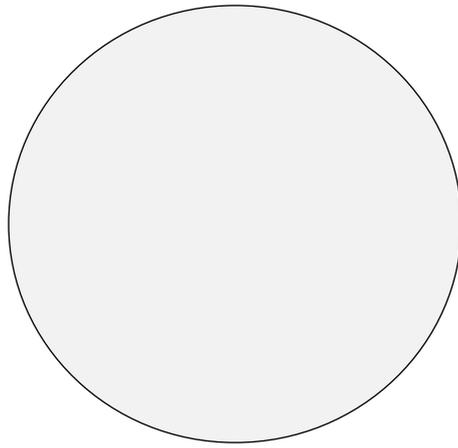


A Declaration
of
Planetary Rights & Responsibilities



A proposal



After the Flood

Proposal for
A Declaration of Planetary Rights & Responsibilities

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2018

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Declaration of Planetary Rights and Responsibilities

Preamble

We, the people – of the species Homo Sapiens within the family of the Great Apes, a branch of the Tree of Life – do hereby declare our profound respect for all other life forms that share with us the Biosphere on this planet we call Earth.

We do not distinguish between Organic and Inorganic life forms; each and all are worthy of our respect in their different ways. Not only the soil, air and water which are essential to sustain organic life, but also the many forms of insect, animal, bird and fish, as well as the plants, forests, mountains, plains, rivers, lakes, seas and oceans – all have their rightful place in the network of being that is the Biosphere. We extend that respect to the layers of rock beneath our feet and the metals and other materials secreted in their depths. We also respect the fire within the body of the planet, as well as that of the Sun, with its planets and moons making up our immediate home: the solar system. Finally, we respect the spiral galaxy to which our star-system belongs, and the endless realms of space beyond.

Within the bounds of evolutionary law, humanity has developed an intelligence that differs from all other beings on planet Earth. This has placed us in a unique position in the animal world, giving us the power to destroy nearly every form of life on planet Earth should we so wish. We have the power to destroy life, but we also have the power to nurture and protect life. We humbly acknowledge that proper use of this power imposes on us certain duties and responsibilities in our relations with all other species.

Apart from our distant relatives, the bacteria, we are the most invasive and adaptable species on Earth. We acknowledge that we have hitherto misused this position and not fulfilled the responsibilities that it entails. We have ruthlessly cut our way through the network of other species, threatening their welfare and even eradicating many of them completely, thus creating vast tracts of impoverished landscape and ocean where once there was great richness of diversity. In so doing we have undermined the very basis of life on Earth, without which we ourselves would not be able to exist.

We hereby solemnly promise to rectify this state of affairs. We will do this by fundamentally changing the ways in which civilization has hitherto extended itself over the surface of the globe and by correcting the gross misuse of natural resources that this has entailed. We aim to restrict the human footprint on the planet to reasonable limits, by so doing increasing the space available for all other species. The purpose is to establish a new, more equitable balance in our relations with the rest of the natural world, in the best interests of all, not least ourselves.

A Declaration of Planetary Rights & Responsibilities

Introduction

It is perhaps natural that when conflicts between nations (mostly over the control of natural resources) had become global, thus threatening the stability of the world order, it first became possible to achieve international consensus over some basic rules of human conduct. The Universal Declaration of Human Rights, signed in 1948 by the nations of the world at the end of a devastating World War, is an agreement of this nature. This document underlies the work of the United Nations and deals only with issues within the human sphere. It provides basic rules governing the relationship between the individual human being and the state. The focus is on Human Rights and the freedom of the individual to grow and develop without hinder of any kind. The nature of the commensurate responsibilities demanded of the state is implicit in this list of human rights. The Declaration is a fundamental text to which all signatory nations must refer when creating laws and regulations within their own jurisdiction.

The relationship between humanity and the surrounding environment – **the Biosphere** – is ignored in this document. This makes it all the more surprising that no other, similarly comprehensive, international agreement exists to regulate this particular relationship, despite the fact that the welfare of the biosphere is crucial for our very existence. There are certainly a number of international agreements, created under the auspices of the UN, that deal with specific, limited aspects of this question, eg: the Antarctica agreement regulating use of that continent, the recent Paris accords on the climate etc. But there lacks a single, fundamental agreement outlining the basic principles for how human communities, business corporations and nation states shall relate to the enveloping world of the biosphere. Such a document, like the Declaration of Human Rights in its own particular field, would act as a reference for all other international agreements dealing with different aspects of this issue. It would also provide a guide to governments when formulating their policies, and a yardstick with which to judge progress towards the common goals outlined in the document.

