

Environment

Preparing for Public Discourse 1

by Arthur Lyon Dahl July 2022

Preparing for public discourse

2010: “two interconnected, mutually reinforcing areas of activity: involvement in social action and participation in the prevalent discourses of society.”

(Universal House of Justice, Ridvan 2010)

2013, creation of the Office of Public Discourse at the Bahá'í World Centre

Preparing for public discourse

...how we are to understand and analyze social issues so that our contributions to the conversations in which we take part are increasingly aligned with the teachings of the Faith.

... be increasingly involved in the life of society, knowing well that the enormous global transformation envisioned by Baha'u'llah will not come about through the endeavors of Baha'is alone.

(Ruhi Book 14: Participating in public discourse)

Preparing for public discourse

How do we go about understanding and analyzing issues of social import in light of the Baha'i teachings? How did I develop the perception I have of this or that issue? To what extent are my views on social issues influenced by informal conversations with friends, neighbors, and co-workers? Given that I am constantly exposed to a wide range of convincing arguments, often stemming from conflicting ideological perspectives, each aggressively propagated by the media, how do I go about separating truth from propaganda? What criteria do I use to distinguish between facts and opinion? How do I avoid presenting as the Baha'i view on a particular issue a set of ideas in vogue that are superficially akin to certain beliefs of the Faith?

(Ruhi Book 14: Participating in public discourse)

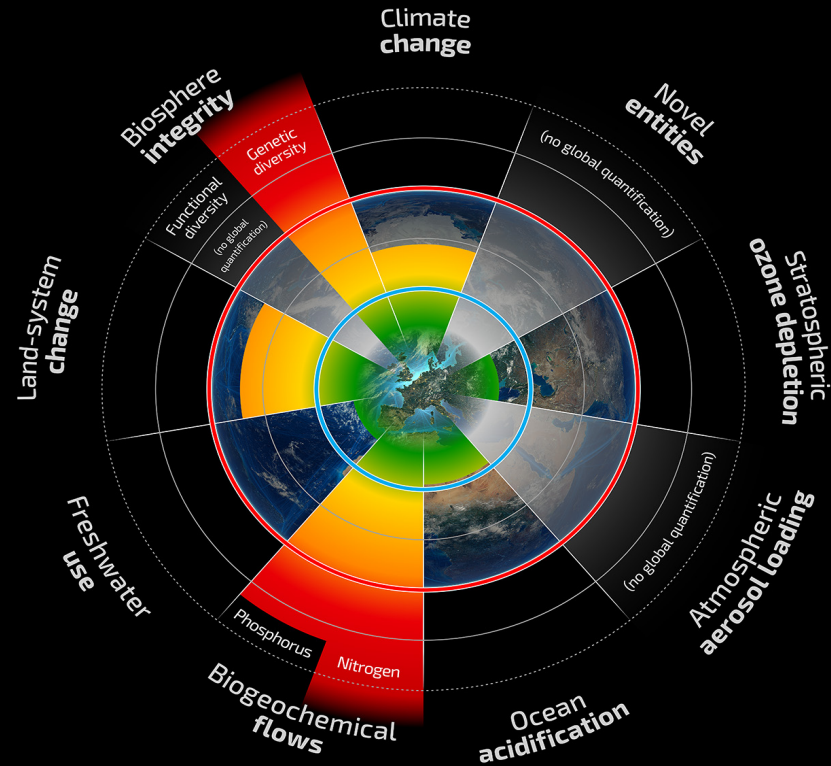
Preparing for public discourse

- Independent investigation of truth and reality
- Certitude in Baha'u'llah's revelation
- Avoiding extreme relativism and fanaticism
- Humility, our understanding far from complete
- Continually gain fresh insights into spiritual and social reality
- Pursue knowledge with others, towards unity of thought
- Make distinction between dogma, superstition and prejudice, and the truth
- Reality or truth is one

The Environment

Planetary Boundaries

A safe operating space for humanity



- Beyond zone of uncertainty (high risk)
- In zone of uncertainty (increasing risk)
- Below boundary (safe)
- Boundary not yet quantified

The environmental crises

Overshooting planetary boundaries

- Climate change, few years to turn the corner
- The collapse of biodiversity: 80% of insects in Europe; 60% of vertebrates in the world, 1 million species
- Land degradation, deforestation, water shortages
- Plastic pollution, chemicals, urban air pollution

World Scientists' Warning

The scientists call for immediate action to change course in six areas:

- (1) **energy**, eliminating fossil fuels and shifting to renewables;
- (2) **short-lived air pollutants**, slashing black carbon (soot), methane, and hydrofluorocarbons;
- (3) **nature**, restoring and permanently protecting Earth's ecosystems to store and accumulate carbon and restore biodiversity;
- (4) **food**, switching to mostly plant-based diets, reducing food waste, and improving cropping practices

World Scientists' Warning

(5) **economy**, moving from indefinite GDP growth and overconsumption by the wealthy to ecological economics and a circular economy, in which prices reflect the full environmental costs of goods and services

(6) **human population**, stabilizing and gradually reducing the population by providing voluntary family planning and supporting education and rights for all girls and young women.

