earth Charter and about how past endorsements are related to some new altered text.

In addition, Maurice Strong, Kamla Chowdry, Wangari Maathai, and other members of the Commission have died, and given this situation, it is very unlikely that the remaining members of the Commission would feel it to be appropriate to authorize alterations of the text. At a drafting committee meeting early in 2000, Parvez Hassan, chair of the IUCN Commission on

Environmental Law, made a critical point urging the committee to keep in mind that “there is no such thing as a perfect document and every document has its time, and the time for the Earth Charter is the year 2000.” The Earth Charter was a declaration for the millennium, and it is best to let it stand as such. Furthermore, its major message remains profoundly relevant.¹

While supporting Mackey’s call for renewed commitment to the development of global ethics, I also recognize the force of the argument that we know the basic ethical challenges facing humanity and what must be done and the most urgent need right now is transformative political leadership and far-reaching economic reform that secures equity, justice, and sustainability. Given this situation, one option that could be pursued in the short term with regard to updating the vision in the Earth Charter is to assemble a small group of international law experts and scientists and charge them with the task of identifying any new international law principles and scientific research relevant to the purpose and strategic goals of the Earth Charter. Earth Charter International could consider organizing this project.

In this regard, hundreds of essays and a number of books have been written on the Earth Charter. A bibliography covering most of this literature is available on the Earth Charter International website maintained by the ECI Secretariat based at the University for Peace in Costa Rica. In this extensive literature, there are accounts of how the Earth Charter came to be and how it has been promoted and used in all regions of the world. There is also a growing body of commentary on the text. A report on new international law principles and science relevant to the Earth Charter would be a valuable contribution to the commentary on the Earth Charter and to any larger, ongoing conversations about global ethics and the Earth Charter. The time will certainly come when a new global dialogue like the inclusive, participatory, worldwide process that produced the first Earth Charter should be undertaken.

Endnotes

1. For a further introduction to the Earth Charter and more information on the drafting process, I recommend two of my essays: “Ecological and Social Responsibility: The Making of the Earth Charter” in Barbara Darling-Smith, ed., *Responsibility* (Lexington Books, 2007) and “Crafting Principles for the Earth Charter” in Peter Blaze Corcoran, ed., *A Voice for Earth: American Writers Respond to the Earth Charter* (University of Georgia Press, 2008). For a further discussion of the Earth Charter principles and links between the Earth Charter, the UN SDGs, and *Laudato Si’*, see my *Democratic Equality, Economic Inequality, and the Earth Charter* (San José, Costa Rica: Earth Charter International, 2015).

About the Author



Steven Rockefeller is a Professor Emeritus of Religion at Middlebury College, where he also served as dean of the College. He received his Master of Divinity from Union Theological Seminary in New York City and his PhD from Columbia University. He is the author of *John Dewey: Religious Faith and Democratic Humanism* (1991) and the co-editor of two books of essays, *The Christ and the Bodhisattva* (1987) and *Spirit and Nature: Why the Environment is a Religious Issue* (1992). He has played a leading role in the drafting and promotion of the Earth Charter, which is a declaration of global interdependence with fundamental principles for building a just, sustainable, and peaceful world. Active in the field of philanthropy, he is a trustee of the Rockefeller Brothers Fund, an international foundation that he chaired from 1998 to 2006.

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