

# WITH EYES TO SEE



## PEACE AND JUSTICE CONCEPT: EARTH CHARTER I

ideas for  
teachers  
who want  
to  
integrate  
social  
justice  
concepts  
into what  
and how  
they teach

September  
2002

"We stand at a critical moment in Earth's history, a time when humanity must choose its future. As the world becomes increasingly interdependent and fragile, the future at once holds great peril and great promise. To move forward we must recognize that in the midst of a magnificent diversity of cultures and life forms we are one human family and one Earth community with a common destiny. We must join together to bring forth a sustainable global society founded on respect for nature, universal human rights, economic justice, and a culture of peace. Towards this end, it is imperative that we, the peoples of Earth, declare our responsibility to one another, to the greater community of life, and to future generations."

So begins the preamble of the Earth Charter\*, a project of the Earth Charter Commission. The Commission traces its roots back to the 1987 United Nations World Commission on Environment and Development where there was a call for a charter of fundamental principles of sustainable development. The movement gained momentum through the 1992 Rio Earth Summit, the launching of the Earth Charter initiative in 1994, and the formation of the Earth Charter Commission in 1997. The resulting Earth Charter was officially launched on June 29, 2000, at the Peace Palace in The Hague with the expressed goal of "establish[ing] a sound ethical foundation for the emerging global society and to help **build a sustainable world based on respect for nature, universal human rights, economic justice, and a culture of peace.**"

Convinced of this need for a sustainable world as witnessed through its work with economically impoverished peoples throughout the world and through social justice work in this country, Concern America is encouraged by the spirit of the Earth Charter and believes its message carries much hope for a peaceful future of humanity.

The Earth Charter can be used as a powerful educational tool in our schools. In this spirit, all four editions of *With Eyes to See* for this school year will explore the four principles of the Charter, focusing on activities that will enable students (and teachers) to reflect on their own attitudes and behaviors, to interact with others unlike themselves, and ultimately to act to help create a sustainable way of life in their communities and around the world.

(\*See page four for information on how easy it is to obtain copies of the Earth Charter.)

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". . . nothing can be understood on its own; everything is part of a system, including human beings who must learn that they, too, are integral parts of this complexity and that they live or die to the extent that each individual part of the whole lives or dies. It will do little good for any individual person (or nation) to seek its own well-being by destroying the very conditions of planetary well-being. This larger vision is no longer utopian; it concerns the most basic reality there is including the water we drink, the air we breathe, the food we eat, and, at a more general level, economics and politics. Any single activity must find its place within the larger pattern or it will die and, perhaps, bring down the larger life-system itself." Diarmuid O Murchu

"To those who have hunger, give bread. To those who have bread, give a hunger for justice."  
 -Latin American Table Prayer

"Like life, racial understanding is not something that we find but something that we must create. And so the ability of negroes and whites to work together, to understand each other, will not be found readymade; it must be created by the fact of contact."  
 -MLK

The heart of the Earth Charter is its four principles. This edition of *With Eyes to See* will focus on the first, **RESPECT AND CARE FOR THE COMMUNITY OF LIFE**, and its four subprinciples:

1. Respect Earth and life in all its diversity;
2. Care for the community of life with understanding, compassion, and love;
3. Build democratic societies that are just, participatory, sustainable, and peaceful;
4. Secure Earth's bounty and beauty for present and future generations.

Each of the following activities relates to one (or more) of the subprinciples, and, though this newsletter only scratches the surface of possibilities with these themes, it is hoped that they will spark more interest in this important document.

## THE "DISCOVERY" OF COLUMBUS

One of the first holidays of the school year is Columbus Day, a time to celebrate the man who "discovered" America. Today, most students are aware, at least on some level, of the complexity surrounding Columbus's arrival to this part of the world and his actions towards the Native inhabitants of the "New World." There are a multitude of activities that can be used surrounding Columbus and the Native peoples of this hemisphere, and many can be found in the publication *Rethinking Columbus: The Next 500 Years* (see page four). Two different activities inspired by the book are highlighted here:

4-8

• When Columbus arrived here, there were many Native peoples flourishing from South America up to the Arctic. A book that does a good job helping us get to know one such group is *Morning Girl* by Michael Dorris. The story follows a period of time in the life of a Taíno girl and her brother, painting a colorful vision of how the Taínos might have lived. The story ends as *Morning Girl* watches and comments on the strange men (Columbus, etc.) who are landing on her island. The book provides the reader with tangible images from which to talk about Columbus and the people he "discovered."

K-12

• What shapes our perceptions of Columbus and Native peoples? All around us images of Columbus and Native Americans fill story books, posters, greeting cards, and television programs. A good place to start breaking down the images that misrepresent or simplify their subjects is to have students draw or write what they know about Native Americans (be sensitive if there are native children in your class), and have the students share what they have. This will both help the teacher ascertain the students' level of understanding on the topic, as well as provide a base from which to talk about stereotypes (most likely, things like tepees and feathers will be mentioned). A discussion on stereotypes can lead to a multitude of activities from inviting in a Native American speaker, investigating the lives of modern day natives, and exploring the differences among various tribes. Or, have the students be investigators by checking out books on Columbus from the library to see how Native peoples are portrayed. The same can be done with other stories and images of Columbus that are found at school or at home.

6-12

## The Common Good?

When talking about global justice and equality, the phrase "common good" is often used (it is found in the Earth Charter as well). Do students know what this means? Try a brainstorm on its possible meanings; use a dictionary to define the terms; explore with the students how their lives and actions are contributing to, or taking away from, the common good (volunteering in their community; their designer clothes made in sweatshops).

