

People's Environment Narrative  
Legacy of the Stockholm Conference on the Human Environment  
Remarks of Daniel Magraw  
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Welcome, and thank you joining us.

The Stockholm Conference on the Human Environment catalyzed a revolution in environmental rights. That revolution took a major step forward three months ago when the UN General Assembly recognized the human right to a clean, healthy and sustainable environment, thus transforming the pantheon of human rights. The vote was 161 in favor, zero opposed, and eight abstentions – the most overwhelming recognition of human rights in the history of the General Assembly.

The environmental rights revolution occasioned by the Stockholm Conference is broader than that, however, as described in the report prepared by Ms. Li Lin and me appended to the People's Environment Narrative. Among other things, the report explains the meaning of the right to a healthy environment. It also explains, importantly, that the right has a solid empirical basis in ecosystem services – that is, the myriad benefits that nature provides to humankind for free and that are the infrastructure of human society -- and thus that achieving human rights depends on a healthy environment, on the one hand, and that protecting the environment requires the exercise of human rights such as access to information and freedom of opinion, expression, association and assembly, on the other. This integration of rights and the environment comprises the Web of Life and Rights.

The report also attempts to imagine the future, to illuminate the possible future legacy of the Stockholm Conference. We do this with the assistance of 45 short essays, including a poem and a song, contributed by 52 thoughtful individuals of various ages from around the world.

I will relate the main themes of our report, which is titled “The Web of Life and Rights”. But time prevents raising many of the inspiring, challenging ideas raised by the essayists. I very much hope you will take the time to read their work. You will not be disappointed!

Principle 1 of the Stockholm Declaration is among the most revolutionary and influential pronouncements in diplomatic history. Its legacy regarding environmental rights is multifaceted, powerful and ongoing.

Principle 1 is pathbreaking with respect to several critical aspects of environmental rights.

- Most famously, Principle 1 proclaimed the human right to a healthy environment – a right that was recently recognized by the UN General Assembly, as I mentioned, after 50 years of struggle. This adds a powerful overarching arrow to the quiver of a rights-based approach to protecting the environment and the planet.
- In so doing, Principle 1 implicitly recognized that the environment and human rights are intimately connected. Although we now know that the two areas have a reciprocal relationship, that was a radical insight at the time.
- Principle 1 also announced that humankind has a responsibility to protect and improve the environment for future generations – another bold pronouncement. This has been recognized by academics, courts and intergovernmental instruments many times since then, but much work remains.
- In addition, Principle 1 declared that environmental protection must be free from discrimination, presaging the present-day movements to achieve environmental justice, to treat indigenous peoples justly, and to provide a just transition for persons affected by major societal changes.
- Moreover, Principle 1 speaks of human well-being, thus clearly including human health as an environmental concern, which too many policy makers still do not understand but which dovetails with the human right to health.
- Finally – and this is extremely significant -- the recognition of the right to a healthy environment is vitally important quite apart from the right itself because it provides a key to approaching other critical environmental rights issues.
  - For example, the right is the (often-unspoken) assumption of environmental justice, because there cannot be justice if the environment is destroying human lives.
  - At the same time, the right provides a seamless, constantly adapting means of protecting the rights of future generations, because regardless of whatever else they might want or need, future generations will certainly want and need a clean, healthy and sustainable environment.
  - The right also provides a rights-based mandate for the Precautionary Principle and the doctrine of *in dubio pro natura*: if there is doubt about the environmental or health impacts of a course of action, take the path that does not risk violating R2HE.
  - And very, very importantly, the right to a healthy environment effectively requires a new focus on protecting nature, because R2HE can only be protected if the environment is protected.
    - This is one of the major themes of our report.
    - The characteristics and severity of today’s environmental crises have led to the realization that humankind’s current attitude towards nature, which is human-supremacist and hierarchical, valuing nature only in terms of its

instrumental value to humans, is fatally flawed and needs to be rebalanced – a view that is supported by ethical considerations.

- One way to do that would be to accord some sort of rights to nature, which is also explored in the report.

We must also confront the inequities that are rife within societies and between them. Often this means that those most impacted by environmental harm had the least to do with causing that harm and have the fewest resources to deal with it. This is inherently unjust. Environmental threats are inequity and injustice multipliers.

Environmental rights as broadly construed relate to all the environmental crises facing humanity and nature. The report contains observations regarding these.

Similarly, environmental rights are affected by a many cross-cutting issues and aspects of society, in terms of both potential harms and solutions. Let me summarize just a few of the report's observations about these.

All elements of society must be involved in addressing inequity and in realizing environmental rights. We need to connect local voices to global action. This includes protecting environmental human rights defenders. It also includes incorporating the experience and wisdom of indigenous peoples.

Current information and communications technology poses serious human rights threats and obstacles to effective advocacy, particularly because of the surveillance economy and the advertising-driven business model of ICT mega-firms. Moreover, civil society is under attack around the world by governments that restrict access to the Internet or its equivalent.

We need to harness the Age of Entertainment and metaverse to restore emotional connections to nature and inspire people – especially young people -- to engage in the struggle to protect nature and environmental rights.

Businesses must become responsible citizens. Business as usual is not an option.

Preservation of natural resources must be strengthened. Nature-based solutions that are science-based and community-based should be utilized when possible, as should rewilding: nature is resilient if given a chance.

Conversion of forests and wetlands to urban areas or farmland should cease and be reversed.

Agriculture must be managed so that it benefits the environment rather than degrades it, decreases inequality rather than increases it, and improves food security rather than diminishes it. Food must not be burned.

Environmental peacebuilding efforts should be enhanced, and armed conflict avoided or undertaken in a way that least harms nature. Internal and external population movements caused by environmental problems will increase tensions and exacerbate inequity; moderated residency and passport measures may be necessary. Border walls, which are proliferating, should be avoided and removed: the international community should strive to build peace, not walls.

Constructive technological and social innovations – including regarding biotechnology -- must be encouraged and disseminated.

Ultimately, the report's vision is an optimistic one. Many efforts to confront environmental threats have been successful, as evidenced by the recent elimination of lead from gasoline, which is saving 1 ¼ million lives per year. But severe threats remain and the trends on most environmental indicators are downward. The struggle must and will continue – hopefully with many of you as agents of change.

Thank you.

Addendum for reference only:

Principle 1 reads:

Man [sic] has the fundamental right to freedom, equality and adequate conditions of life, in an environment of a quality that permits a life of dignity and well-being, and he bears a solemn responsibility to protect and improve the environment for present and future generations. In this respect, policies promoting or perpetuating apartheid, racial segregation, discrimination, colonial and other forms of oppression and foreign domination stand condemned and must be eliminated.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Report of the United Nations Conference on the Human Environment, 5-16 June 1972, at 4, A/CONF.48/14/Rev.1.