

## **Transcript of discussion on the Earth Charter Draft Document**

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Online Conference on Global Ethics, Sustainable Development and the Earth Charter

April 1999

**DB:** Hi, I am David Bernard and I am a lecturer at Capilano College in the graduate program on environmental science and also the Director of Environmental Mediation at ESSA Technologies.

**IB:** Iain Benson, I am a constitutional lawyer and I work with a think-tank based in Ottawa, Canada, called the Centre for Renewal in Public Policy whose purposes among others are to develop the language of engagement between different religious and ethnic communities in contemporary society.

**DB:** Iain, I wanted to start by taking a quick review of the Earth Charter. What do you think about the language in here? It is obviously aimed at nation states. What do you think about translating this into the actual ongoing guidance to individuals?

**IB:** Yeah, I think that is a very important question with respect to this document. At the moment, it is quite clear that we have not just nation states and citizens and the relationships between nation states we, have another element to consider in the question of environmental concern, and that is the growing reality of international corporations, some of whom have larger GNPs than some of the nation states. The question of regulation of those kinds of bodies is extremely important and ties in with another question about the document as a whole, namely, how is this geared to individuals? How are we going to get these general principles of the Earth Charter down to the level, or up to the level of the individual person? Now it strikes me that in an ironic way the Charter is, the Earth Charter Draft, is very general on the level of "ends" language and the "means" are very fuzzy. And this is a paradox in comparison with many contemporary settings in which the ends are fuzzy and the means are what's focused on. So here we have an interesting issue that has to be dealt with. Namely, how are these general principles going to become active and real to citizens. That seems to me to be one the real challenges of this document.

**DB:** Absolutely. One of the things that I am a bit concerned with, in terms of the principles that are laid out here now, is that it begins with this notion of interdependence and the intrinsic value of all beings. But right from the very beginning it seems that we are missing one of the critical foundations for sustainability. And that is that we are as dependent on geo-chemical cycles as we are on other beings, and so there is this failure, I think, right from the very beginning, to base the document on one of the most fundamental elements of the sustainability dimension of natural systems. Now, how do you go about translating that into the practical realities of an individual trying to make decisions about how they operate their lives, and their home, and their family? I think it is a real challenge for our education system, which is really failing at this point to make people aware how they are not only connected with other beings but also with these fundamental cycles within the natural system.

**IB:** I think that is very true. We seem to have fallen into a situation in which we have made a distinction between facts and what we call values and failed to recognize the interrelationship between those two principles, whenever there is a moral question that's raised. And this document is filled with moral terminology, moral imperatives if you will, and calls us as human beings to recognize the large "ought" questions, about how we ought to be living together and with the community. But as you point out, there is a scientific dimension here and this brings us to this very problematic interface between science, which is generally described as "facts driven", and values or morals which is the language I prefer. And this is very difficult because we have, for so long, been taught that values, if you like, are personal and facts are reality. And in so far as values are purely subjective or personal, we have a problem bridging the gap not only between facts and morals or metaphysics, but between, on the personal level, between our personal values and those values that are shared.

**DB:** Sure. Well even speaking as a scientist, things are not as clear and straight forward as one might hope. In the scientific domain, we generally believe, with very good scientific foundation, that there are fundamental limits to the, if you will, the "carrying capacity, what we call the carrying capacity of natural systems. It is very difficult, in most cases, for us to describe what those limits are. However, we believe, very firmly, that those limits not only exist, but that they are also not open to negotiation with humans. We don't simply mandate that the system will increase its capacity for our benefit. And yet, the reality is that it is very difficult and somewhat humbling for a scientist to come before decision makers and have to confess that we cannot prescribe that precise fact. Even though we very clearly believe that that limit does exist for us. And so it is difficult to understand how we can allow a value system, with those somewhat unclear scientific notations, even though it clearly has enormous implications for our sustainability and our long-term well-being.