It is perhaps natural that this idea should arise at a time when exploitation of the finite resources of the planet has reached such levels that the very existence of civilization is threatened. The pressures have been ratcheted up drastically since the time of the Declaration of Human Rights. We can no longer only concern ourselves with problems within the human sphere since problems *outside* the human sphere have now begun to seriously impact our everyday lives. There can be little doubt that a new Declaration is needed, this time defining basic rules of human conduct in our relations with the rest of the natural world.

A (Universal) Declaration of Planetary Rights and Responsibilities would fulfil this need. It would emphasize the responsibilities of humanity in relation to the rights of all other species in the biosphere. Those ‘rights’ reflect very practical considerations, above all, the vital need for **diversity of species** if the planet is to remain conducive to human habitation. Diversity of species is the canary in the coalmine, an indicator of the general state of the biosphere over a wide range of parameters. If we succeed in retaining what is left of this diversity, even reversing its current decline, we can also be sure that we have got it right when it comes to all the other issues that threaten the stability of the biosphere. To achieve this, the Document would therefore place certain limits on both the nature and scope of human activity so that this furthers, rather than erodes the richness of species diversity. Such limits are in our own interest; if we continue to behave as we have over the last century or so, we will bring upon ourselves an ecological Apocalypse on a par with the worst of the great extinctions of the past.

Suggestion for a preamble

My own suggestion for a preamble to such a document is no more than a single A4 sheet and has no pretensions to be other than a sketch. My intention is to provide an impulse for thought and discussion about the idea of a Declaration and the nature of the terms that might be included in its text. This is an exercise that I imagine might appeal to those (especially in certain educational situations) who are aware of the precariousness of our position and the current insufficiency of our response to the challenge. Hopefully this will eventually contribute towards the widespread public demand for such a document that would be needed if it is ever to be realized. Encouragement from all sides is essential if governments and corporations are to see any point in setting strict limits on their own behavior in relation to the environment.

The terms

The agreement I have in mind would be fundamentally ecological in nature. The planet, and especially its biosphere and all to be found therein, would be seen as a self-regulating network of interrelated units or collectives, from the macro-scale of continents down to the micro-scale of a DNA sequence. Somewhere in between these two extremes can be found humanity, which I half-seriously define as a collective of *humans-in-being* – a term that recognizes that our species is still immature and has not yet realized its full potential; it also explains the self-centered childish greed with which we have hitherto fed on the dwindling resources of the natural world.

In the Declaration, the rights of the human collective would be balanced against the rights of all the other collectives that compose the biosphere: water, earth, air, plant, animal, bird, fish, etc. This is basically a democratic idea, the needs of a number of different communities being equally respected and balanced in a way that serves both the best interests of the whole and the well-being of each individual community.

The inclusion of the word ‘Responsibilities’ as well as ‘Rights’ in the title emphasizes the challenging nature of the document. The text would probably define the optimal relationship between humanity and the rest of the biosphere as a delicate state of equitable ecological balance. It would define the range of what is possible for human development without this causing a dangerous shift in one or more of the parameters essential to hold that balance. It would set up a series of long and medium-term goals for humanity to strive towards in order to remain within those limits. It would describe a step-by-step process whereby those goals may be reached. It would thus provide a roadmap to follow for all kinds of human community, not only for those which have signed the document. The ultimate aim would be to return Earth as nearly as possible to its previous status as the most richly diverse and beautiful planet in the solar system – without having to remove humanity from the equation in order to achieve such a state of grace; we do not want a Mars colony to be the only trace of humanity left in the universe.

Subservient to the Declaration would be all current agreements regulating the relationship between humanity and the environment, as well as those exclusively concerned with regulating matters between human beings, eg: the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Such existing agreements would still be valid and binding, provided their terms can be shown to be compatible with the Declaration of Planetary Rights & Responsibilities. This last, more fundamental document would fill a grievous lack among the various texts that at present define the values and goals of humanity. It would give credence and substance to our oft declared intention to act as ‘stewards of the Earth’.

