

Can We Teach the Earth Charter Anymore?

A Critical Examination of the Earth Charter's Role in Education

Nicholas R.G. Stanger, Western Washington University, Nick Engelfried, Reconnect Earth Sarah Clement, University of Alaska Fairbanks, Ash Kunz, North Central Washington Regional Libraries, Rachael Grasso, Western Washington University, & E. Smokey Brine, Western Washington University, United States of America

Abstract

The Earth Charter has become a dated guiding document for the field of environmental education. When the document debuted in 2000 as the global “framework to guide the transition to a sustainable future” (Earth Charter Initiative, n.d.-a, para. 2), the writers promoted it as a solution to environmental problems that incorporated voices of a wide spectrum of diverse communities from across the globe. The Earth Charter is a broad and ambitious document, designed to encourage action at local, national, and international levels (Earth Charter Initiative, 2009). Using critical discourse analysis methodology and social justice lenses, this paper examines the value of the Earth Charter as an educational tool as we enter the Anthropocene, a new geologic period in which our species is the largest force influencing and changing the planet (Olvitt, 2017). We argue that the Earth Charter reinforces dominant oppressive myths of sustainable development and excludes concerns voiced by marginalized populations. In perpetuating problematic narratives, we question the Earth Charter in its current form as a relevant and useful framework for informing environmental education 20 years after its publication. We suggest a method for updating the Earth Charter with social justice framing, using democratic, co-creative tools that are accessible to communities around the world, in their own languages.

Résumé

Publiée en 2000, la Charte de la Terre est aujourd'hui dépassée en tant que document-guide en éducation à l'environnement. Présentée à l'époque comme un cadre mondial qui guiderait notre transition vers un avenir durable (Earth Charter Initiative, s.d., paragr. 2), elle apportait, selon ses auteurs, une solution aux problèmes environnementaux qui conjuguaient les voix d'une pluralité de groupes dans le monde. Document large et ambitieux, la Charte se voulait un moteur d'action à l'échelle locale, nationale et internationale (Earth Charter Initiative, 2009). La valeur de la Charte de la Terre en tant qu'outil éducatif à l'aube de l'Anthropocène, cette nouvelle période géologique où, de toutes les espèces, c'est l'humain qui exerce la plus grande influence sur la planète (Olvitt, 2017), est revue à la lumière d'une analyse critique du discours et sous l'angle de la justice sociale. Nous avançons que la Charte de la Terre renforce non seulement les mythes oppressifs dominants du développement durable,

mais exclut aussi les préoccupations exprimées par les populations marginalisées. Or, sachant qu'elle perpétue des discours problématiques, nous remettons en question sa pertinence et son utilité sous sa forme actuelle, vieille de 20 ans, pour orienter l'éducation à l'environnement. Nous proposons une méthode de mise à jour du document qui intégrerait un cadre de justice sociale et des outils démocratiques et cocreatifs accessibles aux sociétés du monde entier, dans leur langue.

Keywords: Earth Charter, environmental education, education for sustainable development, inclusion, culturally relevant pedagogy, anthropocentrism, ecocentrism

Mots-clés : Charte de la Terre, éducation à l'environnement, éducation au développement durable, inclusion, pédagogie culturellement adaptée, anthropocentrisme, écocentrisme

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The Earth Charter is a succinct, four-page document that promotes guidelines for global solutions to environmental problems. Its 16 principles fall under the headings of “Respect and Care for the Community of Life”; “Ecological Integrity”; “Social and Economic Justice”; and “Democracy, Nonviolence and Peace” (Earth Charter Commission, 2000). This charter is intended to promote human rights, peace, and well-being for all living things on the planet. The purposes of the Earth Charter are many, but one of the main functions is to act as an educational tool for promoting global sustainable development (Earth Charter Initiative, n.d.-a, para. 7). Although the document omits specific references to *environmental* education, it is nevertheless an influential tool for the United Nations’ Decade of Education for Sustainable Development; (Earth Charter Initiative, n.d.-b, para. 10). David Gruenewald (now Greenwood), a place-based educational scholar, describes the document as “constantly challeng[ing] the assumptions and purposes behind existing practices and articulat[ing] a fundamentally different vision” (2004, p.100) of how environmental education is often characterised: naturalist education of liberal progressives.

The Earth Charter is the product of over a decade of planning, consultation, debating, and writing. The desire for a global document first came from the 1987 Brundtland Report, also known as *Our common future* (Earth Charter Initiative, n.d.-b, para. 1). Early planners envisioned the Earth Charter as a document behind which all nations could gather to solve the world’s problems. The Earth Charter Commission was formed in 1994 by Maurice Strong and Mikhail Gorbachev (Earth Charter Initiative, n.d.-b, para. 3). Under their direction, the Earth Charter Drafting Committee was formed and led by Professor Steven C. Rockefeller (Earth Charter Initiative, n.d.-c, para. 2).

Although the Earth Charter was drafted for all nations, we question whether the process by which it was created truly allows for meaningful representation of marginalized communities we wonder about the authorship of the document. Three names that appear most often in connection with writing the document are Strong, Gorbachev, and Rockefeller, all of whom are three powerful White men. Maurice Strong, a Canadian-born globalist, had conflicting and paradoxical careers in the oil industry and the environmental movement (Corbett, 2016). Mikhail Gorbachev, best known as the last president of the Soviet Union, turned to environmentalism when his political career came to an end (Earth Charter Initiative, n.d.-d, para. 7-8). Steven C. Rockefeller is professor emeritus at Middlebury College (Vermont) and a member of the well-known Rockefeller family (Earth Charter Initiative, n.d.-d, n.d., para. 1). Although the 23 members of the Earth Charter Commission represented nations all over the world, all are described as “prominent figures” (Earth Charter Initiative, n.d.-d, n.d., para. 1) in their respective societies. Thus, this document was created by powerful people, for the entire world, and without the authors offering much proof of including disempowered voices.

