

The Dawning of an Earth Ethic

Scott Russell Sanders

Among Earth's millions of species, ours is the only one capable of rapidly changing the chemistry of the atmosphere and thereby endangering the whole web of life, from phytoplankton and corals to polar bears and pine trees, from hummingbirds to humans. We are also the only species capable of documenting this disruption, identifying its causes, and acting to counter it. Yet so far we have failed to act on the scale or with the urgency required to avert this unfolding disaster. Why are we failing? What keeps us from caring for the atmosphere as a shared, finite, and fragile envelope for life?

The resistance mounted by the fossil fuel industry, its purchased politicians, and its hired apologists is obvious. Their campaign of deception and legislative obstruction has been carried out most tellingly in the United States, the nation with the highest per capita rate of greenhouse emissions and, therefore, with the greatest responsibility for devising fair and effective ways of curbing emissions. For example, the U.S. Chamber of Commerce, the largest conduit of corporate money into American politics, lobbies against every move in Congress or the Environmental Protection Agency to place limits on the burning of fossil fuels, and it funds political candidates who oppose any such limits.¹ Between 1997 and 2011 a single oil corporation, Koch Industries, the second-largest privately-held company in America, funneled \$67 million into more than fifty organizations, all of which deny that humans are disturbing the climate.² Despite these efforts to thwart meaningful responses to climate change, however, we cannot place all the blame on the fossil fuel industry. To understand our failure we need to look deeper.

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LOOKING BACK

Our evolutionary history did not prepare us to meet global threats. Indigenous cultures had to learn the forms of restraint necessary to keep from exhausting the supply of game, depleting the soils, or fouling the waterways of their home regions. Their knowledge and practices were local. The cultures that did not learn these lessons either moved elsewhere to try again in a new place or they perished. The ruins of abandoned settlements can be found from the Tigris and Euphrates Valley to the Amazon jungle.³ With more than seven billion of our kind having now filled, and often overfilled, every habitable place, we can no longer move elsewhere without crowding those who are already there. Now we must learn the forms of restraint necessary for survival not as isolated tribes but as a species.

It is not only the novelty of the challenge that has so far prevented humankind from grappling with climate disruption. Our habits of mind, some ancient and some recent, are major obstacles to effective action. We are accustomed to thinking of ourselves as members of families, clans, tribes, races, classes, or nations, with corresponding loyalties and responsibilities, rather than as members of a species, with interests that transcend all such divisions. We are also accustomed to thinking of humans as separate from the rest of nature, privileged to use Earth as we see fit, rather than as one species among millions, all sharing a tiny, hospitable globe in the midst of a vast, inhospitable universe. We have imagined that technology, undergirded by science, enables us to manipulate nature to suit our comfort and convenience while insulating us from harmful consequences. And those of us in rich countries have assumed that it is our right to draw resources from the whole planet, with scant regard for the needs of those who live in poorer countries or for the needs of future generations. These views are not shared by everyone, of course, but they are pervasive enough to influence decision-making at all levels, from households and boardrooms to legislatures and the United Nations.

In societies devoted to free-market capitalism, and especially in the United States, we are taught that we should define ourselves as consumers;⁴ that our chief motivation is self-interest; that the basic model for human interaction is competition, producing winners and losers; that markets, driven by the selfish choices made by consumers and businesses, provide the best means of exploiting resources and distributing goods and services; that money possesses inherent value, so the more of it one controls the more power one deserves to exercise,

regardless of how the money was acquired or how it is used; that the only legal obligation of corporations should be to maximize returns for their shareholders; that corporations deserve certain of the rights guaranteed to human persons, including freedom of speech, and since money facilitates speech, corporations may spend unlimited amounts to sway elections;⁵ that financial wealth is more important than cultural, social, or natural wealth; that wealth held in private hands is more important than shared wealth; and that the overriding goal of every economy, business, and institution should be to grow.

