

## **The Earth Charter and the *Journey of the Universe***

### An Overview of the Earth Charter

The Earth Charter is both a document and the focus of a broad international social movement. The document draws on scientific knowledge, legal principles, sustainability practices, ecological economics, the precautionary principle, and equity issues. In its decade long planning process, it involved thousands of individuals and groups from around the planet and is the most inclusive civil society document ever negotiated. As a people's treaty it is a soft law document that is complemented by hard law of international covenants and laws. It has been endorsed by such international agencies as United Nations Educational Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) and the International Union for the Conservation of Nature (IUCN), the largest body of conservationists in the world. It has also been endorsed by thousands of individuals and groups as well as by a number of countries and cities. The implications for the application of the Charter is seen in the *Earth Charter in Action*, a book of inspiring stories from around the world – ranging from youth to civil servants and government officials ([www.earthcharterinaction.org](http://www.earthcharterinaction.org)).

The Charter was drafted from 1996-2000 by an international committee chaired by Steven Rockefeller. A distinguished group of international figures served as Earth Charter Commissioners for the drafting process and now an Earth Charter International Council guides the activities of the Charter. There is a Secretariat and a website based in Costa Rica at the University for Peace.

The Charter offers a comprehensive framework for revisioning sustainability as balancing the needs for economic development with environmental protection and social justice. It presents an integrated set of principles to guide our emerging planetary civilization that is multinational, multicultural, and multi-religious. It provides a platform for universal commitment to the flourishing of bio-social planetary life

systems recognizing the differentiated responsibilities of nations and individuals

The key components of the Earth Charter are: 1) cosmological context, 2) ecological integrity, 3) social and economic justice, and 4) democracy, non-violence and peace. The essence of the *Journey of the Universe* is to expand our understanding of the cosmological context and the importance of ecological integrity so that justice and peace can flourish. *Journey of the Universe* narrates the story of our cosmological context while the Earth Charter articulates the principles of a global ethics. Together they provide critical components for grounding sustainability principles and practices.

#### Cosmological context:

All cultures have been grounded in the stories they tell regarding the nature of the universe, the evolution of the Earth and of life, and the destiny of humans in this context. These cosmological stories provide accounts of the creation and evolution of life and the purpose of humans. As humans are currently trying to navigate their way between scientific accounts of evolution and the multiple religious stories of creation, the Charter articulates a broad, simple, and inclusive sensibility that Earth is our home, our dwelling place. This is what the *Journey of the Universe* provides as well, a large-scale cosmological context for understanding our role in the future of the Earth community.

This enlarged perspective of home may be a critical foundation for articulating a future that is simultaneously sustaining and flourishing. Both *Journey of the Universe* and the Charter recognize that we are part of a large family of life, including not only other humans but also other species. The interdependent quality of the Earth community is celebrated in *Journey* and in the Charter, along with the fact that the conditions for life have been evolving for billions of years. The cosmological perspective of the Earth Charter is clearly expressed in the Preamble. Here the evolutionary framework of humans emerging out of Earth processes is evident and the

ecological foundation of life is celebrated: “Humanity is part of a vast evolving universe. Earth, our home, is alive with a unique community of life. The forces of nature make existence a demanding and uncertain adventure, but Earth has provided the conditions essential to life’s evolution.”

Thus to speak of the broadest context for the flourishing of bio-social systems we need to be reminded of the cosmological, evolutionary story of life’s emergence as described in the *Journey of the Universe*. The spiritual and ethical response to this epic story is one of reverence, a quality shared by many scientists who are deeply inspired by their study of nature from cells to galaxies, enhanced now by powerful microscopes and telescopes. The intricacy and complexity of life is valued from both a spiritual and a scientific perspective. Awe and wonder become expressed through the shared experience of reverence. This sense of reverence is what the Journey film and book evokes and what the Charter invokes as well.

#### Ecological integrity:

The broad context for a sustaining and flourishing future from the Earth Charter is preserving ecological health and integrity. Without such a foundation for healthy ecosystems there can be no long-term basis for the continuity of human life. It is expressed succinctly in the Preamble as follows: “The resilience of the community of life and the well-being of humanity depend upon preserving a healthy biosphere with all its ecological systems, a rich variety of plants and animals, fertile soils, pure waters, and clear air.”

The *Journey of the Universe* depicts the splendid biodiversity of life and shares with the Earth Charter a call for biological protection and restoration. They both invoke the principles of respect and care for the rich diversity of life and the ecosystems that support life. Without such respect environmental exploitation will continue and we may irreversibly damage the ability of ecosystems to renew themselves. This is further spelled out in the Charter as

protecting Earth's ecosystems by preventing harm through the precautionary principle, adopting effective patterns of production, consumption and reproduction, and advancing the study of ecological sustainability.

#### Conclusion:

This integration of the principles of the Earth Charter with the cosmological story of *Journey of the Universe* provides a unique synergy for rethinking a sustainable future. Such a synergy can contribute to the broadened understanding of sustainability as including economic, ecological, social, and spiritual well-being. This broadened understanding may be a basis for long-term policies, programs, and practices for a planetary future that is not only ethically sustainable, but also sustaining for human energies. For at present we face a crisis of hope that we can make a transition to a viable future for the Earth community. The capacity of the *Journey of the Universe* to provide inspiration for the flourishing of the community of life is significant. The potential of the Earth Charter to create an ethical framework for sustainable plans and practices is considerable. Together they may provide a comprehensive grounding for creating a common and shared future.