Though Strong, Gorbachev, and Rockefeller are the faces of the Earth Charter drafting process, hundreds of organizations and governments and thousands of individuals helped to shape the text (Earth Charter Initiative, n.d.-c). On the website, the contributors are described as hailing from all over the world, bringing expertise in their fields, or representing “important constituencies” (Earth Charter Initiative, n.d.-c, para. 3). The sheer volume of people who contributed in some way to the Earth Charter is emphasized in its supporting website, but there is no readily available list of organizations or individuals who gave their input, or the process that was used to incorporate their concerns into the document. As such, it is difficult to determine whether the final product actually represents voices from a broad spectrum of the global population.

The Earth Charter in Education

The original intention of the Earth Charter Commission was to generate the document through a government-sponsored process. When that opportunity failed due to complex geo-political orientations at the time, the creators hoped the completed Earth Charter would be formally endorsed by the United Nations, with some partial endorsement by the United Nations Educational Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) and the International Union for the Conservation of Nature (IUCN). Today the Earth Charter remains a “people’s treaty” without much formal power, but with moral authority and the potential to mobilize global responses to climate change and conservation initiatives. We believe that with some major rewriting it also has the potentiality to catalyze social justice initiatives. As stated earlier, the Earth Charter was influential in shaping the UNESCO Decade of Education for Sustainable Development from

2005–2014 (Earth Charter Initiative, n.d.-b, para. 10). In the Earth Charter Initiative’s *Guide for using the Earth Charter in education* (2009), the authors state the following goals of education for sustainability:

- To understand the challenges and critical choices that humanity faces and appreciate the interconnections between these challenges and choices;
- To comprehend the meaning of a sustainable way of life and of sustainable development and to create personal goals and values conducive to a sustainable way of living; and,
- To critically evaluate a given situation and identify action goals for bringing about positive change. (p. 7)

We affirm the importance of the Earth Charter as a vital and influential document. Yet, the foregoing goals lack specific reference to “environmental” education per se because, as Gruenewald (2004) argues, the Earth Charter is supposed to be non-controversial and environmental education is often politicized. Despite this, Earth Charter International (n.d.) linked the Earth Charter to environmental education by stating, “all principles in the Earth Charter are related to environmental issues” (p. 1) and touting the document as an educational tool.

We believe the ambition of the Earth Charter’s document has not been realized over the last two decades. Increasing pressure is mounting on Earth systems, political divide is rampant, and we sit on a critical edge of resiliency unprecedented in human history (IPCC, 2018). We look to the concept of social justice as a way not only to understand the value of the Earth Charter in the Anthropocene but also to examine this document and its continuing value in the future visions of life on Earth.

Methodology

We seek to understand the current saliency of the Earth Charter, and to do so we appreciate the need to identify our biases. We are a group of White graduate students and one professor, from primarily middle-class backgrounds; we study environmental education; and we recognize that our positionalities inevitably inform our world views. We acknowledge and attempt to address our inherent biases and seek to look at the Earth Charter through a critical lens in order to contribute to the discourse examining oppressive forces within education. Our bias as environmental educators, which is steeped in the analysis of environmental education theorists such as Bowers (2001a), Jickling and Wals (2008), Sauv  (2005), and Stapp (1969), limits our perspectives on viewership into some aspects of social justice. As such, we believe that it is vitally important for us to acknowledge our biases as we explore “traditional” orientations of environmental education. We

believe that critical analysis of environmental education aids in disrupting the ongoing processes of White supremacy, racism, marginalization, and oppression that stem from the field.

Our team used critical discourse analysis (Chambers, 2009; Fairclough, 2012; Jorgenson & Phillips, 2002) as a way to examine the language used within both the Earth Charter and some primary literature written about the Earth Charter (specifically, Antunes and Gadotti [2005], Bosselmann [2004], Clugston [2010], Corcoran [2004], Gruenewald [2004], Preston [2010], and Tucker [2008]). We recognize that social and cultural landscapes are rooted in linguistics and discursive processes. Discourse is politically bound, complicit in its agency. Moreover, the analysis of language and terminologies can expose societal and political meaning inherent therein. By examining text, language, and discourse within larger social practice, notions of bias and the underlying world views of documents such as the Earth Charter can be surmised and furthered. Jorgensen and Phillips (2002) note the objective of critical discourse analysis as explanatory critique, such as we are practicing here; it is:

to promote more egalitarian and liberal discourses and thereby to further democratisation. A step in this direction is to make people aware that discourse functions as a form of social practice which reflects and takes part in the reinforcement of unequal power relations. (p. 88)

As the Earth Charter has an egalitarian aim, using critical discourse analysis to examine it invites readers to analyze ways in which such a document fails to “further democratisation” and awareness-building and, therefore, ways in which it has the potential to reinforce “unequal power relations.”

