

The Biosphere Ethics Initiative: Building Global Solidarity for the Future of Life

By KATHRYN KINTZELE

At the end of February 2010, I had the pleasure of representing the Center for Humans and Nature, alongside Center Board Member George Rabb, at a development workshop and the formal launch of the Biosphere Ethics Initiative (BEI) at the Paris Muséum nationale d'Histoire naturelle, co-hosted by the Center for Humans and Nature, the Ethics Specialist Group of the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN) Commission on Environmental Law (CEL) and the IUCN Comité français. The aims of the workshop were to finalize drafting of the evolving Biosphere Ethic and to structure the program's Action Plan. The work was then taken to a formal presentation and launch before IUCN Director General Julia Marton Lefevre, followed by remarks of key figures from several partner organizations. This article will provide a background to the Initiative, as well as the results from the workshop and formal launch.

BACKGROUND TO THE BIOSPHERE ETHICS INITIATIVE

The Biosphere Ethics Initiative originated in 2004 from Resolution 3.020, Drafting a Code of Ethics for Biodiversity Conservation, presented and adopted at the 3rd IUCN World Conservation Congress. The Resolution, drafted by members of the IUCN Comité français, appointed the task of developing the code to the Ethics Specialist Group of the IUCN Commission on Environmental Law. As the work of the commissions is dependent upon commitments from volunteer member organizations, the Center for Humans and Nature has been leading this effort since the program's inception, working alongside over 60 cross-disciplinary, government and non-government, partner organizations.

The governance of the BEI consists of four co-chairs and an active membership from across the world. The BEI Co-Chairs are: Dr. Patrick Blandin, Professeur, Le département Hommes, natures, sociétés, Paris muséum d'Histoire naturelle (Paris, France);

Kathryn Kintzele, Esq., Director, North American Global Responsibilities Program, Center for Humans and Nature (Chicago, USA); Karla Monteiro Matos, Diretora, Departamento de Cidadania e Responsabilidade Socioambiental, Ministério do Meio Ambiente (Brasilia, Brasil); and Dr. Razeena Omar, Chief Director, Integrated Coastal Management and Development, Department of Environmental Affairs & Tourism (Cape Town, South Africa).

The overarching goal of the Biosphere Ethics Initiative is to develop and advance a living soft law program of practical conservation ethics, with foundational principles applicable to everyone, yet workable to be region-specific. It seeks and highlights the evolving ethics of biodiversity conservation as experienced through communities of practice and, through them, promotes ethically responsible action. Since 2005, the BEI has held four formal Relatos and several development workshops, including the Chicago Wilderness Relato (2007); the South African National Parks Relato (2008); Brazil's Local Agendas 21 Relato (2009) and the Yunnan Province of China Relato (2009). "Relatos" are mutual learning experiences between members of the BEI and a particular local, regional, national or global initiative. The work of these programs informs the living BEI, and the BEI provides feedback to their ethical questions. The Relatos are the heart of the BEI process.

The BEI is comprised of three main elements: (1) the evolving Biosphere Ethic, or concise document stating the nature of the Initiative and the values learned from our workshops; (2) the Action Plan, or a methodology for implementation with practical deliverables (e.g. target/raise the ethical concerns of the IUCN Program; target/raise the ethical concerns of the Agenda of the Convention on Biological Diversity; incorporate the BEI into National Biodiversity Strategies); and (3) the Annex, giving the history and philosophy of the Initiative, as well as the living examples of good action, or the BEI Relatos. An important aspect of the work is to also implement the BEI at the local level and to highlight local conservation ethics specific to that area. This first implementation will take place in September 2010 in the Indiana Dunes region of the United States.

BEI AT THE PARIS MUSÉUM NATIONALE D'HISTOIRE NATURELLE

After two days of complex and intricate drafting, building from a previous four years of development, the skeleton of the evolving Biosphere Ethic was finalized. It is a concise, 2-page document, which includes: (1) a short introduction to the Initiative; (2) the foundational worldview; (3) the foundational principles; (4) the foundational aims; (5) the process of ethical inquiry [through questions]; and (6) an invitation to contribute to the evolving ethic through local dialogue. I have attached below excerpts of the shared ethical values. (The entire document can be found online at <http://www.humansandnature.org>.)