## The Earth, Various Perspectives

There is a Native proverb which states "The frog does not drink up the pond in which it lives." Many societies and nations, however, are not only drinking up the pond that sustains them, but over fishing its waters, polluting it, damming it, and cutting down the trees that protect its banks. Returning to the Columbus analogy, he sailed to claim land for Spain, extract riches, and transform the land (and its people) into his world vision, while many of the indigenous inhabitants of this land communally "owned" the land, and their lives were intimately connected to the plants, animals, and soil that gave them life. A lot can be learned from Native peoples on how to help divert humanity from its destructive course, and the following ideas are provided in this spirit.

K-12

Used to teach history, values, and lessons of their culture and the world around them, stories and storytelling are an essential aspect of Native American culture. Most of these stories involve nature, used both as metaphors for human actions or to explain why things are as they are. Try reading various Native stories, and have the students reflect on the recurring themes to paint a picture of that which is important to the people telling the stories. Then use stories from other cultures, like fables from Europe, Africa, and Asia, and stories about Columbus, and do the same reflection. How do they compare? How do the various cultures see "the pond where they live?" For a good book of Native American stories and ideas for using them in the classroom, try *Keepers of the Earth: Native American Stories and Environmental Activities for Children*, Caduto, M.J., Bruchac, J., 1988. Available at [www.teachingforchange.org](http://www.teachingforchange.org), or 800-763-9131, and at many libraries.

What ideals are celebrated by American culture in terms of the environment? Where do these ideals come from? A good video to get students talking about this issue and reflecting on their own lives is "Earth and the American Dream." Just over an hour long, the video begins with Columbus and contrasts the words of the European "settlers" and Native peoples with images reflecting the effects of these beliefs on the environment. The video can be used with any unit on the environment, native peoples, American culture, European "settlers," or geography.

6-12

Many cultures look at the environment as something borrowed from future generations: "Treat the earth well. . . it was not given to you by your parents. . . It was lent to you by your children" (Kenyan Proverb). Versions of this quote, much like the one to the right, demonstrate a world view which places us as stewards of the environment, making sure that we "return" to our children and grandchildren the healthy Earth that they "lent" to us. Try presenting this quote to the students, and explore its meanings. While discussions will most likely include things like global warming, or the destruction of forests, both incredibly serious environmental concerns, the point of this exercise is to get students looking at their own actions and the health of the community where they live. How many of them live their lives as if they are living on borrowed land? What is the health of the environment in the community? What are the environmental issues of the community? Of the school? What will the community look like to the grandchildren of the students? Many activities can be created around these questions, many of which will lead to actions in the community.

A-12

[The above activities were adapted from *Rethinking Columbus* and *Rethinking Globalization: Teaching for Justice in an Unjust World* (see page four). Both books have additional activities, including a role play about drilling for oil on indigenous lands and a game about profits and environmental impact, both of which get students to look at the many sides of development, the bottom line, corporations, governments, indigenous rights, and environmental degradation.]

"I am not one of those who believe that devotion to international aims interferes with love of country any more than devotion to family detracts from good citizenship; rather. . . the duties of family, nation, and humanity are but concentric circles."  
-Jane Addams

"One generation plants trees. . . another gets the shade."  
-Chinese Proverb

## RECOMMENDED

"You know, nothing of the past five hundred years was inevitable. Every raised fist and brandished weapon was a choice someone made."  
-Wendy Rose

"When machines and computers and property rights are considered more important than people, the giant triplets of racism, materialism, and militarism are incapable of being conquered."  
-MLK

### HOW TO OBTAIN COPIES OF THE EARTH CHARTER

- Log onto [www.earthcharter.org](http://www.earthcharter.org) to learn more about the Earth Charter and to download a copy. This is the quickest and easiest way to read the Charter and to consider the relevance of the document and the relevance for one's classroom/school. While there, show your support (as an individual or a group) by becoming a signatory to the Charter.
- To receive printed copies (FREE!) of the Earth Charter which comes as an attractive pamphlet containing information on the Charter and its complete text, and is suitable for hanging on the wall or carrying in a folder, contact the Earth Council:

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Earth Charter International Secretariat  
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### CONCERN AMERICA

is an international development and refugee aid organization that sends doctors, nurses, engineers, educators, and nutritionists as volunteers to train and empower the materially poor in Mexico, El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras, Nicaragua, Guinea, and Mozambique.

In support of these projects, Concern America offers educational services in Orange County which include:

- \* The St. Nicholas Project
- \* Walk Out of Poverty
- \* Infusion Method Workshops for teachers
- \* "Training for Transformation" Workshops for adults
- \* School and parish consulting for the implementation of the Bishops' Pastoral: "Sharing Catholic Social Teaching: Challenges and Directions" (June, 1998)
- \* Lending library for resources of peace and social justice

Information on any of these projects can be obtained by contacting:

Education Coordinator  
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**The Giving Box** Fred Rogers, better known as "Mr. Rogers," has inspired more than a generation of children to love learning, value who they are, and be good to others. His book *The Giving Box: Create a Tradition of Giving with Your Children* (Running Press: Philadelphia, PA, 2000) is no exception, and is a great resource for teachers and parents. The book includes concrete ideas on how to talk with children about giving and receiving, and multicultural folktales which provide different perspectives on the subject.

**A Time For Rethinking.** . . . The Rethinking Schools organization puts out many quality publications concerning school reform, equity, and social justice. In addition to their quarterly journal, they have published various books for the classroom ranging from equity and social justice teaching activities and standardized testing analysis to the two books used for this newsletter, *Rethinking Columbus* and *Rethinking Globalization*. Call 800-669-4192 for more information, or visit [www.rethinkingschools.org](http://www.rethinkingschools.org).