

# THE RIGHTS OF EARTH

## Summary

The latter part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century saw the development of a number of charters for the “Rights of Earth”. These sought to establish principles by which humans should respond to and respect the quality and diversity of natural systems. Many of these approaches seek to consciously mimic already established declarations of rights such as the American Declaration of Independence or Thomas Paine’s “The Rights of Man”. This reading highlights examples of these ideas and explores how such approaches have been developed.

## Relevance to business

The environment in which business operates is as much informally determined by a mix of precedent, social acceptability and market demand for given products and services as it is by law and regulation. This framework of informal governance has evolved over time and continues to do so. Societal concerns about the environment and sustainability are potentially the most powerful and far reaching current influence on that evolution. It is in the interests of business to be part of processes that seek to establish a code of agreed values in this respect.

## Introduction

The expectation that business should understand and take into account the interests of a wider range of stakeholders is increasingly evident. The interests of what might be termed “the natural world” are primarily represented by environmental non-governmental organisations (NGOs).

Some NGOs have put considerable effort into establishing and codifying fundamental principles by which humans should interact with the Earth. There are similarities in approach to the establishment of fundamental human rights, such as in the American Declaration of Independence (1776) and Thomas Paine’s “The Rights of Man” (1791). The goal is to establish equivalent rights for the planet and, in some cases, for particular groups which may be at risk on it, such as the UN Draft Declaration of the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (1994/95).

Other efforts have been directed at establishing principles by which sustainable behaviour can be judged. These include WWF’s *One Planet Living* and The Natural Step’s *Four Scientific Principles of Sustainability*.

## We hold these truths to be self evident – the rights of humanity and of the Earth

One of the difficulties that environmentalists have encountered in seeking to assert the importance and primacy of concern for the environment has been that they have felt that they have been stating the obvious to a world that doesn’t appear to understand the evident truth that the success and health of the human species is linked to the success and health of the environment upon which we all depend.

The American Declaration of Independence was also statement of something that most people would consider obvious today: the equality and rights of individuals. But its very existence is evidence that, at the time writing, this was far from being generally accepted. Many social rights were inextricably linked to “differential” rights

<b>2. Human and Social Systems</b>
The economic system
The free market and the capitalist system
<b>The rights of earth</b>
Politics
Technology and science
Human psychology

and status conferred by birth. The declaration challenged this in one of the most famous sentences ever written:

“We hold these Truths to be self-evident, that all Men are created equal, that they are endowed, by their CREATOR, with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty, and the Pursuit of Happiness.”

(<http://www.kidport.com/RefLib/UsaHistory/AmericanRevolution/DeclndWords.htm>)

It drew heavily on the theories of a range of thinkers, but Thomas Paine (1737-1809) had perhaps most direct influence and input to its formation. In *Common Sense* (1776), he observed (in relation to monarchy and hereditary succession) that:

“MANKIND being originally equals in the order of creation, the equality could only be destroyed by some subsequent circumstance: the distinctions of rich and poor may in a great measure be accounted for, and that without having recourse to the harsh ill-sounding names of oppression and avarice.”

(<http://www.ushistory.org/paine/commonsense/sense3.htm>).

Statements of this kind were considered treacherous or even rebellious. Paine's writings were instant bestsellers but he was considered dangerous by the British establishment.

Other thinkers, such as Thomas Spence (1750-1814), who produced a treatise on the Rights of Man in 1775, questioned the “natural order”:

“That property in land and liberty among men in a state of nature ought to be equal, few, one would be fain to hope, would be foolish enough to deny. Therefore, taking this to be granted, the country of any people, in a native state, is properly their common, in which each of them has an equal property, with free liberty to sustain himself and family with the animals, fruits and other products thereof. Thus such a people reap jointly the whole advantages of their country, or neighbourhood, without having their right in so doing called in question by any, not even by the most selfish and corrupt. For upon what must they live if not upon the productions of the country in which they reside? Surely, to deny them that right is in effect denying them a right to live. Well, methinks some are now ready to say, but is it lawful, reasonable and just, for this people to sell, or make a present even, of the whole of their country, or common, to whom they will, to be held by them and their heirs for ever?”

(<http://thomas-spence-society.co.uk/7.html>).

There is an interesting parallel here. Generally speaking, the environmentalist viewpoint is that the rights of the planet are – or should be – equally self-evident and have sought to make similar “first-principle” declarations to reinforce them. The main barriers to broad acceptance of the “truth” as they see it are at worst vested interest or at best unwillingness to challenge established practice, even in the light of better understanding.

“A long habit of not thinking a thing wrong, gives it a superficial appearance of being right, and raises at first a formidable outcry in defense of custom.”

Thomas Paine, *Common Sense* (1776).

## The Earth Charter

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In 1987, the World Commission on Environment and Development (known as the “Brundtland Commission”) called for a “universal declaration” and a “new charter” to help guide the world's transition to sustainable development (*Our Common Future*).

