



THE CENTER
FOR ENVIRONMENTAL ETHICS AND LAW

CEEL Advancing principles of environmental ethics in law and life.

The Evolving Biosphere Ethic

Individuals and communities across the world have been working together to conserve biodiversity, including biological and cultural diversity, as an ethical responsibility. In order to counter the unbridled self-interest that is dominating our society and destroying biodiversity, we need to learn from these communities of practice and build solidarity with one another and with nature to ensure the integrity of the future of all life, in all its diversity.

To keep nature alive, the International Union for the Conservation of Nature (IUCN), through its World Commission on Environmental Law, invites individuals, communities, organizations and governments to build a mutual commitment for the continuity and flourishing of life. The Biosphere Ethics Initiative (BEI) is this participatory promotion of the biological and cultural diversity of the biosphere. By ethics, we mean the domain of inquiry that examines claims about what is right or wrong and when responsibility attaches to human action. The sources of these claims may arise from both religious and non-religious traditions.

A society's ethical ideals are at the core of its vision of the common good and give insight into its hopes for the future. In a deeply interdependent but vulnerable world, they help us take responsible action to address shared problems. To this end, the Biosphere Ethics Initiative bears witness to existing ethical action as evidenced by individuals, communities, organizations, and governments. It learns from their experiences and shares their stories, fostering a continuing and living dialogue, for as new concerns arise, so will new forms of ethical response.

This process of mutual learning, or *Relato*, is the heart of the Biosphere Ethics Initiative. Since 2004, the Initiative has held six formal *Relatos* (the Chicago Wilderness *Relato*; the South African National Parks *Relato*; the Indiana Dunes *Relato*; the Jordan *Relato*; the Rio State *Relato*; and the Gangjeong Village *Relato*) and several development workshops. The resulting key ethical values, aims, principles, and questions form the basis of the Evolving Biosphere Ethic.

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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 ethical values, seeking to guide action for a sustainable and flourishing life within the biosphere.

Our foundational worldview:

Ecological Integrity - 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.

Genetic and Cultural Memories - 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.

Humanity's Dependence on Nature - We live within and are utterly dependent upon the biosphere, which we understand as a diverse and dynamic system with natural limits that human societies must respect.

Humanity and Humility – Humanity has much to learn in its relation with the environment and one another, and we understand the limits of any single discipline or practice – law, science, religion, or the humanities – in providing answers to our questions.

Common but Differentiated Responsibilities – every individual, every sector, every community, and every state has a shared responsibility to protect our future, dependent upon what harm they have caused and what good they are capable of doing.

Our foundational aims are to:

1. Protect Life - Keep nature alive and flourishing in the biosphere.
2. Promote Just Governance - Advance just and sustainable forms of local, regional, state, and global governance, including those that uphold decision-making that is participatory, inclusive, self-critical, and democratic; foster local and regional alliances which recognize the knowledge and understanding that each has to contribute; and support efforts to recognize and implement the rights of nature by ensuring that nature is represented in decision-making on policies at all levels that affect the living world.
3. Promote Just Economies - Establish economies rooted in ecological realities, recognizing natural limits and reflecting the diverse ways in which we understand and value our relationships with nature.
4. Promote Just Development and Consumption – Richness is just as problematic as poverty, and a universally fair manner of human development and consumption patterns, that share both the burdens and the benefits, must be promoted.
5. Promote Environmental Education - Promote an environmental literacy campaign that permeates all disciplines, professions, and educational levels.

Our foundational principles:

1. Ecological solidarity between humans and nature, with the obligation to respect and the compassion of love, is 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. We must always strive to attain social, economic, and environmental justice and support these and other universal human rights, for poverty and environmental and human health are inextricably linked and cannot be solved separately.
3. There is strength in diversity; differences in language, belief, and practice, or bio-cultural diversity, are necessary for biological evolution, support scientific knowledge, and nurture solutions to our shared problems.
4. It is dangerous for the future of life to commodify life, which includes placing a price on nature, appropriating life processes, and synthetically creating new life forms and introducing them into the biosphere.

5. Scientific research, and the application of scientific knowledge, is not value-neutral.
6. We have a responsibility to act with precaution when faced with scientific uncertainty.
7. Ecological reconciliation is necessary for a sustainable future: we must confront the truth of the past, the harms to humans and nature in the name of humans and/or nature, and reconcile ourselves with those impacts; we must be able to forgive and move forward, without blame or guilt.
8. Both animals and humans have sacred spaces in nature that are vital to their lives and healthy development.
9. People from all backgrounds and ages carry wisdom that is important for our common future, and we must build trust among generations, cultures, and professions.
10. Play in and around nature is vital to the healthy development of children and adults.
11. If we protect the vulnerable people, places, species, and societies, we protect everyone and everything.
12. The media has a key ethical role in environmental education, impact, empowerment and the truth of what they report.

The Process of Ethical Inquiry

From these shared ethical principles, questions of population, economy, governance and priority are raised. Within this process of inquiry we must ask ourselves serious questions, placed within their often unique contexts. This process provides an opportunity to think ethically and thereby act responsibly.

1. What is Your Fair Share: what is a fair share of the use of natural resources for each individual that does not compromise the existence of other life?
2. How to Channel Resources: how can we channel the resources required to mitigate climate change and redress vast inequalities in the world?
3. Short Term Arguments versus Long Term Engagement: how do we counter short-term economic arguments against biodiversity conservation with the long-term thinking required in ethical inquiry?
4. The Individual in the Community: how do we support the common good alongside individual ambition, within a society dominated by private property rights and those seeking excessive power?
5. Protecting the Whole: how can we sustain the integrity of the biosphere without much greater equality in economic opportunities and incomes?
6. Ethical Institutions: what kind of domestic and international law systems do we need to empower institutions to respect, support, and implement the Biosphere Ethics Initiative?
7. Balancing Rights: how can we ethically balance the rights of nature and the rights of humans?

8. What is Your Population Responsibility: what obligations should societies and individuals assume in recognition of the pressures that our growing population place on one another and the biosphere?

9. Empowerment during Distress: how can we empower communities in ecological, military, and/or economic distress to promote biodiversity conservation?

Our Invitation

The Biosphere Ethics Initiative is engaged in ethical inquiry to communicate and stimulate ethical thinking and acting. We are seeking to better understand the ethical imperatives needed to keep nature alive, and how we can best translate those imperatives into real action. Let us together build a movement of global solidarity for the future of life.

Learn more at www.environmentalethicsandlaw.org.