**IB:** Yes, well the document does include a principle which is relevant to the point you've just made. And it is one which I would like to endorse and that is the point of #5, "Where knowledge is limited we should take the path of caution." I think this is an extremely important principle, and I am very glad to see it endorsed in this draft. This idea of caution, of prudence is extremely important, and it needs to become much more widely acted upon, not only with respect to the kind of technological developments that the Earth Charter speaks to but I think increasingly we are going to see that it is necessary with respect to human ecological developments as well. In the human ecology, one thinks immediately of such developments that are on the horizon. There is genetic experimentation and so forth. We need an ethic, a moral language to discuss, in a sense, the contingency or naturalness, the givenness of certain things. This document speaks to that reverence for nature, for that stance of caution with respect to manipulating an order that is, in some respects, given. That is a very difficult concept to make widely understood today where we have become so adapt, seemingly, in molding ourselves to technology. As Oppenheimer put it, 'if it's sweet to do it, perhaps it should be done'. And I think we have come to the point now, near the end of this millennium where we're called anew to evaluate whether there is a validity to this endless application of technology that human beings seem to have taken to themselves. I think we have to

challenge that paradigm with ways of thinking that call us, I think, back to some of the stories that are in the various traditions, where knowledge is very much a double edged sword and can, in fact, destroy as much as it can create.

**DB:** Well, I'd like to, along those lines, raise another point and that is, in point seven on the Earth Charter. It talks about ensuring the economic goals and means of attaining the support and promotion of human development. One of the things which I think is in place in the system of economics that we see in operation now is that there are increased rewards for power and competition. I would like to see decreased rewards for power and competition. It seems to me that that's quite basic if we want to somehow introduce this notion of harmonizing the human system with the underlying natural system. Right now we're rewarding the very behavior which is perhaps undermining some of those supportive structures in the natural system. How do we go about calling forth the values that would allow an individual to call upon something other than competitive nature and the acquisition of power for their sense of well-being?

**IB:** Well, the first thing, I think, would be to renew a language, a moral language, which gives us more to work with than this language of values. I think it's fair to point out that various philosophers have noted that values language is very recent and is in fact, as the great Canadian philosopher, George Grant, called it "an obscuring language for morality used when the idea of purpose has been destroyed." Now bringing in the notion of "purpose," in effect, is relevant to this document, because the document contains a lot "purpose" language with respect to human communities and their lives together. If that is so, if the drafters of the document, in fact believe that there are shared human purposes and shared goods, then I would want to question whether this language of values is really helpful or whether there's a more resonant, richer language of virtue or principles which should be used in the document and in our understanding. Because, remember, this document, like the other UN declarations back to 1948, is going to have to educate and teach as much as it is to stand as a document. It has to have a resonant power. So the language I'd like to see utilized and built upon and understood is a language of virtue. And, that brings me back to your question. In the Cardinal Virtues as they were developed in the Western tradition, "prudence" which is also known as wisdom and "temperance," also known as moderation, were considered key, "hinge" principles upon which the whole structure of the virtues was built. Now this language of virtue and the characteristics of the particular virtues themselves has in many ways been lost and I think it's there in all world traditions, in all world religious traditions in different language. But the fact that it is there is extremely important, because this document is going to apply to the entire Earth. It needs a language, which when it's translated and worked through the global communities that make up the one global community, when it works backwards through these different ethnic and religious traditions, it has to have traction. It has to have convicting power, and it strikes me that this language of virtue, containing these principles of prudence and wisdom and moderation is essential if we're going to properly understand how to deal with technology. Business cannot be just the doing, the technique of mass production, is not its own guide. It needs to be informed by standards external to itself. And, therefore the virtuous conduct of the business person has to become richer, more widely understood, in all human communities.