Conveyed by advertising and the corporate media, by politicians and pundits, these ideas appeal to our impulses for selfishness, aggression, tribalism, short-term gratification, and status-seeking. Together, they form a worldview that stymies action not only on climate change but also on the arms trade, nuclear proliferation, overfishing of the oceans, population growth, chronic poverty, environmental refugees, the accelerating extinction of species, and many other global issues. Carried to its logical extreme, this worldview would convert every tree and fish, every inch of soil and drop of oil, every smidgen of clean water and fresh air into money, at which point there would be nothing of real value left to buy. Long before this happened, of course, Earth would have become desolate and civilization would have collapsed—or, alternatively, we would have rejected this ruinous worldview and embraced a countervailing vision, one that appeals to our impulses for compassion, altruism, cooperation, long-term planning, and justice.

LOOKING FORWARD

What might this alternative worldview entail? We could begin by seeing ourselves not as consumers but as creators, conservers, and citizens. We are not solitary selves, concerned only for personal advantage; we are social beings, belonging to families and communities, concerned for the well-being of others, especially those who are most vulnerable. Nor are we confined to the present moment; we live with an awareness of history, inheriting the consequences of past human actions, good and bad, and imagining the future consequences of our own actions. True, we are moved by self-interest, but we are also motivated by affection, generosity, curiosity, empathy, respect, and reverence. We may identify with a place, a religion, or an ethnic group, but ultimately we belong to humankind. Our fate is inseparable from the fate of our species. And our species, in turn, is linked genetically as well as ecologically to all life on Earth: we cannot thrive on a degraded

planet. Competition is appropriate in certain domains, such as sports, but our lives are primarily defined and enriched by cooperation. While technology has provided us with many benefits, it has also brought nuclear weapons, pollution, pesticides, acid rain, electronic spying, climate change, and many other hazards. While shielding us from old dangers and discomforts, it exposes us to new ones. So we must ask of any technology, before it is imposed on the world, whether it will harm people, our fellow creatures, or Earth.

In the realm of economics (especially as currently understood in the United States), this alternative worldview would insist that money is not the measure of all things. Money has no intrinsic value; it is only a symbolic token, which people agree to accept in exchange for things of real value. Without that acceptance—when there is runaway inflation, for example, or social breakdown—money becomes mere digits in databases or worthless paper. Since capital is nothing more than the stored symbolic power of money, the owners of capital deserve no preferential treatment or deference, especially when their actions threaten the health of society or nature. Likewise, corporations are artificial entities licensed by society and dependent for their functioning on society's laws and infrastructure. They are not persons, and they are not entitled to the rights of persons. At any scale larger than face-to-face exchanges, markets are never truly free; they are manipulated so as to benefit those with the greatest financial power. Markets are useful mechanisms in certain spheres, but there are other spheres—such as health care, education, criminal justice, environmental protection, and warfare—in which profit-seeking should not rule.⁶ Concentrated financial wealth may be acquired by means fair or foul—through selling useful inventions or valuable services, perhaps, or through slavery or gambling or fraud. But however acquired, it is a social product, and therefore is rightly taxed and regulated by society. On a finite planet, perpetual growth—of a business, an institution, or an economy—is neither sustainable nor desirable. No nation or social class has the right to consume resources at a rate that forces others to live in poverty, drives other species to extinction, or diminishes the prospects for future generations.

Some such reimagining will be essential if we are to foster an ethic that embraces not only humankind but all other species along with the natural systems, from oceans to atmosphere, that make life possible on our small planet. Moral visions asserting the worth and dignity of all human beings appear in the creeds of many religions, in the works of many philosophers, and in pivotal manifestos such as the American Declaration of Independence and the Universal Declaration of Human

Rights.⁷ Moral visions that assert the worth and dignity of nonhuman nature, a feature of long-lasting indigenous cultures, have arisen within industrial societies only recently, primarily in response to scientific revelations about the interconnectedness of the living world.

Among the earliest and most influential of these ecologically-informed ethics is the one proposed by Aldo Leopold in *A Sand County Almanac, and Sketches Here and There* (1949).⁸ Well before it became evident that humans were disturbing the climate, Leopold recognized environmental disturbance on the scale of watersheds and bioregions. He was alarmed by the clear-cutting of forests and draining of wetlands, the overgrazing of public lands, the spread of invasive species, the dwindling or disappearance of songbirds and prairie flowers, and he was alarmed especially by the American Dust Bowl, with its catastrophic erosion of soil and displacement of people. The root cause of this damage, he argued, was the narrowly economic and utilitarian view of nature prevailing in America: “We abuse land because we regard it as a commodity belonging to us. When we see land as a community to which we belong, we may begin to use it with love and respect. There is no other way for land to survive the impact of mechanized man That land is a community is the basic concept of ecology, but that land is to be loved and respected is an extension of ethics.”⁹

