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ETHICAL REFLECTIONS ON THE *World Charter for Nature*
by Brian Brown

To engage in reflection and discourse on ethics and the environment is the compelling intellectual and moral exigency of the present moment.

At the heart of the multiple crises that presently threaten the planet lies a severe disjuncture between the human species and the larger dynamics of planetary life. The human has lost the vital sense of its connection to and participation with the community of organic life from which it has emerged and by which it has been sustained.

Symptomatic of the cleavage is the connotation that is regularly implied in the use of the word "environment." Often, the sense is that of mere surroundings and the physical things of air, water and land that define a particular locale or region. Reference to "environment" is routinely spatial and insufficiently vital, dynamic and interrelated. Thus, to speak of ethics and the environment may often go no further than to suggest the impermissible uses of air, water and land by one person or group that would damage or interfere with the consequent use or enjoyment of those same things by others.

But an exercise in that form of environmental ethics runs the risk of perpetuating the radical ignorance and consequent alienation that is the source of the dangers that now confront the planet. What is of the greatest importance and the first step of any ethical reflection and discourse is to reanimate and expand the concept of "environment" and abandon its tendency to reify and objectify the living planet. But to the extent that "biosphere" conveys within the ongoing ethical concern the primary subjectivity of the planetary community of life-forms where each contributes to and interdepends with the whole, it is a more appropriate designation. To ponder the specific ethical responsibilities of the human species to the other members of the biosphere is to engage in the re-education towards reintegration without which all other discussion will be superficial and all other solutions to the present crises unavailing.

An alternative to those ethical paradigms that fail to adequately conceive of the environment as a planetary community of interdependent life, or biosphere, is presented in the United Nations' World Charter for Nature. In October 1982, the thirty-seventh session of the General Assembly adopted the World Charter as a formal resolution by a vote of 111 to 1 (the United States voting against the resolution). While its implementation remains still to be translated into specific codes with national and international enforcement procedures, the Charter is a significant statement of ethical principles governing human activities within the biosphere.

"Resolution" and "Adoption" Statements

The Charter opens with the recognition of nature as a living reality whose diversity of life forms makes possible the benefits that have been derived by humanity. The interdependence between the human and all other species is apparent in the Charter's notice that excessive exploitation and destruction of species' habitats ultimately jeopardizes their beneficence to the human. The Charter proceeds to reaffirm that humankind is but "a part of nature" and that human civilization "is rooted in nature"; the artistic and scientific achievements of human culture, as well as the creativity of the human mind are derivatives of nature.

The Charter's insistence on human contingency reverses the persistent notion of human nature as a thing removed from, superior to, and without responsibility for other organisms. The Charter strikingly repudiates the anthropocentrism of according value to other life forms merely in terms of their utility to human purposes. Instead, "every form of life is unique, warranting respect regardless of its worth to man, and, to accord other organisms such recognition, man must be guided by a moral code of action." The Charter thus identifies and grounds human ethical responsibility towards nature on the inherent value of organic individuality and diversity: nature as a community of beings of intrinsic worth.

But what are the delineations of the "moral code of action" that the Charter claims must guide human behavior? Fundamental to the ecological ethics of the Charter is the necessity for human self-awareness of its capacity to destroy the natural world through excessive consumption, misuse, and habitat destruction. Without the conviction of its destructive impact within the biosphere, the human species will experience no moral commitment to integrate its civilizational

processes within the larger life support systems of the planet. To remain ignorant of its ongoing disruption of the delicate organic interdependencies that sustain planetary life, is to dull human sensitivity to a more expansive ethical concern. Without critical self-evaluation of its often destructive presence within the biosphere, the human species will be unable to recognize the ethical challenge of using planetary resources "in a manner which ensures the preservation of species and ecosystems".

"Principles" and "Functions"

The Charter next identifies five general principles "by which all human conduct affecting nature is to be guided and judged" (see "General Principles"). Fundamental to the first two principles is the Charter's insistence on a thorough reformation of our understanding of and attitude towards the concept of environment. The popular notion of discrete, inert physical surroundings must give way to the more adequate conception of nature as a living reality, an integral community of diverse life form where each contributes its unique genetic heritage to the viability of the whole. Only with such a conception will human arrogance, initially unconscious of its own status as derivative from the life-giving whole, mature to a necessary respect and responsibility for the multiplicity of organisms, their diverse habitats and their larger ecosystemic interdependencies.