**DB:** I think that's wonderful. I'd like to add on a science side, another dimension to this to go hand-in-hand with this, while we're educating and inculcating those values, there are a few things I'd like to see added to our curriculum. One of the most important is the teaching of non-linear thinking. And, I gave you the example earlier of a pond in which there are lily pads, and each day the number of lilies doubles in this pond and at the end of 30 days the pond is covered with the lilies. And the question is 'on what day was the pond half-filled with water lilies?' And the answer, of course is on the 29th day, because it only took one day to complete the covering of the pond. And yet we teach a large proportion of our disciplines very much in a linear mode. And I think we need to move people to thinking in a more integrated fashion, to thinking about these non-linear changes that are taking place in the world around us, to begin thinking about futures, rather than thinking only about our contemporary lives and perhaps of our children. We have a native community here in Canada that often talks about the seventh generation, considering what the effects are on the seventh generation. Somehow, I think, we need to make environmental literacy as well as the values literacy, part of our curriculum. I think it's no longer enough to teach math and science and history and art and so forth in our schools. We need to teach some of these other basic principles as well. And I'd like to see some of those notions incorporated into the Earth Charter.

**IB:** Well, the other challenge ahead of us on that score is the question of fragmentation of disciplines, each from the other. We tend to now, instead of having an approach to the universality of knowledge, we have what some have called a multiversity. We don't have a universal sense, we have a multiversal. This is, in a sense, problematic, because it leads us into a condition where no longer see the interrelatedness of disciplines. In fact, it would be extremely helpful if the insights garnered from philosophy and theology worked more closely and in a more integrated way with what scientists are working on and thinking about. And, the condition that brings that very finely in view is the challenges now posed by the, as I said earlier, the human genome project. And the question of global pollution. These force an analysis that cannot be answered on a purely scientific basis or from any other single discipline. We're called again to work to bring the disciplines back together for a necessary discourse to try and solve the problems. And that presents a wonderful opportunity, but a real challenge when you're face with what some of us are calling, kind of a "moral phobia" where the fear is the minute one speaks about morals one is in an impositional stance and doesn't respect others. I think that's erroneous. The fact that we are enunciating a principle or a moral does not necessarily mean that we are insensitive to other people's traditions or other people's viewpoints. Remember that the definition of the word 'conversation' is two people turning together to see something in a new way. It's not an imposition of my view that I may disagree with you. If this is properly understood, we are turning together to appreciate a new dimension of the debate. And I think that turning together with a true conversation that this document is calling us towards, has to become interdisciplinary.

**DB:** I'd like to end on a note of leadership. It seems to me that one of the challenges in all disciplines is the challenge of leadership. One of the very fine ecologists we have in North America, George Woodwell, once said "it's a shame that scientists have become so hyper-critical of themselves and their own work, that their often afraid to offer expert

judgment even when it's the very thing that's required to save the systems that they love and study. It seems to me that we need the courage to step forward in a leadership position, even when we don't have all the facts, to somehow make the greater society aware of what is required in order to obtain that goal of sustainability.

**IB:** Yeah. I think that's well put. The one point here that I thought needed to be mentioned, relates to the fear that may be engendered by this document unless it's made clear that the affirmation of a global community is not a denigration of local communities. In other words, if this document is seen, to use a labor law term, as a "top down organizational model", I think the resistance that's generated will outweigh the benefits. If it's seen as a bottom up, or in relation to a bottom up strategy, I think it will have a much greater chance of achieving its outcomes. The reason for that is that in the document itself, it speaks about cross-cultural and inter-religious dialogue and collaboration. That's at section 15 B. If there's to be inter-religious dialogue and collaboration, the necessary respect for the diversity that is recognized in the document on the level of biological life, needs to be brought to the fore with respect to the diversity of human communities and human principled living. So, religious communities need to be respected in their particular norms, in a conversational way to build outwards towards a true global understanding that's respectful of the human community and it's relationship to the biosphere, as well as the distinct diversity of each component part. That seems to me to be an explanation of this project that unifies the specific with the general. And that's what needed for it to be accepted, I would think, on a global basis.

**DB:** Well thank you very much. I very much enjoyed having a chance to talk with you.

**IB:** David, as always it's a delight to speak with you.

**DB:** Thanks.