In “The Land Ethic,” the final essay in *A Sand County Almanac*, Leopold elaborates on the moral implications of ecological knowledge:

All ethics so far evolved rest upon a single premise: that the individual is a member of a community of interdependent parts. His instincts prompt him to compete for his place in that community, but his ethics prompt him also to co-operate (perhaps in order that there may be a place to compete for). The land ethic simply enlarges the boundaries of the community to include soils, waters, plants, and animals, or collectively: the land.¹⁰

Near the end of the essay, after outlining what ecology reveals about the intricate relationships within natural systems, Leopold sums up the values at the heart of the land ethic: “Examine each question in terms of what is ethically and esthetically right, as well as what is economically expedient. A thing is right when it tends to preserve the integrity, stability, and beauty of the biotic community. It is wrong when it tends otherwise.”¹¹

Since Leopold’s day, scientists have expanded our understanding of “the biotic community” to encompass the whole planet. In order to dwell responsibly within this great community, we need an ethic that likewise encompasses the planet, with

all its interwoven parts, living and nonliving, human and nonhuman. It is easy to dismiss such a vision as utopian, too feeble to overcome the self-serving bias of individuals, corporations, and nations. But there are clear signs that an ecologically-informed Earth ethic is emerging—within religious groups, among artists and philosophers, in municipal and regional governments, and in hundreds of thousands of organizations devoted to protecting the environment and meeting human needs.¹²

One of the most comprehensive expressions of this emergent ethic is the Earth Charter, which was formally launched in 2000. Commissioned by the United Nations, the Charter was composed through a civil society initiative that involved a decade-long drafting process and open, searching, worldwide consultation. It has been endorsed by more than 4,500 organizations, including academies, universities, foundations, and churches, representing tens of millions of people throughout the world. No previous manifesto has inspired such a globe-spanning consensus of values, or so firmly grounded a moral vision in the cosmic story revealed by science. As noted in its Preamble:

Humanity is part of a vast evolving universe. Earth, our home, is alive with a unique community of life. The forces of nature make existence a demanding and uncertain adventure, but Earth has provided the conditions essential to life's evolution. The resilience of the community of life and the well-being of humanity depend upon preserving a healthy biosphere with all its ecological systems, a rich variety of plants and animals, fertile soils, pure waters, and clean air. The global environment with its finite resources is a common concern of all peoples. The protection of Earth's vitality, diversity, and beauty is a sacred trust.¹³

While not legally binding, the Charter has gained moral authority by giving voice to a universal aspiration, one that links human flourishing with “the integrity, stability, and beauty” of our planetary home.

The dawning of an Earth ethic is visible in the work of the United Nations and its agencies, and in the dozens of international agreements aimed at protecting the biosphere, ranging from the Migratory Bird Act (1918) and the Antarctic Treaty (1959) to the Montreal Protocol on Substances that Deplete the Ozone Layer (1989) and the Minamata Convention on Mercury (2013). It is visible in the work of global organizations devoted to relieving human suffering and protecting nature, such as Doctors Without Borders and the World Wildlife Fund; in the striving by nongovernmental organizations, such as the World Social Forum, to

create an equitable and sustainable alternative to the industrial economy; and in the free sharing of art, knowledge, inventions, and tools through the Internet.

Whatever their shortcomings, these and kindred efforts show our potential for cooperating on a scale commensurate with the challenges we face. Nowhere is that potential better illustrated than in the quarter-century endeavors of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC). Established by the United Nations in 1988 to assess the risks of human-caused climate change, the IPCC has integrated the work of thousands of scientists from dozens of nations to produce a series of authoritative reports and policy recommendations. So far, governments have been reluctant to follow those recommendations—again, with the United States among the most laggard. The inertia and selfishness of nation-states contrasts shamefully with the dedication and generosity of the scientists, who donate their service to the IPCC, and who transcend the parochial interests of their home countries and social classes in the search for truth.