In addition to critical discourse analysis, we examined the Earth Charter through the specific critical lens of social justice, drawing on particularly stemming from the myriad of perspectives found within Adams et al. (2018) in *Readings for diversity and social justice* and the ecocentrically oriented findings of Martusewicz, Edmundson, and Lupinacci (2014) in *Ecojustice education: Toward diverse, democratic, and sustainable communities*. We conducted six discussion-based meetings over fall 2018 and winter 2019 in which we considered various aspects of the Earth Charter and related peer-reviewed literature. These meetings led to a focussed analysis of three different aspects of the materials: inclusiveness in language, terminology, and communication; social justice education through culturally-relevant pedagogies; and world view. Each author was tasked with asking the question, how does the Earth Charter hold up as an educational tool within the Anthropocene?

For the remainder of the article, our analysis focusses on language and terminology use in the Earth Charter and related documents. The examination is divided into four sections: an introductory section that explores the relevance of the Earth Charter in today’s educational climate; an analysis of the importance of inclusion in language, terminology, and communication within the Earth

Charter; an exploration of culturally relevant pedagogy and the Earth Charter; and an examination of world views presented within the Earth Charter.

Relevance of the Earth Charter in Today's Educational Climate

Despite the Earth Charter's attempts at creating a broad and inclusive framework for education for sustainable development across the globe, we suggest that the Earth Charter lacks the rigour it needs to become a transformative educational document in this day and age. We believe the Earth Charter does not go far enough in framing effective, inclusive education that opposes institutionalized educational practices. The Earth Charter is out of touch with developing trends in environmental education practices because the document uses exclusive terminology inherent in standardized education. Further, the Earth Charter does not sufficiently address problematic deficit approaches to marginalized people. Finally, the Earth Charter promotes an anthropocentric world view through sustainability education—a perspective that we find incongruent with the purpose of environmental education. We conclude our paper by questioning the utility of using the Earth Charter in its current form as a foundational document for environmental education or education in general.

Environmental education is in the midst of an identity crisis. Gruenewald (2004) believes environmental education is a field that, in practice, has “marginalize[d] its inherent critique of dominant culture” (p. 88) by attempting to become legitimate through standardization. When it was first published, he had high hopes for the Earth Charter's influence on environmental education. Even at that time, he raised a flag, however: “whether the Earth Charter can begin to influence moral judgement, public opinion, or education remains an open question” (Gruenewald, 2004, p. 100). We wonder if it is really an open question. Perhaps a better way to phrase this question is to ask: How can we reimagine an Earth Charter that is fair, just, inclusive, and culturally responsive?

The Freirian eco-pedagogues, Antunes and Gadotti (2005), suggest that the Earth Charter does not need to be changed; rather, it needs to be accepted in its current state, but should also be more strategically mobilized. They remark:

The Earth Charter has contributed to the development of sustainability initiatives in schools and, principally, in communities. But, we still need to broaden the Earth Charter's recognition and acceptance around the world as a mobilizing force toward a culture of peace and sustainability, as a way to celebrate diversity. As a call for unity, it can be used to develop the meaning of responsibility with respect for quality of life and to become a force to fight terrorism based on a global consensus. (p. 137)

Whether the Earth Charter *should* influence education without significant restructuring remains an open question to us. Could opening the academic and public dialogue about the underlying purpose of the Earth Charter itself help with these noble endeavours of peace, sustainability, and diversity?

Environmental education is a transdisciplinary field that has historically brushed against social justice education without engaging with it at a deeper level. For example, only recently has the field of environmental education started to acknowledge the necessity of integrating cultural and political knowledge—particularly from Indigenous communities—with “the devastation and damage to the Earth by a colonial, exploitative, industrial mindset” (Korteweg & Russell, 2012, p. 6) through special volumes such as the *Canadian Journal of Environmental Education* Volume 17 (2012) and *Environmental Education Research* Volume 20 (2014, No. 1). The integration of environmental education and social justice education through decolonizing environmental education is an essential and painful process (Tuck & Yang, 2012). Simply changing the terminology of the Earth Charter to make a superficial nod toward inclusion of Indigenous perspectives is not sufficient; the principles on which the document was written must shift to “actively recognizing, centring, validating, and honouring Indigenous rights, values, epistemologies or worldviews, knowledge, and the stories of the people of the Land” (Korteweg & Russell, 2012, p. 7) to be considered relevant in today’s educational climate.

The Importance of Inclusion in Language, Terminology, and Communication

The Earth Charter was written with the intention of creating a positive future-looking ethical foundation for a global community. Though created in the spirit of inclusivity, the document has lost relevance over time as widely recognized standards for diversity, equity, and inclusion have developed and grown more nuanced (Adams et al., 2018; DiAngelo, 2018). We want to take a moment, at the suggestion of one of the reviewers of this article, to identify what we mean by the term inclusivity. We consider inclusivity to be radical pluralism that welcomes multiple positions and identities into dialogues, learning, and partnership. Esteva, Prakash, and Shiva’s (2014) book *Grassroots post-modernism* speaks to the complexity of global and local movements that seek to manifest a “Global Project.” This book identifies the concept of Radical Pluralism (derived from Panikkar, 1990):