The Charter next proceeds to specify how this more biologically informed concept of nature needs to be translated into political, social, economic and managerial processes. Thus, within the broad and varied arenas of political decision making, all attempts to address human needs must be firmly grounded in the recognition that satisfaction of those needs can only be met

by ensuring the integrity of the entire biosphere ("Functions", paras. 6-7).

To advance a political agenda on the priority of human needs without an assessment of the collective and long-term impact that the satisfaction of those needs may exact on planetary life, is irresponsible. While the Charter does not so elaborate, its logic would support the necessity of evaluating the meaning of "human needs" as opposed to "human desires". Without determining the specifics of that distinction, the Charter clearly suggests that the ethical political discourse must engage the issue that the integrity of the biosphere, in the complex diversity of organisms that together sustain it, must define the context within which political decisions are made respecting the satisfaction of human needs, however they may be defined ("Functions", para.8).

Similarly, the planning and implementation of social and economic development activities must recognize the parameters of the biosphere. The long term capacity of the planet's living systems to maintain their natural stability, regenerating themselves within their respective habitats and contributing to the vitality of the whole, is the limit against which ethical planning for human population growth and improved standards of living must conform. Implicit to the Charter is a condemnation of a heedless human expansion linked with a short-term design for increased economic development. The Charter is aware of the very real dangers of international conflicts over increasingly scarce resources which such expansion and expectation would bring. But, the Charter is fundamentally concerned to protect the earth as a biologically diverse and productive entity against the physical constraints which such ill-conceived human activity would threaten it.

The Charter's standards for the ethical

management of the earth's resources are again animated by the awareness of the planet as a living reality to be used with respect ("Functions", para. 10[a]-[d]). Human use of the biosphere must not exceed its natural capacity for regeneration. Agriculture, grazing, forestry and fishing practices and techniques must be adapted to the natural rhythms of the earth's soils and waters as organize communities of fertility and decomposition. Science and technology may be used to enhance the productivity of the planet's living resources only if they simultaneously maintain and safeguard their long-term vitality and stability. Even in its consumption and exploitation of the earth's non-renewable inorganic resources, the human species must weight the compatibility of the uses it makes of them and the consequences of their depletion on the well-being and functioning of the biosphere's multiple and diverse communities of life.

Finally, the Charter specifies that humanity must evaluate its activities in the light of the impact they will have on the biosphere. Activities that are "likely to cause irreversible damage to nature" ("Functions", para. 11[a]) must be avoided. Those activities which are "likely to pose a significant risk to nature" must be exhaustively examined to show that their expected benefits would outweigh the potential damage to nature must be preceded by an assessment of their consequences. ("Functions", 11[b]).

The Charter's use of the general term "activities" without further specification, signifies its intent that humanity's obligation to carefully evaluate its presence within and as part of the biosphere, is comprehensive and inclusive. Whether the activity be local or regional, national or international in scope, whether the process involves commerce, manufacture, land development, technological innovation,

scientific exploration and investigation, no human enterprise is exempt from the ethical review of the impact the respective activity will have on the organic processes of the planet.

The significance of the United Nations' World Charter for Nature cannot be overestimated. As a formal resolution of the General Assembly, it represents a striking consensus of the international community on the necessity of protecting the planetary biosphere. Its mandates and strictures are not yet self-implementing international law, since they await legislation from the various national jurisdictions which have thus far only resolved on their desirability and importance. Nevertheless, the Charter is singular as an international document that advocates human ethical behavior towards nature. More so, it identifies nature not merely as an object of anthropocentric concern, an environment which, if contaminated or otherwise damaged, interferes with human use and enjoyment. For the Charter, nature is a subject in its own right, a totality of diverse, unique, interdependent life forms of which the human is but one and without which the human would not be possible.

