

“The Sustainability Revolution”  
An Address by Steven C. Rockefeller  
International Earth Day  
Guanajuato, Mexico  
April 22, 2010

Governor Juan Manuel Oliva  
Municipal President Nicéforo Guerrero Reynoso  
Rector Arturo Lara López  
Ladies and Gentlemen

It is an honor and privilege for me to be here in this historic, beautiful and unique city with you to celebrate the International Day of Mother Earth and to begin celebrating the 10<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the launch of the Earth Charter. All of us associated with Earth Charter International deeply appreciate the warm welcome that we have received in Guanajuato.

I am especially glad to be in Mexico for Earth Day and Earth Charter celebrations, because the United States and Mexico have a unique relationship shaped by shared values and deep economic and social ties. The prosperity and welfare of our two nations will become ever more tightly interconnected in the decades ahead. I extend my congratulations as the citizens of Mexico celebrate this year the Centennial of the Revolution and the Bicentennial of Mexican Independence.

It is fitting that the yearlong celebration of Earth Charter+10 begin in Mexico and in Guanajuato, because President Felipe Calderon, SEMARNAT, and many cities, universities and civil society organizations have made an exemplary commitment to promotion of the Earth Charter as an educational tool and guide to policy and planning. The support given to the Earth Charter by the City, State and University of Guanajuato is particularly significant.

On behalf of the Earth Charter International Council, I would like to thank the Municipal President of Guanajuato, Nicéforo Guerrero Reynoso, and the Municipal Council, Governor Juan Manuel Oliva, and Rector Arturo Lara López and the University of Guanajuato for their endorsement of the Earth Charter and for hosting celebrations of Earth Charter+10. I also want to express my heartfelt thanks to the Municipal President and Council for presenting to me the key to the City of Guanajuato. This key will be for Earth Charter International a symbol of the support provided by the City, State and University of Guanajuato and of Earth Charter International's partnership with the people of Mexico in the effort to build a more just, sustainable and peaceful world. Again, I extend to the Municipal President and Council my deep gratitude for this special honor.

I also want to express special thanks to Mateo Castillo, who is a member of the Earth Charter International Council and whose outstanding work in support of the Earth Charter and sustainable development in Mexico has been a model and inspiration for other Earth Charter activists throughout the world.

The International Day of Mother Earth is a special day recognized by the United Nations. All over the world millions of men, women and children are gathered together to express their respect and love for our planetary home and the great community of life on Earth of which we humans are an interdependent part. We come together on this day to deepen our commitment to carry out another revolution that will mark a milestone in the evolution of human life—the transition to sustainable ways of living. This means building local communities and a global civilization that honor the interrelated principles of ecological integrity, justice, democracy, and peace. It means eradicating poverty and

taking to heart our responsibility to future as well as present generations. These are the values and principles set forth in the Earth Charter.

There are very real dangers and an urgent need for action that cause us to pause in the midst of our busy lives to celebrate International Earth Day and to reflect on the Earth Charter. Human life is utterly dependent on Earth's biosphere for its survival and flourishing. We know of no other planet of light and life like Earth. The existence of life on our tiny, beautiful planet floating in space is a true miracle. Earth as well as each one of us is part of this sacred mystery.

However, current patterns of human economic activity are causing accelerating environmental deterioration as a result of global warming pollution, the release of toxic chemicals, the elimination of forests and wetlands, and the depletion of ocean fisheries. The planet's biodiversity, which is essential to the health of Earth's ecosystems, is declining at rates not seen in 65 million years.

The most urgent environmental problem facing the community of nations today is global warming caused by human-made greenhouse gas emissions, especially carbon dioxide emissions generated by deforestation and the burning of coal, oil and gas. There is wide agreement among scientists that if current trends continue, global warming will cause ocean levels to rise significantly and will lead to an increase in violent storms, floods, and droughts such as Mexico experienced last year. Global warming has the potential to disrupt economic systems, create massive humanitarian crises and destabilize governments. No nation will be unaffected. However, it is many of the poorest developing nations that will suffer the most devastating impacts of climate change, and the task of eradicating poverty will face immense new obstacles.

International Earth Day provides an opportunity to face our situation honestly, intelligently and compassionately. Our objective should not be to find fault and lay blame but to find ways to rectify the situation, using our common sense and creative powers to build cooperatively a better world that works for all peoples and the whole community of life.