This love [Radical Pluralism] is to be found in the act of identifying oneself with the Other, surrendering to the Other’s identity, trying to immerse oneself in it, without ever losing one’s own identity. This pluralism cannot be equated with moral relativism. Pluralism is not the same as plural. That truth is pluralistic implies denying that it is either one or many; that it is possible to reduce it, to quantify it, to compare it, with a “superior,” supra-cultural criterion. Approaching the world as a pluriverse, without renouncing one’s own universe, calls for the adoption of diatopic and dialogic approaches which bring us to juridical pluralism. With this comes a radical questioning of any universalist attitude about law and rights. Cultures that probably represent the majority of the people on Earth lack words or concepts equivalent to the notion of “a right.” (Esteva et al., 2014, p. 130)

Indeed, even as the Earth Charter was entering the endorsement phase, new developments in critical discourses, including those on race, gender, class, and sexuality (Bell & Russell, 2000), were entering educational discourse, and communities that are directly affected demand a pluriverse of recognition, attention, and justice. Within the environmental movement, problematic and biased terminology has contributed to a binary-oriented view of the relationships between humans and nature (Bell, 1996). This terminology perpetuates attempts to solve problems using the same processes that created them (Bowers, 2001a). It also contributes to the systemic oppression of minoritized individuals through the reinforcement of an industrial-capitalist model based on the exclusion of non-hegemonic identities.

When addressing large-scale social and cultural ills known as “wicked problems” (Kolko, 2012), it is important to recognize that just replacing the discourse on these issues with “good terminology” is not enough. Authentically inclusive terminology is a call to take action by interrupting and dismantling the ways in which institutions construct and perpetuate systems of oppression (Fairclough, 2012). The Earth Charter emphasizes gender equality but does so using a limited and now outdated binary framework which sees the only goal as giving women the same opportunities as men. Since the Earth Charter was created, the movement for gender equality has developed a much more comprehensive and complex understanding of gender and all aspects of identity. This is also true with regard to intersections of gender and other identity markers, such as sexuality, race, and class. There are persistent challenges in normative language respecting race, class, gender, and ability in the context of access and equity (Lee & Anderson, 2009).

Though the Earth Charter calls for an acknowledgement of and action against social and environmental injustices, it does not address the deep root causes of hegemonic misogyny and systemic oppression that permeate a global world (Fairclough, 2012). C. A. Bowers, an environmental activist and educational scholar, argues:

Environmental education contributes to the double bind of helping to address environmental problems while at the same time reinforcing the use of the language/ thought patterns that underlie the digital phase of the Industrial Revolution we are now entering on a global scale. (2001a, p. 141)

The double bind to which Bowers is referring attempts to solve problems through the same methods by which they were created. In education, the social and academic opportunities available to students are directly linked to their ability to understand and identify themselves through language (Corson, 2000). Student action is best cultivated through inclusive language in which individuals see themselves reflected. If students around the world cannot see themselves included in the Earth Charter, they will not answer the call to create an ecologically just future.

Some may argue that the Earth Charter, as a document drafted in the late 20th century and first endorsed in 2000 (Earth Charter Initiative, n.d.-b) should not be held accountable for more recent changes and developments in the inclusive terminology used by educators. We acknowledge this, and also recognize the challenging nature of drafting a document that aims to be accessible to a large audience while using language that assumes a mirroring relationship between the word and the world (Lather, 1996). However, we feel the problems with terminology in the Earth Charter run much deeper than a mere failure to meet today's criteria for inclusivity.

We agree with Tucker (2008) that “we face a crisis of hope that we can make a transition to a viable future for the Earth community” (p. 20) and suggest that diverse religions, positionalities, and identities can offer alternate and inclusive views into complex problems. However, stating that the Earth Charter is “the most inclusive civil society document ever negotiated” denies the reality of what inclusion, from start to finish, looks like. This is especially true when we take into consideration younger generations championing environmental and social justice movements who have new priorities of diversity, equity, and inclusion and who use new and particular terms within those fields.

The solution to this lack of true inclusiveness within the Earth Charter is to turn to advances in critical discourse on inclusivity, equity, and access while avoiding essentialism. One way to do this is applying the lens of intersectionality to our critical examination. Intersectionality is a term that suggests the identities expressed (and unexpressed) within individuals interact in and with other identities and are bound within and among rhizomatic systems of oppression (Grillo, 1995).

Such a shift in critical discourse explicitly would recognize the ways in which various socialized oppressions interlock to create subjugation that is distinct from any one form of inequity (Dhamoon, 2011). If we applied critical theory to the Earth Charter, we could identify and examine the power and problems within the current version of the document as these relate to the description of human connections with each other and with Earth. We could then modify the charter so that it contained welcoming terminology and intersectional language, and thus the charter could offer inclusive solutions that would counter exclusive social paradigms and colonialist economics that perpetuate the global environmental crisis. The modified language could promote, among other social justice topics, gender inclusivity.

A recent paper on intersectionality and environmental and sustainability education (ESE) by Maina-Okori, Koushik, and Wilson (2018) deeply examines how gender is explored through class, race, sexuality, and ability. The authors comment on the importance of looking through interconnective and intersectional lenses when considering the field of ESE:

Examining the interconnections of social, ecological, and economic issues can help to inform a critical and inclusive conceptualization of societal problems and to reveal

just and sustainable solutions to these problems. Without such analyses, ESE runs the risk of perpetuating dominant ideologies and further marginalizing and silencing diverse voices and issues. (Maina-Okori, Koushik & Wilson, 2018, p. 293)

Celebrating and supporting diversity and intersectionality initiatives is critical to help reshape environmental education and support educators in a just and inclusive future that practices radical pluralism.