All transformative climate action should focus on **social justice** for all by prioritizing basic human needs and reducing inequality.

Our society of abundance

The most significant impact on the environment and sustainability comes from the wealthy and our society of abundance. Our materialistic consumption is not compensated by advances in technology. The only way we can avoid the climate and biodiversity catastrophes is through a significant reduction in our lifestyle and GDP in Western economies, with all the losses in employment and changes in our economic model that this implies. We must rethink our communities from the bottom up and simplify our ways of living.

Human Right to a Healthy Environment

On 8 October 2021, the UN Human Rights Council approved the Human Right to a safe, clean, healthy and sustainable environment

Public discourse on environment

One of the pressing concerns of humanity today is how the resources of nature can be utilized in a way that safeguards the health of the environment, and there is a large community of people around the world who are giving attention to the many dimensions of this challenge. Some are, for instance, scientists investigating the causes of phenomena such as climate change or searching for means to curb pollution. Others are working to raise consciousness about the effects of the systems and processes of present-day society on the natural world. Still others are associated with endeavors aimed at establishing environmentally sound policies.

Public discourse on environment

In short, the question of environment is being addressed by a diversity of groups and in numerous ways. And all these efforts require engagement in ongoing interconnected conversations, of different degrees of formality, from the local to the international level. We can refer to the totality of what is being expressed about this concern of humanity – in books and articles, at summits and conferences, in the media, in classrooms and so on – as the discourse on the environment. Like any other significant discourse of society, it has a direction, and it is, to an extent that may vary, rigorous. It is public in the sense that it aspires to reach everyone who wishes to follow its unfolding.

Norms & Values for Transformation

Against the backdrop of climate change, environmental degradation, and the crippling extremes of wealth and poverty, the transformation from a culture of unfettered consumerism to a culture of sustainability has gained momentum.... ...it is a transformation that will require an earnest examination of our understanding of human nature and of the cultural frameworks driving institutions of government, business, education, and media around the world. Questions of what is natural and just will need to be critically re-examined. The issue of sustainable consumption and production... will need to be considered in the broader context of an ailing social order—one characterized by competition, violence, conflict and insecurity—of which it is a part.

(Bahá'í International Community, *Rethinking Prosperity: Forging Alternatives to a Culture of Consumerism*, 2010)

The environment

We cannot segregate the human heart from the environment outside us and say that once one of these is reformed everything will be improved. Man is organic with the world. His inner life moulds the environment and is itself also deeply affected by it. The one acts upon the other and every abiding change in the life of man is the result of these mutual reactions.

(Letter written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi, 17 February 1933)

