Assignment Summary

Before Nov. 28-29:  
1. Review this Earth Charter Case Study  
2. Review Earth Charter (E-reserve)  
3. Optional: Examine web site at www.earthcharter.org

Nov. 28-29:  
1. Submit card (5 pts) on the Earth Charter  
2. Discuss Earth Charter (see below for discussion questions)

Dec. 2:  
1. Submit Earth Charter essay during lecture. Maximum length of essay is 6 pages (1.5 spaced) plus one page for literature cited. (see below for specific assignment for this essay)

Case Study Introduction

As we have seen throughout the quarter, two opposing worldviews on environmental issues are prominent today. The “technological optimist” view holds that technological progress will continue to solve humanity’s problems. Its proponents believe that technology will ultimately allow humans to become independent of nature. The “technological skeptic” view recognizes that technology is constrained by the Earth’s carrying capacity. It holds that human activities have consequences for individuals and cultures—obvious and subtle, social and environmental, global and local. During the past few decades, proponents of the second (latter) view have enacted numerous environmental laws and formed government agencies to enforce those laws. Grassroots nongovernmental organizations have lobbied to pass and enforce laws and to promote personal action, and national and international conferences have attempted to educate a broad range of citizens and political leaders on the relationships between human activities and environmental and social issues.

In lecture, I described a paradox: For thousands of years, many societies recognized environmental challenges stimulated by human actions and, in the last few centuries, scientific understanding of the causes of these trends has increased dramatically. However, there is little evidence that society has translated this understanding into effective actions. How can this be? Is anything happening to resolve this paradox?

THE EARTH CHARTER (available at the course web site and at www.earthcharter.org) is a recent product of the activities of those with the second worldview. Many also feel that the time for effective action is overdue but that it is not too late for those actions to improve the situation.
Earth Charter in Historical Context

Although a document such as the Earth Charter was envisioned in 1972 at the Stockholm Conference on Sustainable Development, agreement on its goals, content, and language was not even attained twenty years later at the 1992 Rio Earth Summit. Discouraged by the inability of official governmental channels to develop a document like the Earth Charter, four people—Ruud Lubbers, prime minister of the Netherlands; Maurice Strong, secretary-general of the Rio Earth Summit and Chairman of the Earth Council; Mikhail Gorbachev, president of Green Cross International (and former president of the Soviet Union); and Jim MacNeil, secretary of the Brundtland Commission from the 1972 Stockholm conference—launched in 1994 a new civil society\(^1\) initiative to draft this document.

An Earth Charter Commission was formed in 1997 to oversee the project; the commission approved a final version in March 2000. Since then, thousands of organizations have endorsed the Earth Charter. Efforts in 2002 to secure an endorsement of the Earth Charter by the World Summit on Sustainable Development in Johannesburg, South Africa were unsuccessful. In 2003, the UNESCO General Conference Plenary approved a resolution in support of the Earth Charter.

All these activities should be seen in the framework of a continuing evolution of concern about the social and environmental challenges facing human society. The year 2002 marked the fourth consecutive decade in which a major international conference with a focus on human-environment interactions was held in a year ending with “2.” The World Summit on Sustainable Development in Johannesburg, South Africa (September 2002) marked the thirtieth anniversary of the UN Stockholm Conference on the Human Environment (1972), the twentieth anniversary of the conference that produced the World Charter for Nature (1982), and the tenth anniversary of the Rio Earth Summit—the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development (UNCED, 1992). The Earth Summit produced, among other things, a global biodiversity treaty and calls for protection of the global atmosphere. Major elements of the Plan of Implementation developed at Johannesburg included improved water supply and sanitation, phasing out of export subsidies, increased access to energy services, increased use of renewable energy, reduction in use of harmful chemicals, and commitment to restore fisheries and protect biodiversity.

Each conference increased global understanding and sensitivity to social and environmental challenges that threaten the well being of human society, indeed of all life on Earth.

\(^{1}\) Civil society is a third sector of society alongside the state and the market. The values underlying civil society include freedom of association, freedom of expression, participatory democracy, and respect for diversity. A vigorous civil society is an important counter-balance to government and business. The growing global integration of markets and coordination of governments creates the need for a corresponding global civil society.
In short, the Earth Charter is the product of a decades-long, worldwide, cross-cultural conversation about common goals and shared values. Thousands of individuals and hundreds of organizations from all regions of the world and diverse sectors of society have participated. It is truly a people's initiative (as opposed to a government initiative) that seeks to inspire a sense of global interdependence and shared responsibility.