Culturally Relevant Pedagogy and the Earth Charter

For too long, environmental education, like mainstream environmentalism generally, has been a mainly a White, upper- and middle-class domain which has failed to recognize the needs and contributions of marginalized communities. In response, a growing number of environmental educators are attempting to teach in ways that are culturally relevant for students coming from a diverse spectrum of racial, economic, and gender identities. *Culturally relevant pedagogy* (CRP), a theory developed by educational scholar Gloria Ladson-Billings (1995), is “a theoretical model that not only addresses student achievement but also helps students to accept and affirm their cultural identity while developing critical perspectives that challenge inequities that schools (and other institutions) perpetuate” (p. 469). CRP seeks to move beyond educational models that see students’ cultural differences as “deficits.” It recognizes students as active agents who are rich in their own knowledge and skills, which they bring to educational settings. We believe when the Earth Charter is examined through the lens of CRP, it becomes clear that the document takes a deficit approach to marginalized communities. The Earth Charter promotes a severely limited vision of environmental and social justice that fails to address the right of all people to play an active role in shaping their own futures. To understand how the Earth Charter falls short of recognizing and celebrating marginalized communities’ own agency, it is necessary first to consider the long history of people from marginalized groups who have actively and often successfully fought back against environmental injustice.

Environmental justice (EJ) took shape as a distinct movement in the 1980s, though its roots extend much farther back into resistance against colonialism, racism, and other forms of oppression, both in North America and internationally. The movement’s foundational document is *Toxic waste and race in the United States*, a study released by the United Church of Christ in 1987. The publication shows the correlation between the racial composition of communities and where toxic waste sites are located (United Church of Christ, 1987). A follow-up report released 20 years later, in 2007, showed no reduction in the degree to which race continues to be a predictor of where toxic sites will be located (Bullard, Mohai, Saha, & Wright, 2007).

Another watershed moment for the EJ movement occurred in 1991, when activists and academics, including Dr. Robert Bullard, organized the First National People of Color Environmental Leadership Summit. At the summit, the EJ movement released a list of 17 principles and made explicit a call to eliminate the exposure of marginalized groups to not only toxic waste sites but also nuclear radiation sources, toxic working conditions, and other environmentally harmful activities (Darby & Atchison, 2014). Today, the movement continues to advocate for eliminating entrenched systems of oppression that put marginalized communities at disproportionate risk of environmental harm and for building a broader-based environmental movement concerned with the needs of marginalized groups.

Environmental justice within the environmental education field has been characterized by a number of authors as ecojustice education (Bowers, 2001b; Mueller, 2009; Martusewicz et al., 2014). This orientation invites students, teachers, organizations, and other practitioners to recognize the intersectional nature of environmental education, to refuse the “dichotomy between social justice and environmental concerns” (Martusewicz et al, 2014, p. 10), and to understand that social justice and environmental concerns are “grounded in the same cultural history” (p. 10). Drawing on the work of C. A. Bowers (2001b), Martusewicz et al. (2014, pp. 9–10) offer a succinct, six-element framework that provides a useful lens for examining the Earth Charter’s shortcomings:

- 1 The recognition and analysis of the deep cultural assumptions underlying modern thinking that undermine local and global ecosystems essential to life.
- 2 The recognition and analysis of deeply entrenched patterns of domination that unjustly define people of color, women, the poor and other groups of humans as well as the natural world as inferior and thus less worthy of life.
- 3 An analysis of the globalization of modernist thinking and the associated patterns of hyper-consumption and commodification that have led to the exploitation of the Southern Hemisphere by the North for natural and human resources.
- 4 The recognition and protection of diverse cultural and environmental commons—the necessary interdependent relationship of humans with the land, air, water and other species with whom we share this planet, and the inter-generational practices and relationships among diverse groups of people that do not require the exchange of money as the primary motivation and generally result in mutual aid and support.
- 5 An emphasis on strong Earth democracies: the idea that decisions should be made by the people who are most affected by them, that these decisions must include considerations of the right of the natural world to regenerate, and the well-being of future generations.
- 6 An approach to pedagogy and curriculum development that emphasize both

deep cultural analysis and community-based learning encouraging students to identify the causes and remediate the effects of social and ecological violence in the places where they live.

Many authors have regarded the Earth Charter as a visionary document that includes social and environmental justice as central themes. Section 12.a of the Earth Charter makes a call to “eliminate discrimination in all its forms, such as that based on race, color, sex, sexual orientation, religion, language, and national, ethnic or social origin” (Earth Charter Commission, 2000, p. 3). Some writers have apparently interpreted this and similar passages as a sufficient endorsement of the goals of environmental justice. For example, Gruenewald (2004) portrays the Earth Charter as representing a laudable “transformative discourse” that stands in stark contrast to mainstream environmental education (p. 100). Authors such as Gruenewald have also strongly praised the Earth Charter’s language about justice and seem to feel the document does enough to acknowledge the goals of social movements such as environmental justice.

While we agree that the Earth Charter goes a long way toward demonstrating cultural sensitivity, what Gruenewald and others seem to have missed in our reading of their analysis of the Earth Charter is its deficit approach to marginalized people. In its current iteration, the Earth Charter envisions top-down global solutions to environmental problems, where oppressed communities are seen as passive and in need of rescue by benevolent saviours (presumably people of privilege). Section 9.c of the Earth Charter exemplifies this problematic approach to social justice, in which oppressed people are seen as passive victims awaiting salvation: “Recognize the ignored, protect the vulnerable, serve those who suffer, and enable them to develop their capacities and to pursue their aspirations” (Earth Charter Commission, 2000, p. 3). To be sure, altruism is admirable, and people with access to money and resources have a moral responsibility to use them for good. However, there is little room, in this vision, to conceive of marginalized people as active agents who are fighting against oppressive systems on their own terms. Work for the liberation of oppressed groups should be treated as a partnership in which all stakeholders are active participants, not as a top-down delivery of liberation from on high.

