

The Earth Is in Our Hands
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People from all walks of life and all over the world are talking about the Earth Charter, a Magna Carta for the entire planet.

From beginning to end, the Earth Charter is a people's document. Although born from several earlier attempts by the United Nations and other groups, drafting the Earth Charter is now largely a worldwide grass-roots effort.

And that means that discussions are going on all around the world — consultations, as they are called — among people of all religions, cultures, creeds, races, nationalities and genders.

“People, through their organizations and through the Earth Council” are the focus of current efforts, says Earth Council Chairman Maurice Strong. The charter, he says, will be “a product of people's commitments, and those commitments will clearly serve to motivate governments. The charter will...be in effect the Magna Carta of the people around the Earth. It will also, we hope, lead to action by the governments through the United Nations.”

The preamble of the draft reads: “Earth is our home and home to all living beings... Human beings are members of an interdependent community of life with a magnificent diversity of life forms and cultures..... We give thanks for the heritage that we have received from past generations and embrace our responsibilities to present and future generations.”

In the SGI-USA, 13 consultations have already been sponsored, bringing together more than 600 representatives from throughout society (not to mention the thousands who have received invitations from SGI-USA with information about the Earth Charter). Several meetings have been co-sponsored with other organizations. Related efforts have included distributing information at Earth Day events in San Diego, Sacramento and Concord, Calif. Future events are being planned in San Francisco, Denver, Miami and Los Angeles.

Linda Wright, organizer in Washington, D.C., reports on a “very successful discussion” with around 60 guests representing a broad spectrum of interests and organizations. “I thought the diverse representation was impressive,” she says. “Jane Hurst [professor at Galluadet University] brought several friends, including a representative of a Native American group. She commented that she found the atmosphere of the meeting ‘embracing.’ Peter Adriance [leader in the Bahai faith] said that he thought the event was one of the best he has ever attended on the Earth Charter.”

In Chicago, Steve Furman assisted when the SGI-USA co-sponsored an April 25 consultation with the Chicago chapter of the U.N. Association at the Chicago Culture Center. Invitations were sent to around 280 people. “The first two hours of the consultation were spent in open dialogue about very specific points in the draft,” Mr. Furman says. “The three hours were full, and we could have gone for three more.”

In Massachusetts, the Boston Research Center for the 21st Century has conducted a number of events, aiming to “widen the network of scholars and activists who are considering the role of human rights in the Earth Charter process,” says Amy Morgante, BRC publications manager.

In November 1997, the BRC published two landmark pamphlets, filling gaps in two areas of concern: the Buddhist approach to the Earth Charter, and the role of women in its creation and implementation. The good news: “These two books are being used by a wide variety of grass-roots organizations, NGOs and religious groups,” reports Ms. Morgante.

Published by the BRC in November 1997, *Buddhist Perspectives on the Earth Charter* presents the views of leading Buddhist scholars on the contribution of Buddhist teachings to an emerging environmental ethic. While the authors write from diverse perspectives — including Thai, Tibetan, Nichiren and Zen Buddhism — they uniformly call for personal transformation if practitioners are to apply the fundamental Buddhist principles to protecting and respecting Earth as a living entity.

SGI President Ikeda writes in the foreword: “It is by bringing together the wisdom and courage of all people on Earth toward a charter that truly represents the general will of humankind that we will be able to move from an era of sounding warnings to one of action based on solidarity. It is the solidarity of humanity united in a common struggle that will bring forth a third millennium that shines with the light of hope.”

The second BRC publication, *Women’s Views on the Earth Charter*, contains a collection of essays by women leaders exploring the relationship between issues crucial to women and the principles and values of the charter.

One premise of the Earth Charter is its emphasis on principles. Rather than set practical or legal procedures, it is a “soft-law” approach that attempts to identify healthy norms in attitudes toward the environment. It is a people’s treaty that cannot exist without the support of people.

And, although engendered by U.N. efforts for a similar document, the Earth Charter stands on its own. “This is a people’s Earth Charter,” says Mr. Strong. “It will have its power, it will have its influence, because it comes from people. That’s why we want to ensure that...the maximum number of people are involved. That is what will give it its authenticity.... The real goal of the Earth Charter is that it will in fact become like the...U.N. Declaration of Human Rights. It will become a symbol of the aspirations and the commitments of people everywhere.”

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