A draft UN Earth Charter was developed for the Earth Summit in Rio de Janeiro in 1992 but the time for such a declaration was not right. The Rio Declaration was less forceful than hoped for – a statement of achievable consensus at the time.

In 1994, Maurice Strong, Chairman of the Rio Summit, and Mikhail Gorbachev, former Soviet President, working through organizations they had founded (Earth

Council and Green Cross International respectively), restarted the Earth Charter as a civil-society initiative, with the help of the Netherlands government. The initial drafting and consultation process drew on hundreds of documents. After numerous drafts and taking into account the inputs of over 5,000 people, the Earth Charter Commission delivered its consensus view – the Earth Charter – in March, 2000. It was formally launched at a ceremony in The Peace Palace, the Hague.

## From rights to principles and practice

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A number of individuals and organizations have tried to build on the concept of the “Rights of Earth” by defining principles and behaviours that respect them and are clearly sustainable. The two foremost approaches are *One Planet Living*, a joint initiative of WWF and Bioregional, and *The Natural Step Framework*, developed by The Natural Step.

### One Planet Living

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One Planet Living is essentially a way of thinking that encompasses a range of activities that are required to make sustainable living a reality. It is based upon ten fundamental principles:

- Zero carbon
- Zero waste
- Sustainable transport
- Local and sustainable materials
- Local and sustainable food
- Sustainable water
- Natural habitats and wildlife
- Culture and heritage
- Equity and fair trade
- Health and happiness

It seeks to demonstrate through the application of these principles that sustainable living is both understandable and achievable. The alternative is an unsustainable future. The rates of resource consumption currently enjoyed by a significant proportion of the Earth’s population exceed the planet’s capacity to support them even in the medium term. If all of the Earth’s population aspired to equally high levels, it would take the resource equivalent of three and a half planets to meet their needs.

The One Living Planet approach is based upon the concept of “ecological footprints” that relate the impact of lifestyles and consumption to the productive land-area required to support them – a “true” measure of sustainability. For more information, see *R 6.4 Ecological Footprint*. According to One Planet Living, sustainable living can be achieved if key activities and areas consume no more than the following share of the Earth’s resources:

- Carbon – 25%.
- Food – 25%.
- Transport – 20%
- Waste – 15%.
- Materials – 15%.

For more information on One Planet Living, see *R 5.3 One Planet Living*.

### The Natural Step

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The Natural Step is a non-profit organization founded in Sweden in 1989 by Swedish scientist, Karl-Henrik Robert. It pioneered a “backcasting from principles”

approach to achieving sustainability. Following publication of the Brundtland Report, Robert developed *The Natural Step Framework* which established four “system conditions” for sustainability, derived from the laws of thermodynamics.

In a sustainable society, nature is NOT subject to systematic increases in:

1. Concentrations of substances extracted from the Earth’s crust
2. Concentrations of substances produced by society
3. Degradation by physical means

And in that society...

4. People are not subject to conditions that systematically undermine their capacity to meet their needs.

Natural Step thinking has been widely applied to environmental policy and planning development and to the development of frameworks for more sustainable business products and services.

## Conclusion

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Statements of right tend to be declared in the face of prevailing but outdated beliefs. Rights of Earth declarations are most recent in a historical sequence that can be traced back over centuries. In recent times, the evolution of business activity has primarily been based on what is technically possible, what is affordable and what will be profitable. The social or environmental impact was, at best, secondary. In fairness to business, this reflected a relative lack of societal (and ultimately market) concern. The informal governance framework was not unduly concerned.

As societal and business attitudes change, approaches such as One Planet Living and the Natural Step offer means of navigating towards sustainability and a theoretical ideal state in which human activity has no net negative impact on the natural world. They seek to draw attention to, and address, damaging imbalances in society that are largely ignored by modern market economies and in much political decision making. They are a statement of the obvious: that viewing the Earth as a resource to be exploited, rather than an ultimately fragile system to be nurtured, is in itself unsustainable.

## Sources of further information

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American Declaration of Independence (1776)

<http://www.kidport.com/RefLib/UsaHistory/AmericanRevolution/DeclIndWords.htm>

The life and writings of Thomas Paine: <http://www.ushistory.org/Paine/index.htm>

UN Draft Declaration of the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (1994/95)

[http://www.unhcr.ch/huridocda/huridoca.nsf/\(Symbol\)/E.CN.4.SUB.2.RES.1994.45.En](http://www.unhcr.ch/huridocda/huridoca.nsf/(Symbol)/E.CN.4.SUB.2.RES.1994.45.En)

Declaration of planetary rights (John McConnell): <http://www.earthsite.org/rights.htm>

Full text of the Earth Charter: [http://www.earthcharterinaction.org/read\\_charter.html](http://www.earthcharterinaction.org/read_charter.html)

One Planet Living and its approach: <http://www.oneplanetliving.org/>.

The Natural Step: <http://www.naturalstep.org>

Wikipedia has a comprehensive overview of the approach:

[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The\\_Natural\\_Step](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Natural_Step).

**The opinions expressed in this reading are not necessarily those of WWF.**

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