

Land Stewardship and the Earth Charter

by

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A paper presented at *The Leading Edge, Stewardship & Conservation in Canada*
Victoria, BC, July 2003.

"The Earth Charter is a declaration of fundamental principles for building a just, sustainable, and peaceful global society in the 21st century. It seeks to inspire in all peoples a new sense of global interdependence and shared responsibility for the well-being of the human family and the larger living world. It is an expression of hope and a call to help create a global partnership at a critical juncture in history. The Earth Charter's inclusive ethical vision recognizes that environmental protection, human rights, equitable human development, and peace are interdependent and indivisible. It provides a new framework for thinking about and addressing these issues. The result is a fresh, broad conception of what constitutes a sustainable community and sustainable development." (from the Earth Charter Brochure)

Why should land trusts and stewardship groups be concerned about the Earth Charter? Land stewardship and preservation are inherently ethical activities. The Land Trust Alliance of British Columbia has a code of ethics for land trusts aimed at ensuring that we pursue our goals with honesty and integrity. Shouldn't this be enough?

While preserving the ecological integrity of the land is, indeed, a worthwhile activity, especially as many of us do it as volunteers without thought of material reward, we may forget that our efforts occur in a global and local social, economic, and political context. Our stewardship work doesn't just affect fish and trees and birds, it affects people, too. Our activities can have both positive and negative consequences for others. For some examples:

- Protecting the ecosystems on which wild salmon depend can have economic effects on the sport and commercial fishing industries.
- Protecting natural beauty can support the tourist industry, which in turn changes the communities in which it expands.
- Protecting trails, parks, and natural areas creates community amenities which change real estate values and the quality of life for residents and visitors.
- Removing land (or values in land, as with conservation covenants/easements) from the market economy can have an effect on neighbouring real estate values, the availability of land for a variety of human uses, and the tax base for local government.
- The protection by government through regulation or through the creation of parks or ecological reserves is an expression of our democratic society. In contrast, private protection of land by conservancies is inherently undemocratic, with small groups of people making stewardship and preservation decisions without much of a process of public scrutiny.
- Fundraising and volunteer activities of stewardship groups inflict opportunity costs on the community by making funds and volunteer hours unavailable for other worthwhile activities.
- Stewardship activities can interfere with the economic welfare of the community by limiting the productivity of activities such as agriculture or forestry.
- Stewardship work often depends on financial support from the wealthier members of the community. Our work may sometimes feed into the inequities of "environmental racism", saving habitat valued by the well-to-do at the expense of habitat valued by the less wealthy and powerful.

Of course, the reason we are here at the Leading Edge Conference is because, for the most part, such stewardship values as biodiversity, habitat protection, and ecosystem protection have not traditionally been ethical priorities for society. Public policy on both the left and the right has seldom placed restraint on the exploitation of resources or the uses of land; the debate has mostly been about how to divide up the spoils of exploiting the planet. Until recently, ecological integrity, the central value of stewardship groups, was not valued by political and social institutions.

This has begun to change: With roots going back to the 1970s and after a long consultation process in the 1990s, the Earth Charter was launched in 2000. This remarkable document recognizes the interconnections among ecological integrity, social and economic justice, democracy, and peace. Making decisions in the light of the Earth Charter can give land trusts and stewardship groups a broadly-based ethical foundation. The Earth Charter is not a simple document; it requires study and careful consideration. It has no easy answers; the Earth Charter recognizes that ethical decision-making sometimes involves trade-offs, compromises, and conflicting values.

The Earth Charter sees environmental protection, human rights, equitable human development, and peace as interdependent aspects of a healthy society. I believe we need to ground our stewardship and conservation efforts in a set of values of which protection of nature is only a part. It is incumbent on us to consider the social, economic, and political consequences of our work and the Earth Charter provides a framework for doing this.

At the Cowichan Community Land Trust, we have found that looking at ourselves through the lens of the Earth Charter has had an immediate and profound effect on how we make decisions. Basing our policies on the Earth Charter can help avoid the dynamics of jobs vs. environment, private vs. public policy, social vs. ecological justice, and private vs. public decision-making.

To my knowledge, at least three other Canadian land trusts have already endorsed the Earth Charter (Salt Spring Island Conservancy, Comox Valley Land Trust, and Blue Mountain Watershed Trust Foundation) and intend to use it as a guide to their operations. I hope many other stewardship groups will follow their lead.

The remainder of this paper consists of background information taken, with permission, from the Earth Charter Brochure, followed by the text of the Earth Charter itself.