Clearly, we need international agreements that will lead to dramatic reductions in greenhouse emissions and will help protect those communities and species that are most endangered by climate disruption. But in the absence of such high-level policies, local and regional governments have been taking the initiative—setting standards to reduce emissions, encourage conservation, and speed the shift from carbon-based fuels to renewable energy. Religious organizations have identified climate disruption, and the suffering it imposes on the poor, as a leading moral issue. Congregations, businesses, universities, and nonprofits, along with many millions of households and individuals, are reducing their carbon footprints and creating a human economy respectful of nature's economy. This is a spontaneous worldwide movement, a rational as well as ethical response to an unprecedented challenge.

Humans have never before had to recognize that our actions can degrade the conditions for life not just in our home region but on the entire planet, and can do so quickly, within a human lifetime. No single generation is responsible for creating this dilemma, but those of us alive now are the ones who have been made aware of it. Thus, we have an obligation to find a solution that will not condemn our descendants and fellow species to misery or extinction. We are not doomed by nature or history to continue on the path that has led us to this evolutionary impasse. Despite the powerful inertia of the industrial economy, despite human appetite, we can choose to go a different way, guided by reason,

imagination, and love. We see people making that choice, alone or in groups, everywhere we look.

NOTES

- ¹ “Of the \$32,000,000 the chamber spent on the 2010 midterm elections, 94 percent went to climate change deniers.” Website of the “The U.S. Chamber Doesn’t Speak for Me” campaign, March 11, 2013, chamber.350.org (consulted November 2013). Nike and Apple are among the corporations that have resigned from the chamber over this issue.
- ² “Koch Industries: Still Fueling Climate Denial,” Greenpeace USA, www.greenpeace.org/usa/en/campaigns/global-warming-and-energy/polluterwatch/koch-industries/ (consulted November 2013). Recipients of the largest amounts of Koch’s cash, ranging from \$1 million to \$13 million, include: Americans for Prosperity, Cato Institute, Citizens for a Sound Economy, Federalist Society for Law and Public Policy, Heritage Foundation, Institute for Humane Studies, Mercatus Center, Pacific Research Institute for Public Policy, Washington Legal Foundation, and Reason Foundation. See also: www.greenpeace.org/usa/en/campaigns/global-warming-and-energy/polluterwatch/Dealing-in-Doubt--the-Climate-Denial-Machine-vs-Climate-Science/.
- ³ For an overview of societies doomed by ecological abuse, see Jared Diamond, *Collapse: How Societies Choose to Fail or Succeed*, rev. ed. (New York: Penguin, 2011).
- ⁴ In many American high schools, departments formerly called “Home Economics” have been renamed “Consumer Science,” neatly shifting the emphasis from the managing of households to the buying of goods and services.
- ⁵ These “rights” were asserted in *Citizens United v. Federal Elections Commission* (2010) in a 5-4 vote that has been compared with the *Dred Scott* case as one of the most shameful decisions in the history of the Supreme Court. For a discussion of the case, see: en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Citizens_United_v._Federal_Election_Commission (consulted November 2013).
- ⁶ Michael J. Sandel makes the case for such distinctions in *What Money Can’t Buy: The Moral Limits of Markets* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2012).
- ⁷ The Declaration, adopted in 1948 by the United Nations in response to the horrors of World War II and the concentration camps, bears frequent reading: www.un.org/en/documents/udhr/. The vote was 48-0, with eight abstentions: South Africa (to protect apartheid); Saudi Arabia (to protect state religion); the Soviet Union and members of the Soviet bloc (to avoid permitting the free movement of people).
- ⁸ Aldo Leopold, *A Sand County Almanac, and Sketches Here and There* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1949; Special Commemorative Edition, 1987).
- ⁹ Leopold, pp. viii–ix.
- ¹⁰ Leopold, pp. 203–204.
- ¹¹ Leopold, pp. 224–25.
- ¹² For a comprehensive survey of world spiritual traditions as they bear on environmental concerns, see the Forum on Religion and Ecology: fore.research.yale.edu/. For a survey of the worldwide upwelling of social justice and environmental activism, see Paul Hawken, *Blessed Unrest: How the Largest Social Movement in History Is Restoring Grace, Justice, and Beauty to the World* (New York: Viking Penguin, 2007).
- ¹³ The full text of the Earth Charter, along with the history of its composition, can be read here: www.earthcharterinaction.org/content/pages/Read-the-Charter.html (consulted November 2013).