One Earth. One Future

The United Nations Earth Charter

The Earth Charter is "a declaration of fundamental principles for building a just, sustainable and peaceful society for the twenty-first century". The charter was created by international organisations, representing millions of people who share a concern for the future of our planet.

In 1987, the United Nations started the process of creating a new Earth Charter that would set out principles for sustainable development. After ten years of worldwide discussions about common goals and shared values, an international committee drafted the Earth Charter in 1997. The final version was approved in Paris in March 2000.

Several global ecological issues are of major concern and action now may save the earth from future disasters.

Ecological Issue: Pollution

Pollution is increasingly becoming a global issue because of its impact on human health. It also threatens rivers and the survival of marine species. Air, water and marine pollution are usually caused by human activities but can also occur from natural causes, such as volcano eruptions, flooding and dust storms. Air pollution can be caused through industry, business, farming or products used in the home. Transport, factories and businesses, coal-fired power plants and decaying landfills are all potential sources of pollution.

Coal-fired power plants are a source of air pollution.

A polluted waterway

Water pollution may result from waste products from industry and agriculture. Chemicals are leached into rivers or the sea or washed out of the air in rain. Air and water pollution can have important effects on human health and wildlife survival. Marine pollution can impact on marine species and destroy fragile marine ecosystems.

Discarded tyres on a riverbank
Ecological Issue: Land Clearing

Deforestation (land clearing) continues globally at an alarming rate every day. About one third of the forests which once covered the earth are gone. Each year, another 16 million hectares disappear.

Deforestation removes the trees that hold the soil to the land which can lead to desertification (the process of land becoming increasingly dry so it resembles a desert); this causes soil erosion and loss of soil in windstorms. Overgrazing by livestock also strips the land of grasses. Overfarming removes nutrients from the soil, making it less fertile for growing crops. Desertification occurs in areas with low rainfall and a hot climate, causing vegetation to stop growing on the land.

The long-term effects of deforestation and desertification are the loss of fertile land for cultivation and grazing and the loss of habitats for wildlife and plant species.

The Threat to Wildlife

Changes in weather patterns affect wildlife habitats, which affect the whole interconnected wildlife web. Less snow in winter, higher temperatures in summer and wilder weather patterns will combine to make survival difficult for many animals and plants.

Some wildlife will adapt, but for some, such as the polar bear, which lives in the Arctic and relies on ice floes (sheets of ice) for survival, the future is bleak. However, for the golden toad of Costa Rica, thought to be extinct because of global warming, it is too late.

Marine species are threatened from pollution and the effects of warmer sea temperatures, and also by humans. Over-fishing and illegal fishing has affected the population of various fish, such as swordfish. The International Whaling Commission was created to help conserve whales, to prevent their decline, and to monitor the whaling industry.

Who will protect our fragile planet? The United Nations Earth Charter states that the people of the world can but only if action is taken immediately.