

# John Woolman and the Earth Charter

By Bert Horwood

**J**ohn Woolman argued that owning slaves was as bad for the owners as it was for the slaves. The first Friends who recognized that slavery was wrong also knew that Quaker slave owners needed to be convinced to free their slaves before an honest appeal could be made to the rest of the world. Woolman also had concern for the care of creation and all creatures, but his ecological sensibility was secondary to his concern about slavery. I would like to show, following the same Guide, that practicing the Earth Charter is like ending slavery.

During the 20th century, many Friends became aware that the testimony to equality extended beyond fellow humans to embrace creation. We were led to recognize that other species had intrinsic value and the same rights to fulfill their respective natures as we had. Personally, this was opened to me during times alone in the bush, through studying biology, and from the great spiritual power in the teachings of Haudenosaunee (Mohawk) Elders and Faith Keepers through their use of the Thanksgiving Prayer, “the words that come before all others.”

**W**hen we abuse the earth and any of its life forms, we prevent them from being true to their “original instructions,” i.e. to live their lives freely according to their natures. We offend against the testimony of equality. It is exactly like owning and trading slaves. Abusive practice is obviously bad for the abused species. Each day makes it grow more clear that it is also bad for us abusers.

When we abuse any part of the biosphere, we weaken the life support system and suffer the consequences. There is no technology to save us. This is apparent, for one example, in increasing environmentally based diseases. Abusing the biosphere is accompanied by ever increasing social injustice. The relentless search for perpetual growth in corporate and personal profits brings destruction of the indigenous ways of life which have been sustainable for centuries. Poverty grows in the cities of the world as rural areas are stripped of inhabitants to fuel destructive agriculture.

Even greater damage is done in the spiritual domain. Instead of living harmoniously with the world around, we are in a continual state of violence against it. We become insensitive, diminished and alienated from the creation in which dwells the creative power itself. Our lives, although materially enriched, become spiritually impoverished. Living in a culture which denies a place in the sun to our fellow creatures destroys our souls and alienates us from God.

It is essential to distinguish between right use and abuse. Every living thing derives its life from the use of other living things. Everyone eats and is eaten, consumes and is consumed. Limited modification of the environment is part of the way the creation works. But how can we tell what the limits are? Most people speak of sustainability as the criterion. The implications of this principle for our culture, based on one-way flow of petroleum and mineral extraction, is horrendous. That's why no one practises sustainability. But as Woolman wrote, when a young man, “Conduct is more convincing than language.” So we must look to our conduct rather than our words.

John Woolman's labour with Friends was loving but hard-nosed. He never failed to urge Friends to free their slaves. He was not reluctant to embarrass his hosts by paying wages to the slaves who carried his bags or groomed his horse. He refused to draw up wills (one of his sources of income) for Quakers who left slaves as bequests. Those of us who feel led in the spirit to liberate ourselves and the earth from our present bondage may need to be as persistent and demanding.

**T**o summarize the points drawn from Woolman and expressed in biospheric terms: Abuse of the earth harms the earth, denies our testimony of Equality, and is an offense to God. Abusive practices also harm ourselves physically and spiritually, despite the illusion of well-being we have. Friends have a burdensome responsibility to get their own environmental behaviour right (free their own slaves) as part of enjoining others to do likewise. 🌱

*Bert Horwood is a member of Thousand Islands Monthly Meeting.*