THE EVOLVING BIOSPHERE ETHIC

As noted above, the AEI focuses on biodiversity conservation as experienced through communities of practice around the world. The central goal of the BEI is stated as follows: “From these communities of practice, informed by a scientific understanding of the biosphere and the place of humans within it, the evolving Biosphere Ethic gives voice and commitment to the following shared ethical values, seeking to guide concerted action for a sustainable and flourishing life within the biosphere.”

The foundational worldview of the evolving Biosphere Ethic contains the following ideas:

1. We value the ecological integrity of the biosphere and its diversity of interacting ecosystems and species, independently of other values that humans place on them.
2. We value the genetic and cultural memories carried by species and human communities and recognize their continuity as the basis of the biosphere’s resilience, adaptive capacity and potential for transformation.
3. We live within and are dependent upon the biosphere, which we understand as a diverse and dynamic system with limits that human societies must respect.

The evolving Biosphere Ethic contains the following foundational principles:

1. Promote ecological solidarity between humans and nature, with the obligation to respect and the compassion of love as the basis for genuine care of living beings, places and people: love for the beauty and gift of the natural world with all of its living diversity; love for our places and our homes; and love for the people of today and tomorrow.
2. Support universal human rights and efforts for social, economic and environmental justice.
3. Recognize the danger in the commodification of life, the appropriation of life processes and the synthetic creation of new life forms being introduced into the biosphere.
4. Maintain, promote and nurture bio-cultural diversity.
5. Foster local and regional alliances which recognize the knowledge and understanding that each has to contribute.
6. Recognize that the application of scientific knowledge is not value-neutral.

The evolving Biosphere Ethic has the following foundational aims:

1. Keep nature alive and flourishing in the biosphere.
2. Provide representation of nature in decision-making on policies at all levels that affect natural resources and the living

world.

3. Uphold decision-making that is participatory, inclusive, self-critical and democratic.
4. Advance just and sustainable forms of governance within our political and economic structures, including supporting efforts to recognize and implement the rights of nature.
5. Establish an economy rooted in ecological realities that reflects the diverse ways in which we understand and value our relationships with nature.
6. Exercise ecological reconciliation by confronting the truth of the past and reconciling ourselves with those impacts and consequences.
7. Promote a universally fair manner of human development and consumption patterns, sharing both the burdens and the benefits.
8. Act with precaution when faced with scientific uncertainty.

THE BEI ACTION PLAN

After finalizing the skeleton and shared values of the evolving Biosphere Ethic, the group began to structure its Action Plan, or methodology for implementation. Some of the general elements to the Action Plan, now in development, include (1) a continuation with the formal Relato process as points of mutual learning, as well as with developments of local biosphere ethics; (2) a process to begin to unpack the foundational worldviews, principles and aims in an Annex; (3) a process to build a website with real-time identification and responses to ethical dilemmas, to be used when teasing out the ethical issues in the current IUCN Program and CBD Agenda; (4) the creation of a communications strategy; and (5) the development of a strategic plan to inspire and engage ethical inquiry.

To this last point, several specific recommendations were proposed on the final day of the workshop, prior to and when meeting with the IUCN Comité français, as well as the final day of the entire event, when participants gathered for a ceremony to formally present the work and hear remarks from Director General of the Paris Muséum nationale d’Histoire naturelle Bertrand Pierre Galey; President of the IUCN Comité français François Letourneux; CEL Chair Sheila Abed; IUCN Director General Julia Marton Lèfevre; IUCN President Ashok Khosla; and the French Director General of l’aménagement, du logement et de la nature Jean-Marc Michel.

Sebastien Moncorps, Director of the IUCN Comité français, and François Letourneux, President of the IUCN Comité français, would like to use the BEI when working with the French National Biodiversity Strategy in several ways. First, to assist in the promotion of the text at the Convention on Biological Diversity in Nagoya, Japan in October, 2010; next to assist in communicating the work to all relevant partners, possibly through a signatory process; and finally to assist in the unpacking of specific topics in the Annex. They would also like to use the BEI to inform the CBD process of access and benefit sharing (an existing project of the Comité); and to use the BEI to contribute to their work with the TEEB study, or The Economics of Ecosystems and Biodiversity study of the United Nations Environment Program and the European Union.