NOTES

1. World Charter for Nature, G.A. Res. 37/7, 37 U.N. GAOR (48th plen. mtg.), U.N. Doc. A/37/L.4 and Add. 1 (1982).

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THE UNITED NATION'S WORLD CHARTER FOR NATURE

I. GENERAL PRINCIPLES

1. Nature shall be respected and its essential processes shall not be impaired.
2. The genetic viability on the earth shall not be compromised, the population levels of all life forms, wild and domesticated, must be at least sufficient for their survival, and to this end necessary habitats shall be safeguarded.
3. All areas of the earth, both land and sea, shall be subject to these principles of conservation; special protection shall be given to unique areas, to representative samples of all the different types of ecosystems and to the habitats of rare or endangered species.
4. Ecosystems and organisms, as well as the land, marine and atmospheric resources that are utilized by man, shall be managed to achieve and maintain optimum sustainable productivity, but not in such a way as to endanger the integrity of those other ecosystems or species with which they coexist.
5. Nature shall be secured against degradation caused by warfare or other hostile activities.

II. FUNCTIONS

6. In the decision-making process it shall be recognized that man's needs can be met only by ensuring the proper functioning of natural systems and by respecting the principles set forth in the present Charter.

7. In the planning and implementation of social and economic development activities, due account shall be taken of the fact that the conservation of nature is an integral part of those activities.
8. In formulating long-term plans for economic development, population growth and the improvement of standards of living, due account shall be taken of the long-term capacity of natural systems to ensure the subsistence and settlement of the populations concerned, recognizing that this capacity may be enhanced through science and technology.
9. The allocation of areas of the earth to various uses shall be planned, and due account shall be taken of the physical constraints, the biological productivity and diversity and the natural beauty of the areas concerned.
10. Natural resources shall not be wasted, but used with a restraint appropriate to the principles set forth in the present Charter, in accordance with the following rules:
 - (a) Living resources shall not be utilized in excess of their natural capacity for regeneration;
 - (b) The productivity of soils shall be maintained or enhanced through measures which safeguard their long-term fertility and the process of organic decomposition, and prevent erosion and all other forms of degradation;
 - (c) Resources, including water, which are not consumed as they are used shall be reused or recycled;
 - (d) Nonrenewable resources which are consumed as they are used shall be exploited with restraint, taking into account their abundance, the rational possibilities of converting them for consumption, and the compatibility of their exploitation with the functioning of natural systems.
11. Activities which might have an impact on nature shall be controlled, and the best available technologies that minimize significant risks to nature or other adverse effects shall be used; in particular:
 - (a) Activities which are likely to cause irreversible damage to nature shall be avoided;
 - (b) Activities which are likely to pose a significant risk to nature shall be preceded by an exhaustive examination; their proponents shall demonstrate that expected benefits outweigh potential damage to nature, and where potential adverse effects are not fully understood, the activities should not proceed;
 - (c) Activities which may disturb nature shall be preceded by assessment of their consequences, and environmental impact studies of development projects shall be conducted sufficiently in advance, and if they are to be undertaken, such activities shall be planned and carried out so as to minimize potential adverse effects;
 - (d) Agriculture, grazing, forestry and fisheries practices shall be adapted to the natural characteristics and constraints of given areas;

- (e) Areas degraded by human activities shall be rehabilitated for purposes in accord with their natural potential and compatible with the well-being of affected populations.
12. Discharge of pollutants into natural systems shall be avoided and:
 - (a) Where this is not feasible, such pollutants shall be treated at the source, using the best practicable means available;
 - (b) Special precautions shall be taken to prevent discharge of radioactive or toxic wastes.
 13. Measures intended to prevent, control or limit natural disasters, infestations and diseases shall be specifically directed to the causes of these scourges and shall avoid adverse side-effects on nature.