The good news is that we are already in the earliest stages of the sustainable development revolution, and if the human family can summon the moral courage in the face of fear of change, it has the intellectual capacity and ingenuity to design and build the new economic and governance systems needed. For example, much of the new technology required to eliminate waste, promote energy efficiency, and develop clean renewable energy is being developed.

Change will involve some real short-term costs. One major study concludes that the financial cost over the next few decades would be in the order of 1-2% of global GDP.<sup>1</sup> The benefits of a transformation of industrial civilization, however, will far outweigh the costs, especially the cost of inaction. The world will be cleaner, healthier and safer and more beautiful and productive. Furthermore, the sustainability revolution is opening up vast, new fields of economic opportunity that will create millions of new jobs.

Last December in Copenhagen at a meeting of the Conference of the Parties (COP15) to the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change, governments endorsed the scientific consensus that a further increase in global temperature of more than 2 degrees Celsius (3.6 degrees Fahrenheit) could unleash the most severe negative effects of global warming<sup>2</sup>. In order to cap the rising global temperature at 2 degrees, the

increase in greenhouse gas pollution must be halted in the next decade and global emissions must begin to decline rapidly.<sup>3</sup> Time is clearly running out.

Advancing the sustainability revolution requires the support of an effective global peoples movement and the multiplication of the voluntary initiatives that have been launched by local governments, businesses, and NGOs. There is also the pressing need for new systems of democratic global governance, including a legally binding international treaty on global warming mitigation and adaptation. Since the United States and the other large developed nations have put over 70% of the greenhouse gas pollution into the global atmosphere, they have a moral responsibility to lead the way in the reduction of greenhouse gases and the invention and promotion of low carbon economic systems. Without delay the developed nations should make commitments to adopt binding targets involving 20% to 40% reductions by 2020, leading to at least an 80% reduction relative to 1990 levels by 2050.

An equitable international agreement on global warming would make provision for ongoing economic growth in the developing world and involve financial and technological assistance for the developing nations in support of their mitigation and adaptation efforts. However, since the day is fast approaching when the developing world will be the largest producer of greenhouse gas emissions, it is essential that the developing nations also adopt meaningful, legally binding targets and timetables that are equitable and reflect their common but differentiated responsibilities.

The next Conference of the Parties (COP 16) under the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change will be hosted by the government of Mexico later this year in Cancun. We can hope that the Cancun meeting will achieve what eluded

governments in Copenhagen and produce an equitable and responsible, legally binding, climate change treaty. However, given the disagreements among governments and the loss of confidence in the UN process evident at Copenhagen, this will require exceptional leadership. It will require a new level of commitment on the part of the U.S. government, and US Mexican collaboration will be critical. If the Cancun meeting is able to restore confidence in the UN process, this in itself will be an important accomplishment.

It is often said that what is holding back the sustainability revolution is a lack of political will. We can wait until our global situation so deteriorates that desperation drives action, but then it will be too late. It would be far better to recognize that what creates political will in a situation such as we face is wholehearted commitment to an ethical vision of a better world that is a real possibility. The dream of a just, sustainable and peaceful world is fundamental to the new global consciousness that is awakening in the hearts and minds of millions of men and women in all nations and cultures. If our leaders finally let this compelling dream drive the action, there is grounds for hope.

It would be a critical step forward if governments at the Cancun climate summit were to acknowledge the fundamental importance of ethics and formally endorse an ethic of respect and care for Earth and the whole community of life as an essential part of the shared vision for long-term cooperative action. The sustainability revolution needs just such an ethical foundation.

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<sup>1</sup> Nicholas Stern, The Global Deal: Climate Change and The Creation of a New Era of Progress and Prosperity (New York: Public Affairs, 2009) pp.48-55, 90-92

<sup>2</sup> See the 2009 Copenhagen Accord.

<sup>3</sup> Since the start of the industrial revolution concentrations of carbon dioxide in the atmosphere have increased by one-third and are now over 380 parts of carbon dioxide for every million parts of air in our atmosphere. Scientists at the National Aeronautics and Space Administration (NASA) in the United States believe that anything over 350 parts per million involves unsafe levels.