Vincent Graffin, Director General for Développement Durable

et Expertise (Sustainable Development) at the Paris Muséum nationale d'Histoire naturelle, would like to continue to work with members of the IUCN Comité français and use the committee as a platform to interact with the French Environment Ministry, which already has a successful working relationship with the IUCN Comité français. As “ethics is part of the story of this institution (the Muséum),” Director General Graffin would like to host internal seminars on the BEI, as well as working with us to use the material for Museum exhibitions as part of the communication strategy and our interface with the public. He also proposed that the BEI work alongside the “Appel Citoyen” to incorporate the BEI principles of biodiversity conservation alongside the existing human rights principles.

Support for the BEI is strong. The Chair of the IUCN Commission on Environmental Law, Sheila Abed, hailed the work as one of the most important efforts under the Commission, yet one of the most important efforts for all of IUCN, as “ethics is the foundation of law and good governance.” She, along with Deputy Chair and Justice of the Supreme Federal Tribunal of Brazil, Antonio Herman Benjamin, has offered to approach each of the Commissions to make them aware of our work and to invite them to the process. This is in addition to the already strong support given by CEL in BEI substantive development and communication.

IUCN Director General Julia Marton Lèfevre also showed strong support for the Initiative, giving a personal story of her history with the drafting of the Earth Charter, and stating that the BEI offered a model of good governance that is needed to “walk the talk,” have “courage to protect humans and nature” and “speak up for nature.” She very much liked the fact that the heart of the BEI is found in local communities, in existing local ethical action, as found in the Relatos. In order to help us build a movement and to incorporate these principles into all levels of IUCN, she has already begun to disburse the documents of the Initiative to all membership and Councilors. She would also like to highlight the BEI before all membership as a model for successful implementation of an IUCN resolution. Ms. Marton Lèfevre continued that she would like the BEI to have big visibility at the 5th IUCN World Conservation Congress in late 2012 and hopes to see the Initiative at Rio+20 in early 2012 to help crystallize its impacts at the Congress. As we approach these benchmarks, she has offered to help the BEI in any way to ensure its development and implementation alongside all work of IUCN. She is excited to see the outcomes of the local biosphere ethic that will result from the 5th Annual CHN Global Symposium this fall, highlighting the Indiana Dunes region of the United States.

IUCN President Ashok Khosla also spoke of courage and that

“courage is a necessary attribute of ethics.” He supported that the BEI was a message of learning through real examples of ethical action and that ethics shows us how to deal with issues in the most practical sense. He stressed the need to be always aware of the diverse sources of ethics, from parents and families, to religions and faiths. He stated that the BEI is an ecological necessity because there is no survival if we do not change, and the ecological consequences of today are a result of the current ethics.

Finally, the French Director General of l'aménagement, du logement et de la nature Jean-Marc Michel, supports the continued relationship between the French government, IUCN and the IUCN Comité français and work to incorporate the BEI into their National Biodiversity Strategy. He stated that biodiversity conservation should be made through the “publique politique” and it is a part of a citizen's “contrat sociale.” He wants to use the BEI in the revision of the National Biodiversity Strategy and to assist in taking the work before the Convention on Biological Diversity. Also, the Grenelle de la biodiversité will begin soon (a public debate of government officials specific to biodiversity), and they will take the BEI into these negotiations with other members of the French government. He was impressed by the local examples, as they are the heart of the Grenelle de l'environnement.

Following the ceremony, I traveled to the office of the IUCN Environmental Law Center and met with Senior Counsel Françoise Burhenne Guilmin, Legal Officers John Costenbader, Thomas Greiber, Juan Carlos Sanchez and several ELC legal externs. The ELC supports the work of the BEI and is available to assist with substantive input and communications. I will be working closely with Juan Carlos Sanchez to incorporate the principles and Relatos of the BEI with the ELC's Rights Based Approach program, including a series of case studies and an interactive website.

The Biosphere Ethics Initiative aims to keep nature alive by building solidarity for the future of life. Our efforts are going strong, motivated by benchmarks along the way and growing by increments of individuals, governments and organizations. It is an exciting exercise in thinking and acting across disciplines and across regions of the world, and I invite you to join this movement to change the world.

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