The foundations for this evolving view and conception of human responsibilities can be traced back more than 50 years to the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (available at www.un.org/overview/rights.html), adopted and proclaimed by the UN General Assembly on 10 December 1948, as a common standard of achievement. The Human Rights Declaration spoke out against slavery and servitude; torture or cruel, inhuman, or degrading treatment or punishment; and arbitrary arrest, detention, or exile. It called for global recognition of such basic rights and freedoms as life, liberty, and security of person; recognition that all persons are equal before the law; fair and public hearings by independent and impartial tribunals; freedom of movement; the right to a nationality, to own property, to education, to participate in cultural life, to peaceful assembly, and to take part in the government. In short, it spoke in “recognition of the inherent dignity and of the equal and inalienable rights of all members of the human family as the foundation of freedom, justice, and peace in the world.”

The human rights declaration focused narrowly on human rights while the Earth Charter expands the purview to recognize that more than individual human rights and freedoms must be protected. The quality of life beyond individual rights is inextricably tied to diversity of cultures and to a broader diversity of life forms, a community of life on Earth with a common destiny. This perspective was summarized best by the murdered Nigerian protestor, Ken Saro-Wiwa, in 1995: “The environment is man’s first right. Without a safe environment, man cannot exist to claim other rights, be they political, social or economic.” The Earth Charter frames a set of principles that focus on our responsibility to one another, to the greater community of life, and to future generations. In many respects the Earth Charter will serve as an extension, even a counter-balance, to our often-voiced individual rights.

**Fundamental Objectives of Earth Charter**

The Earth Charter can be used to advance four fundamental educational objectives and serve as a catalyst for global dialogue and change. First and foremost, the Earth Charter can play a key role in consciousness-raising as it draws attention to environmental, social, and economic challenges and the very important interactions among them. The Earth Charter calls for (second) an exploration of and application of values and (third) definition of a set of guiding principles crucial to invoking and implementing those values. Finally, the Earth Charter is a call to action that requires participation and collaboration through partnerships that include civil society, business, and government.

**Thoughts for Discussion Nov. 28-29**

A variety of assumptions are implicit in the assertions articulated in the paragraph titled “The Global Situation” of the Earth Charter Preamble. If those assumptions are flawed, it
is harder to make a case for the lofty goals and principles articulated in the Earth Charter. “The Global Situation” paragraph begins with the words “The dominant patterns” and goes on to assert the existence of a number of global patterns and trends. It assumes that the reader understands and believes those patterns to be true. That is, it assumes the reader is convinced that those patterns represent a reality that can be confirmed through an objective assessment of data on past and present world conditions. But not everyone believes the statements made in the Earth Charter Preamble and no data are presented in the Earth Charter to document those statements. Such lofty vision statements cannot be effective if they are mired in the technical detail required to justify the assertions.

The "Global Situation" paragraph contains 13 distinct assertions (see inserted numbers).

The Global Situation (from the Earth Charter Preamble)

The dominant patterns of production and consumption are (1) causing environmental devastation, (2) the depletion of resources, and (3) a massive extinction of species. (4) Communities are being undermined. (5) The benefits of development are not shared equitably and (6) the gap between rich and poor is widening. (7) Injustice, (8) poverty, (9) ignorance, and (10) violent conflict are widespread and the cause of great suffering. (11) An unprecedented rise in human population has (12) overburdened ecological and social systems. (13) The foundations of global security are threatened. These trends are perilous—but not inevitable.

For your card due in section, please address the following points:
1a. Do you agree with each of those assertions?
1b. Why or why not and for which assertions?
2. Could the goal of the Earth Charter be thought of as too unrealistic and utopian to be given thoughtful consideration?
3. In your view, do the principles do an adequate and effective job of outlining a path for a “sustainable global society”? Why or why not? What would you change to make a more compelling case?

In discussion, we will explore the above questions as well as the following:

Is the Earth Charter connected in any way to our exploration “Auditing the Earth”?

Is the Earth Charter connected to any other concepts introduced in ENVIR 201 or to discussions that we have had this quarter?

Is the Earth Charter interesting and engaging? Does it encourage you to read on? Do you agree or disagree with each principle and why? Be prepared to explain your position. In your view, do the principles adequately and effectively outline a path for a “sustainable global society”? Why or why not? What would you change to make a more compelling case? Are you prepared to comment on the “Preamble,” the “Principles,” and “The Way Forward”? How relevant do you feel the Earth Charter is as a guide to public policy?
Does it make a compelling case for the four actions described above: consciousness-raising, exploration of values, definition of guiding principles, and call to action?

**Essay Assignment**

As an employee of the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency in its Region 10 headquarters in Seattle, the regional administrator has asked you to write a maximum 6-page, 1.5 spaced essay that will convince the President of the University of Washington that he should take actions to improve the average college student’s understanding of the Earth Charter and its importance to society in the 21st century. Your essay must both articulate why you think this is an important thing to do and outline specific actions that the university president should take.

The evidence that you use to convince the president is up to you. Be sure to connect concepts from the Earth Charter with arguments from lecture, discussions, the Uhl textbook, or other sources. Please make sure to cite the sources that you use for support.