III. IMPLEMENTATION

14. The principles set forth in the present Charter shall be reflected in the law and practice of each State, as well as at the international level.
15. Knowledge of nature shall be broadly disseminated by all possible means, particularly by ecological education as an integral part of general education.
16. All planning shall include, among its essential elements, the formulation of strategies for the conservation of nature, the establishment of inventories of ecosystems and assessments of the effects on nature of proposed policies and activities; all of these elements shall be disclosed to the public by appropriate means in time to permit effective consultation and participation.
17. Funds, programmes and administrative structures necessary to achieve the objective of the conservation of nature shall be provided.
18. Constant efforts shall be made to increase knowledge of nature by scientific research and to disseminate such knowledge unimpeded by restrictions of any kind.
19. The status of natural processes, ecosystems and species shall be closely monitored to enable early detection of degradation or threat, ensure timely intervention and facilitate the evaluation of conservation policies and methods.
20. Military activities damaging to nature shall be avoided....
21. Taking fully into account the sovereignty of States over their natural resources, each State shall give effect to the provisions of the present Charter through its competent organs and in cooperation with other States.
22. All persons, in accordance with their national legislation, shall have the opportunity to participate, individually or with others, in the formulation of decisions of direct concern to their environment, and shall have access to means of redress when their environment has suffered damage or degradation.
23. Each person has a duty to act in accordance with the provisions of the present Charter; acting individually, in association with others or through participation in the political process, each person shall strive to ensure that the objectives and requirements of the present Charter are met.

Earth Covenant

A Citizens' Treaty for Common Ecological Security

Preamble

We, the peoples of the Earth, rejoice in the beauty and wonder of the lands, skies, waters, and life in all its diversity. Earth is our home. We share it with all other living beings.

Yet we are rendering the Earth uninhabitable for the human community and for many species of life. Lands are becoming barren, skies fouled, waters poisoned. The cry of people whose land, livelihood and health are being destroyed is heard around the world. The Earth itself is calling us to awaken.

We and all living beings depend upon the Earth and upon one another for our common existence, well-being, and development. Our common future depends upon a reexamination of our most basic assumptions about humankind's relationship to the Earth. We must develop common principles and systems to shape this future in harmony with the Earth.

Governments alone cannot secure the environment. As citizens of the world, we accept responsibility in our personal, occupational and community lives, to protect the integrity of the Earth.

Principles and Commitments

In covenant with each other and on behalf of the whole earth community, we commit ourselves to the following principles and actions:

Relationship with the Earth: All Life is sacred. Each human being is a unique and integral part of the Earth's community of life and has a special responsibility to care for life in all its diverse forms.

Therefore, we will act and live in a way that preserves the natural life processes of the Earth and respects all species and their habitats. We will work to prevent ecological degradation.

Relationship with Each Other: Each human being has the right to a healthful environment and to access to the fruits of the Earth. Each also has a continual duty to work for the realization of these rights for present and future generations.

Therefore—concerned that every person have food, shelter, pure air, potable water, education, employment, and all that is necessary to enjoy the full measure of human rights—we will work for more equitable access to the Earth's resources.

Relationship Between Economic and Ecological Security: Since human life is rooted in the natural processes of the Earth, economic development, to be sustainable, must preserve the life-support systems of the Earth.

Therefore, we will use environmentally protective technologies and promote their availability to people in all parts of the Earth. When doubtful about the consequences of economic goals and technologies on the environment, we will allow an extra margin of protection for nature.

Governance and Ecological Security: The protection and enhancement of life on Earth demand adequate legislative, administrative and judicial systems at appropriate local, national, regional, and international levels. In order to be effective, these systems must be empowering, participatory, and based on openness of information.

Therefore, we will work for the enactment of laws that protect the environment and promote their observance through educational, political and legal action. We shall advance policies of prevention rather than only reacting to ecological harm.

Declaring our partnership with one another and with our Earth, we give our word of honor to be faithful to the above commitments.

(Signature)

HOW TO USE THIS COVENANT

Your signature above indicates that you are entering into a covenant with others around the world. Please keep the document for personal reflection and commitment. For discussion and action in group settings, you are invited to duplicate the Covenant. Both individuals and groups are asked to PRINT CLEARLY the name(s) and complete address(es)—including country—of those signing the Covenant, and to send them to the address below, together with this statement:

"The following person(s) have signed the Earth Covenant, committing themselves to the principles and actions therein. They have thereby entered into a covenant with others around the Earth to live ecologically responsible lives. They wish their names to be entered in the Register of Signatories to the Earth Covenant, which will be presented at Earth Day 1990 and the World Conference on the Environment in 1992."

The sponsors of the Earth Covenant are developing materials for use with different groups for action, education, research and networking. For more information, write:

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