Environmental justice requires that oppressed groups be seen as fully capable of and deserving of the right to determine their own way forward, but the Earth Charter does not recognize this. Section 13.a embodies the document’s problematic approach when it makes a call to “uphold the right of everyone to receive clear and timely information on environmental matters and all development plans and activities which are likely to affect them or in which they have an interest” (Earth Charter Commission, 2000, p. 3). Environmental justice is about far more than making information available; communities have the right not only to be informed about decisions that affect their local environment, but also to be actively involved in shaping and making those decisions.

The Principles of Environmental Justice released at the First National People of Color Environmental Leadership Summit are very explicit on this point. The Principles state that the EJ movement “affirms the fundamental right to political, economic, cultural and environmental self-determination of all peoples,” and that communities have “the right to participate as equal partners at every level of decision-making, including needs assessment, planning, implementation, enforcement and evaluation” (Environmental Justice Network, 1996). The Earth’s Charter’s suggestion that communities simply need to be given information falls far short of these demands, further illustrating its deficit approach to marginalized people.

Incorporating concepts from environmental justice and other social movements of marginalized people should be considered an ethical imperative for educators, and it is an idea with immense practical value. EJ is an ideal lens through which to examine topics in the hard sciences, sociology, political science, the humanities, and other fields since possessing a good understanding of environmental justice controversies may require knowledge drawn from many diverse disciplines (Darby & Atchison, 2014). Authors including Kopnina (2016) have noted potential tension between the EJ movement’s focus on marginalized *human* communities and the goal of a more ecocentric environmental paradigm that considers all organisms to be important for their own sake (p. 140). As a later section of this paper argues, we agree environmental education should become more ecocentric, and we view this as another place where the Earth Charter falls short. However, we also join Hung (2007, p. 46–47) in maintaining that many traditional cultures around the world have developed much more ecocentric orientations than today’s mainstream Western culture. Thus, by recognizing the value of non-dominant cultures’ perspectives, as EJ seeks to do, we can challenge students to consider relatively ecocentric worldviews. We must consider, as J. Drew Lanham does in *Orion* magazine, “the role that red, brown, and black people—who preceded ecologists and their almost exclusively white conservation ‘movement’—played in shaping nature, and what those people know about the . . . landscape before they [ecologists] did” (Lanham, 2018, p. 30). We must also acknowledge the often undervalued past and present contributions of Indigenous ecologists and those from other marginalized groups (Kimmerer, 2013).

In short, when treated correctly, EJ provides an opportunity to connect environmental topics to students’ lived experiences while opening a gateway to challenge White human supremacy from a variety of angles. However, as we have shown, the Earth Charter does not offer a sophisticated enough framework for doing this in a way that respects marginalized people’s decision-making power. Rather than the deficit approach to marginalized people promoted in the Earth Charter, we believe environmental educators must embrace the alternatives embodied by culturally relevant pedagogy and its derivatives. This should be done with an awareness of how CRP has evolved over time, and of

how recent authors have critiqued some attempts to put CRP into practice. For example Paris (2012) writes, “We must ask ourselves if the research and practice being produced under the umbrella of cultural relevance and responsiveness is, indeed, ensuring maintenance of the languages and cultures of African American, Latinx, Indigenous American, Asian American, Pacific Islander American, and other longstanding and newcomer communities in our classrooms” (p. 94). Paris suggests what is really needed is *culturally sustaining pedagogy*, which is more than merely reactive or responsive. It seeks to “support young people in sustaining the cultural and linguistic competence of their communities while simultaneously offering access to dominant cultural competence” (p. 95). This is an important contribution to the foundation laid by CRP.

Despite the usefulness of engaging in such critiques, CRP and its derivative pedagogies stand among the most important responses to traditional deficit approaches to teaching (Ladson-Billings, 2014). Culturally relevant and culturally sustaining pedagogies regard students of all backgrounds as rich in the cultural, social, linguistic, and other forms of capital that they bring with them into educational settings. These students are actively involved in shaping their own futures and that of the world around them, just as marginalized communities have always defined their own goals through movements such as EJ. This is in direct contradiction with the language of the Earth Charter, which, as aforementioned, feeds into a deficit approach to teaching.

We cannot “teach the Earth Charter” and do a good job addressing the concerns of movements such as EJ and ecojustice education without a deep dive into supplemental material and critical thinking. The Earth Charter’s assumption that oppressed communities are passive, its failure to treat them as deserving of full inclusion in decision-making processes, and its promotion of a deficit approach to marginalized people make it wholly insufficient as a tool for educators who wish to make our teaching culturally relevant.

World Views and the Earth Charter

A question we must ask ourselves is, “What world view is the Earth Charter promoting?” The answer, we argue, is that the Earth Charter reinforces the fundamentally anthropocentric, capitalist world view that permeates dominant Western culture and that treats the non-human biosphere mainly as a collection of resources to be privatized and exploited. This is despite the fact that the document sometimes uses terminology that appears on its face to suggest an ecocentric world view, one where plants, animals, and other lifeforms are celebrated for their intrinsic value (Preston, 2010). The Earth Charter’s failure to challenge modern capitalism by embracing a robust ecocentrism is one of its most problematic aspects.