Coordination and cooperation

Today there are a number of international initiatives striving to change the trajectory of human society. Each seeks to achieve change within a specific area: towards clean air and water, renewable energy, “circular” economy, sustainable forestry and agriculture etc. What this diversity of effort wins in terms of focus on specific issues, it loses in overall impact. Lack of coordination and cooperation reduces the effect of the whole. Were these initiatives to be linked together within a suitable framework (eg: the Declaration), they would reinforce each other and reveal the true strength of the global movement towards a sustainable and resilient society.

I take but two of those initiatives as an example. Johan Rockström’s proposal for “Nine Planetary Boundaries” beyond which the wellbeing of the biosphere would be severely compromised is one of the few that attempt to provide a fully integrated, across-the-board approach. Another is a proposal for adding a new international crime, “Ecocide”, to genocide and the other crimes covered in the work of the International Criminal Court. These and other suitable initiatives could well be incorporated into the terms of the Declaration. Rockström’s would provide the basic analysis underlying a definition of the goals of the Declaration; Ecocide would provide one means among many of enforcing its terms.

The imperative of human intelligence

To my knowledge there is only one other comprehensive document comparable to the Declaration discussed here. This is **The Law of the Rights of Mother Earth**, proposed by Evo Morales, President of Bolivia, and based on the world view of the indigenous peoples in that part of South America. Morales’ document was integrated into the Bolivian constitution in 2010. It is a well-written text and has been presented internationally as suitable for a globally binding agreement, but has not been received with approval by all. One reason may be the reference to “Mother Earth”, a concept foreign to many groups of people, especially those from two of the world’s great religions. That is why I suggest a more scientific approach, using broadly ecological and evolutionary terminology. I believe this approach has a better chance of reaching a broad consensus. Whatever deity one may worship, it seems reasonable to assume that that deity created the laws of evolution and ecological balance and saw that they were good.

In this connection it is important to address the issue of human intelligence and the special way evolution has formed our mental capacities. We do not need to call upon God, or any universal moral or ethical code, to accept that humanity has certain responsibilities in its relationship with the biosphere. Instead, *it is the very nature of human intelligence itself*, with its uniquely creative and destructive powers, that imposes those responsibilities. The almost unlimited power to destroy or create that we now have at our command constrains us to wield that power in a responsible manner. In this we are unique among the species that inhabit the planet. In an otherwise ‘self-regulating’ ecological system, humanity stands apart as being the only species capable of determining its own fate and the fate of all other species. It either uses its intelligence to take responsibility for its own self-regulation, thus furthering its own chances of survival as well as those of all other species. Or a ‘self-destruct’ process, seemingly embedded in our genes by evolution itself, will take over and do the job the hard way. The choice is ours.

The Declaration should also tackle the question of Artificial Intelligence. As in the case of human intelligence, AI requires clearly defined rules of praxis in its relations with the rest of the biosphere if it is not to run amok or be grossly misused. We created AI; it is our responsibility to see that it does no harm, either to ourselves or the biosphere.

The process

Regarding the writing of such a document, this should be carried out by a group of men and women who are internationally respected for their wisdom (maybe an old-fashioned quality, but essential in this context). Their work would not be easy because they would have to represent the conflicting interests of both humanity *and* the entire natural world. To aid in their task the group would have access to advice from a wide range of expertise. Within the human sphere, this would include those working in agriculture, forestry, fishery, industry, construction etc, where the impact on the natural world is most marked, as well as social scientists, psychologists, philosophers, historians, economists, architects, cognitive scientists and others who study human nature, and the forms of civilization we have created in the past and aim to create in the future. Within the natural sphere, the group would be advised by researchers from disciplines where insight into the inner mechanisms and needs of the biosphere is most developed: geologists, geographers, oceanographers, botanists, zoologists, entomologists, climate scientists etc.

In addition, there would be input from people working with IT (eg virtual reality), as well as poets, artists, writers etc. who in their work have explained the hidden processes of nature in terms understandable to the layman (eg: the books of Peter Wohlleben: *The Hidden Life of Trees* and *The Inner Life of Animals*). This category of expert “communicator” would play a vital role in the task of raising public awareness as to why a Declaration is needed, as well as explaining the implications of its final terms for the life of the individual and society in general.

A further group composed of experts in international environmental law would be at hand to help in formulating the terms of the agreement, making them judicially sound and easy to apply in the present (ie. no loopholes), yet resilient enough to be valid for years to come.

