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## COMMENT

# Towards a universal recognition of environmental responsibilities

It was just over 50 years ago that the fledgling United Nations expressed its revulsion against the German wartime atrocities, doing so by means of a Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UNGA 1948). The 30 principles declared in 1948 were eventually solidified in 1966 via two widely-adopted international covenants (Afghanistan *et al.* 1966*a*, *b*). However, the need for environmental conservation was nowhere directly mentioned in any of these three landmark documents. Nonetheless, their fundamental principle that every human being has the inherent right to life (UNGA 1948, Article 3; Afghanistan *et al*. 1966*a*, Article 6.1) has been inferred to imply the need for an environment adequate for the fulfillment of that right (Westing 1993).

It is of course heartening to note that the Universal Declaration of Human Rights was widely celebrated on the occasion of its fiftieth anniversary. But not so widely linked with those affirmations was the need to explicitly couple declarations of individual rights with coordinate declarations of responsibilities, both individual and governmental or societal. One notable attempt at least to spell out this unavoidable relationship between individual rights and individual responsibilities has been by the InterAction Council. The InterAction Council, established in 1983, consists of 26 former heads of state who have come together from the four corners of the earth. Its secretariat is located in Tokyo.

The Universal Declaration of Human Responsibilities of the InterAction Council (IAC 1997) was prepared in time for consideration by the 53rd United Nations General Assembly, in conjunction with the Assembly's commemoration of the golden anniversary of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Regrettably, it was not brought before the full Assembly for its consideration. (Although not directly related to present concerns, the 53rd United Nations General Assembly did adopt a resolution that recognizes the responsibility of states to guarantee a number of basic political rights and civil liberties [UNGA 1998].)

Two of the 19 principles enunciated by the recently-formulated Universal Declaration of Human Responsibilities of the InterAction Council stand out as being of particular relevance if the earlier-promulgated individual rights are, indeed, ever to have the opportunity to be realized. These two principles, novel in the present context, are of central importance to the achievement of comprehensive human security, achieving this sought after security by virtue of coupling social security with environmental security (Westing 1989). The two included principles that accomplish this quantum leap are:

> Article 7. Every person is infinitely precious and must be protected unconditionally. The animals and the natural environment also demand protection. All people have a responsibility to protect the air, water and soil of the earth for the sake of present inhabitants and future generations.
>
> Article 9. All people, given the necessary tools, have a responsibility to make serious efforts to overcome poverty, malnutrition, ignorance, and inequality. They should promote sustainable development all over the world in order to assure dignity, freedom, security and justice for all people.

Transmuting the Universal Declaration of Human Rights from hortatory resolution to formal international commitment took the world community of nations 18 years to achieve. It now falls upon all of us to see that the Universal Declaration of Human Responsibilities receives favourable attention by a future United Nations General Assembly, thence to be followed by a more rapid evolution from aspirational declaration to binding covenant. And, as a next step, we might then even attempt to facilitate the evolution of the aspirational World Charter for Nature (UNGA 1982) into a binding international covenant that explicitly guarantees appropriate rights for nature *per se*.

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