The negative effects of Western-style capitalism on people and the non-human environment are well-documented (see for example Chasin, 2004;

Klein, 2014; Korten, 2001; Shiva, 2008; and Vandermeer & Perfecto, 2005). Furthermore, while the discipline of environmental education presents itself as being in opposition to ecologically destructive activities, in practice it too often fails to question the anthropocentric, capitalist assumptions that undergird concepts like “sustainable development” (Hung, 2007, p. 41–42). For example, environmental education has tended to exclude or fail to take seriously the world views of Indigenous and other non-Western cultures (Cole & O’Riley, 2010; Tuck, McKenzie, & McCoy, 2014), many of whom espouse a greater ecocentrism than can be found in the capitalist world view that dominates in the West (Hung, 2007). We believe the Earth Charter follows the mainstream environmental education model in so far as it fails to challenge dominant Western world views in any meaningful way. This is a crucial oversight because attempting to address environmental problems without questioning the conditions under which those problems were created effectively eliminates the possibility of accomplishing the vision the Earth Charter puts forth. Reverend Lynice Pinkard, an activist of faith in California, highlights the necessity of questioning capitalism in her 2013 interview with *Tikkun* magazine, in which she says, “global capitalism binds the majority of the Earth’s population into poverty, substitutes consumption for humanity and the love of life, and fosters wanton depletion of the Earth’s resources” (p. 32). It is highly challenging to envision how a capitalist society could effectively teach the values and principles of environmental education without engaging in gross hypocrisy.

To be sure, certain passages in the Earth Charter do at least attempt to break free from an anthropocentric, Western capitalist world view. For example, its first principle—(1. a)—is to: “Recognize that all beings are interdependent and every form of life has value regardless of its worth to human beings” (Earth Charter Commission, 2000, p. 2). However, despite this apparent nod to a holistic ecocentrism, we believe that when taken in its entirety, the Earth Charter continues to promote an anthropocentric world view that reinforces capitalist systems.

One way in which the charter displays its anthropocentric, pro-capitalist stance is through its use of terminology. Words and phrases related to production, resource extraction, and development propagate the anthropocentric dogma that the Earth is for human consumption, while operating within the existing oppressive frameworks of capitalism and “sustainable growth” that led to the ecological degradation and social injustices the Earth Charter is attempting to redress. Furthermore, Section 7 calls for societies to “adopt patterns of production, consumption and reproduction that safeguard the Earth’s regenerative capacities, human rights and community well-being.” This is further emphasized in Section 10’s call to “Ensure that economic activities and institutions at all levels promote human development in an equitable and sustainable manner” (Earth Charter Commission, 2000, p. 2). Unfortunately, this language feeds into a dominant narrative grounded in the desirability of infinite economic growth, which has contributed to the conquering of land and the simultaneous

subjugation of marginalized peoples for production and exploitation. This type of colonialism is a basic principle of capitalist models (Davis, 2000). We believe this narrative runs counter to the goal of a sustainable human relationship with the Earth.

The Earth Charter's approach is largely consistent with current mainstream environmental education, or education for sustainable development (ESD), which offers an anthropocentric world view in which humans are placed at the centre, separate from the environment and other living creatures. Kopnina (2012) argues ESD's near-exclusive focus on human needs risks sidelining ecological concerns that affect the existence of other species, but which may have little or no direct impact on human welfare. We agree with Kopnina on this specific point, although we wish to stress some misgivings about her overall approach. For example, later in the same paper Kopnina appears to endorse (or at least does not challenge) Paul Watson of the Sea Shepherd Conservation Society's position that "speciesism is a far more serious issue" than social issues like racism and sexism. After quoting Watson, Kopnina further emphasizes his argument by paraphrasing it, stating that "human rights are taken for granted, while the rights of other species are reduced to 'protection of natural resources'" (p. 707). This appears to downplay the degree to which oppressive systems like racism and sexism are so deeply rooted in our society that the need to challenge their many manifestations is in fact not taken for granted by large segments of the population (Adams et al., 2018, p. 65-68 and p. 323-329). We agree that speciesism is important, but we would put it on more of an *equal* footing with racism and sexism (Olson, 2019) and would challenge the arguments stating that speciesism is a "far more serious" issue. Despite this major caveat, we agree with Kopnina that ESD as it is currently practiced has shifted the emphasis in environmental education away from non-human species and ecosystems and toward unlimited economic growth. How can the environment exist as more than a commodity in this anthropocentric world view, which the Earth Charter upholds? ESD and environmental education more generally must recognize that all living things have intrinsic value, not just the economic value ascribed to them by humans.