Confirming the final judicial status of the Declaration is another matter. Ideally this should be the responsibility of some kind of constituent assembly with representatives from the entire world. Such a global assembly does not yet exist. The United Nations can hardly be considered as such since this body is exclusively composed of nation states and their governments, which is not quite the same thing as ‘the entire world’. Missing are NGO’s and other representatives of civil society, including business corporations. Both these categories have a stake in the welfare of the biosphere. If both governments *and* business corporations were to make a firm commitment to follow the dictates of the Declaration this would dramatically improve the chances of making real progress. Such a wider commitment is probably essential, since time is not on our side.

Maybe the actual work on the Declaration would best be carried out under the auspices of the WWF or some other suitable global NGO, working closely with universities and appropriate UN organs, but independent of governments. The UN’s list of Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), set up in 2015, would be a useful starting point, since this initiative recognizes the intimate relationship between human development and environmental issues. The work on the Declaration could have a role in the SDG process, checking for compromises overly favoring humanity, and even become the final document, summarizing the process and its conclusions. Finally, when it comes to the judicial status of the Declaration, this might well be left in the hands of the UN, provided the Security Council is united in its will to act according to the spirit of the Declaration’s intentions.

However these tricky problems are resolved, my hope is that distribution of this proposal will at least contribute to a general discussion, and that this may lead to more and more people becoming engaged in the issue. Only the active involvement of human communities everywhere can be expected to produce a Declaration of Planetary Rights & Responsibilities worth the name.

The whole picture

It can be argued that there is little chance that this proposal can be realized before it is too late to stop the impending catastrophe upon which it is predicated. What is the point of spending months or years in trying to unite the nations of the Earth behind such a project when all that really matters is immediate and far-reaching changes in the way humanity organizes itself and acts in the world?

The reason for treating the proposal seriously is that such changes cannot take place until we are all agreed on the true nature of the threat and the most appropriate strategy of response. At present this unifying view only exists within certain academic circles and is not shared by the general public. That is why the proposal is important; it has the potential to open people's eyes to the scale of the threat. It forces people to think laterally, taking in the full breadth of the picture, rather than only a few familiar segments.

When it comes to spreading awareness of the idea of the Document, it is necessary to begin by appealing to those who already sense the seriousness of the situation and who in various ways are engaged in trying to do something about it. Everyone is at least vaguely aware that a threat exists (thanks to media coverage), but most people try in every way to avoid facing the consequences of this knowledge. When it comes to those who *are* actively engaged, each has focused on a different part of the problem, or as the old story goes, different parts of the elephant. This makes it difficult to see the full enormity of what is actually happening around us. It is high time we saw the elephant in its entirety; after all, it fills the room.

The elephant is of course the climate, and especially the fact that it is changing in unpredictable and more and more extreme ways. The consequences of a warming climate are proving to be far more complex and far-reaching than we imagined. Few areas of the globe can expect to escape the effects and science seems to have consistently underestimated both the strength of those effects and their immanence. We do not have the luxury of a breathing space before a tsunami of destructive forces beyond any previously experienced during the current interglacial rolls in over the horizon.

This means that it is foolish to believe that we can do more than mitigate the worst effects of the changing climate. Instead, we face the monumental task of adapting society to deal with the new conditions of life on the planet as they unfold around us. The current focus on reducing CO² emissions, vitally important though this is, has blinded many to this crucial need. Even if that reduction were at all possible (stabilizing the situation is probably the best we can hope for at present), there is a wealth of other areas where critical decisions must soon be made if civilization is to respond adequately to the challenges of the Anthropocene Age.

The danger is that in the struggle to adapt society to the immediate pressures of climate change we forget the long-term goals of humanity, summarized here as the reestablishment of a state of equitable ecological balance between ourselves and the rest of the planet's biosphere. One purpose of the Declaration would be to remind us of this, ensuring that no desperate measures taken to avoid immediate threats to our security have side-effects that might make it more difficult to reach the ultimate goal. Retaining a planetary perspective while riding the rapids of Change is the only way to survive the exceptional stresses of life in the Anthropocene.

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2018-04-23

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Hope

Declaration of Planetary Rights & Responsibilities, Introduction 03

Text version 09

2018/04/01 (Latest reworking of text: 04/23)



Riding the rapids of Change