An anthropocentric world view precludes humanity's collective ability to understand the true implications of how our current practices directly affect the world in which we live. This is especially problematic given that we have entered the Anthropocene. Human beings, especially dominant elites, have the potential to alter the landscape so that the Earth may become uninhabitable, and those affected first and hardest will be marginalized populations who currently lack the power and resources to shield themselves from environmental degradation and collapse (Pellow & Brulle, 2005). The emergence of the Anthropocene poses foundational questions for education across the globe. Laird (2017) argues, "nurturing the will to change our ways of living so that we can maintain or enhance Earth's habitability . . . [may] be the most difficult

educational challenge that the Anthropocene poses” (p. 269). The Earth Charter puts forth a framework that assumes consumption-based capitalist lifestyles will largely be maintained in their current form and calls for “deficit” lifestyles to be improved. This framework resides firmly in the world view of capitalist anthropocentrism and represents a major shortcoming of the document. As Bosselman (2004) suggests,

The shift from the welfare of human beings to the welfare of human and other living beings may not be dramatic in practical terms, but does indicate a significant shift of paradigms. The Earth looks different if we are solely concerned with ourselves (anthropocentrism), on the one hand, or if we are seeing ourselves as part of a wider community of life (biocentrism), nature (ecocentrism) or the universe (holism). Only in a non-anthropocentric perspective do we accept moral responsibility towards Earth and its future; only then we can truly speak of an “Earth” Charter. (p. 68)

To be an effective educational tool that promotes the well-being of all humans and non-human species across the globe, the Earth Charter would have to critically analyze the dominant anthropocentric, capitalist world view it currently promotes (Bosselman, 2004). In failing to do this, the document misses a major opportunity and does a disservice to our students.

Conclusion

We have entered the Anthropocene, and with this epoch we must focus on inclusive terminology, culturally relevant pedagogy, and the development of an ecocentric world view. We believe that human–environmental–ethical considerations should help reorganize and reset the field of environmental education and should not be complicit in upholding capitalist orientations. Amidst the rampant inequality and environmental degradation caused by capitalism with which our students are confronted, we want young people to read educational documents that are fully alive and relevant to the problems of our time.

A special issue of the *Journal of Education for Sustainable Development* (Volume 4: Issue 2) was published in 2010. In this issue, Rick Clugston, the introductory author and Executive Director of Earth Charter US, synthesized much of the arguments put forth in support of the Earth Charter as an educational document. He ended his synthesis with a statement of endorsement that articulates the aspirations of the Earth Charter:

The dream of creating a just, sustainable and peaceful future is perennial, and the way forward to realise it has been articulated in a rich diversity of cultural and historical contexts. The Earth Charter is an expression of this dream, articulated in our increasingly globalised world. Many are translating this dream into action through educational approaches that increase our ability to respect and care for the community of life and Earth, our common home. (Clugston, 2010, p. 165).

We hold this same aspiration and think that the Earth Charter must be updated to reflect the ways in which we are teaching, thinking, and imagining our future.

Educational progress is not easily discernible. As environmental crises continue to mount, it is imperative to question the ways in which we teach our young people about the world in which we live. We do not mean to be discouraging by questioning the value of the Earth Charter. Instead, we are aiming to create an atmosphere for critically examining the possibilities of environmental education for a just and thriving future, particularly as the field struggles with standardization and legitimation.

International declarations on world issues today look different from when documents such as the Earth Charter and the Tbilisi Declaration were written (UNESCO/UNEP, 1977). We see countries focussing on addressing specific issues such as carbon emissions, through international bodies such as the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC- History, n.d.). One option that might foster critical environmental education would be to abandon all-encompassing global documents, such as the Earth Charter, which easily fall into the trap of promoting dominant language, attitudes, practices, and essentialization. However, to us this feels counterproductive. We believe that the collective, international action and intent of creating the Earth Charter is noble, yet it falls short in the ways explained above. In the Anthropocene, it is clear that this document must either find new life through its radical revision or perhaps be renewed as a Social Justice Charter for Earth. We propose that a Social Justice Charter for Earth would centre Environmental Justice. Such a charter would use an eco-justice and culturally relevant pedagogy and recognize the intersectional and overlapping nature of social and natural worlds on Earth.

We have an opportunity for reframing and reorganizing outdated documents like the Earth Charter. With co-creative writing technology, we have the ability to create a world-wide collaboration process for a Social Justice Charter for Earth. This charter could include many diverse voices, be supported by international agencies, be grounded in pluralism, and highlight frameworks for environmental solutions that are inclusive, culturally relevant, and ecocentric. We can create something that both educators and students look to for direction and understanding. We have the space to find new ground as a result of the identity struggle of environmental education and that is a very hopeful place to be.

Notes on the Contributors

Nicholas R.G. Stanger is an associate professor of environmental education at Huxley College of the Environment at Western Washington University. His research uses an educationalist lens and participatory techniques to understand environmental sociology, ecological identity, transformative places, and Indigenous responses to climate change. He aims to understand, mobilize, and help

create space for Indigenous communities to tell their stories of resurgence, cultural adaptation, and sovereignty all while helping find pathways, protocol, and critical understandings amongst settler-colonial communities.

Nick Engelfried is an educator who holds an MEd in Environmental Education from Western Washington University and an MS in Environmental Studies from University of Montana. His interests include using culturally responsive education strategies and outdoor experiential learning to engender a commitment to environmental protection in K-12 students and young adults.

Sarah Clement is a program coordinator and educator at the University of Alaska Fairbanks. She holds an MEd in Environmental Education from Western Washington University.

Ash Kunz is the STEM Outreach Coordinator for North Central Regional Library. Her focus is in inclusivity and equitable access to education in rural communities. She holds an MEd in Environmental Education from Western Washington University.

Rachael Grasso instructs and coordinates outdoor educational experiences for a variety of organizations. She holds an MEd in Environmental Education from Western Washington University

Emily “Smokey” Brine holds an MEd in Environmental Education from Western Washington University. She currently studies fine cabinet making in the north of Israel.

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