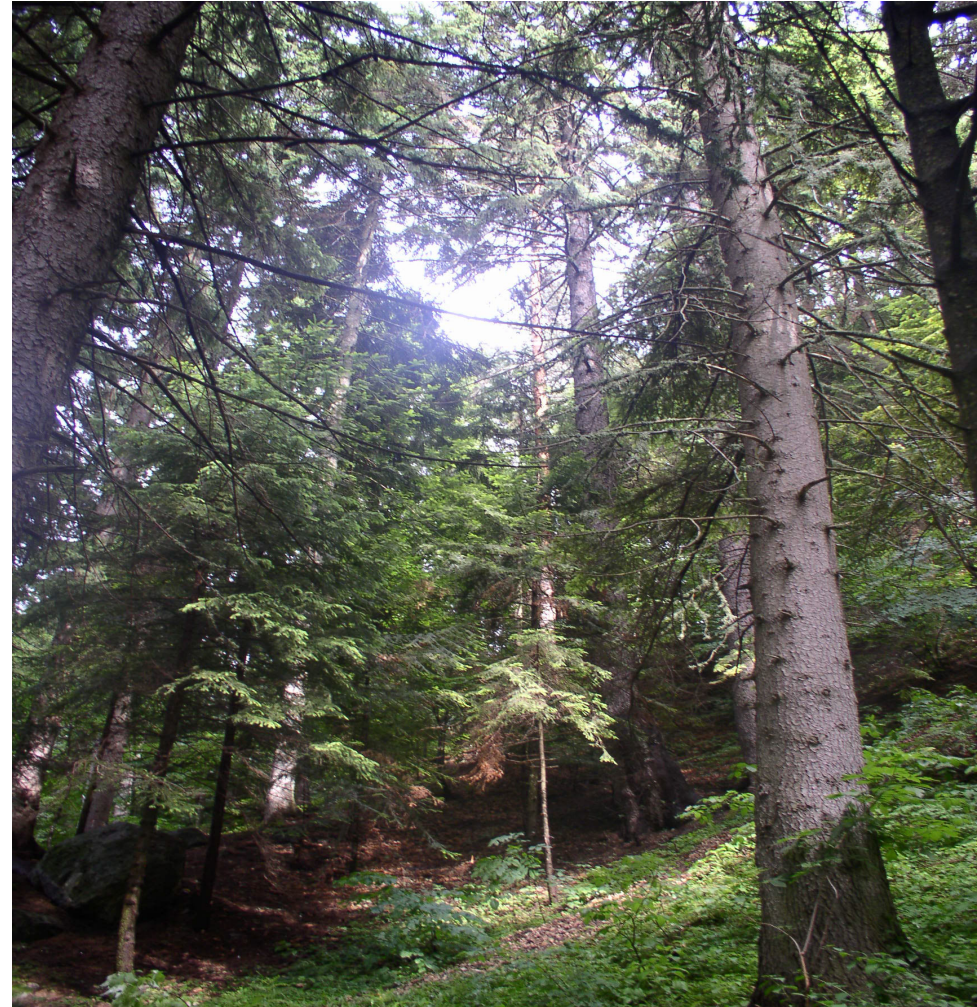
Respect for the earth

Every man of discernment, while walking upon the earth, feeleth indeed abashed, inasmuch as he is fully aware that the thing which is the source of his prosperity, his wealth, his might, his exaltation, his advancement and power is, as ordained by God, the very earth which is trodden beneath the feet of all men. There can be no doubt that whoever is cognizant of this truth, is cleansed and sanctified from all pride, arrogance, and vainglory.

The country is the world of the soul

Bahá'u'lláh loved the beauty and verdure of the country. One day He passed the remark: *'I have not gazed on verdure for nine years. The country is the world of the soul, the city is the world of bodies.'*

(‘Abdu’l-Bahá, in J. E. Esslemont, Bahá'u'lláh and the New Era. Chpt. 3, p. 35)



Nature and Spirituality



All religions
have teachings
about ecology



Hinduism

All actions take place in time by the interweaving of the forces of Nature; but the man lost in selfish delusion thinks that he himself is the actor.

But the man who knows the relation between the forces of Nature and actions, sees how some forces of Nature work on other forces of Nature, and becomes not their slave.

Those who are under the delusion of the forces of Nature bind themselves to the work of these forces. Let not the wise man who sees the All disturb the unwise who sees not the All.

Judaism

But ask the animals, and they will teach you; the birds of the air, and they will tell you; ask the plants of the earth, and they will teach you; and the fish of sea will declare to you. Who among all these does not know that the hand of the Lord has done this? In his hand is the life of every living thing and the breath of every human being. (Job 12:7-10)

The earth lies polluted under its inhabitants; for they have transgressed laws, violated the statutes, broken the everlasting covenant. Therefore a curse devours the earth, and its inhabitants suffer for their guilt; therefore the inhabitants of the earth dwindled, and few people are left. The wine dries up, the vine languishes, all the merry-hearted sigh. The mirth of the timbrels is stilled, the noise of the jubilant has ceased... (Isaiah 24:5-8)

Buddhism

This is what should be done by those who are skilled in goodness, and who know the path of peace...

in gladness and in safety, may all beings be at ease. Whatever living beings there may be, whether they are weak or strong, omitting none, the great or the mighty, medium, short or small, the seen and the unseen, those living near and far away, those born to-be-born-- May all beings be at ease!...

Even as a mother protects with her life her child, her only child, so with a boundless heart should one cherish all living beings, radiating kindness over the entire world, spreading upward to the skies, and downward to the depths, outward and unbounded. (from Metta Sutta, "Loving-kindness")

Christianity

He went up on the mountain by himself to pray. (Matthew 14:23)

And the Spirit immediately drove him out into the wilderness. He was in the wilderness forty days, tempted by Satan, and he was with the wild beasts, and the angels waited on him. (Mark 1:12-13)

...for "the earth and its fullness are the Lord's." (1 Corinthians 11:26)

The nations raged, but your wrath has come, and the time for the dead to be judged, and to recompense your servants, the prophets, and the holy ones and those who fear your name, the small and the great alike, and to destroy those who destroy the earth. (Rev 11:18)

Islam

It is He who produceth gardens, with trellises and without, and dates, and tilth with produce of all kinds, and olives and pomegranates, similar (in kind) and different (in variety): eat of their fruit in their season, but render the dues that are proper on the day that the harvest is gathered. But waste not by excess: for God loveth not the wasters. (6:141 Al-An'am - Cattle)

And the earth We have spread out (like a carpet); set thereon mountains firm and immovable; and produced therein all kinds of things in due balance. (15:19 Al-Hijr - The Rocky Tract)

Islam

There is the type of man whose speech about this world's life may dazzle thee, and he calls God to witness about what is in his heart; yet is he the most contentious of enemies. When he turns his back, his aim everywhere is to spread mischief through the earth and destroy crops and cattle but God loveth not mischief. When it is said to him, "fear God," he is led by arrogance to (more) crime. Enough for him is Hell; – an evil bed indeed (to lie on)! And there is the type of man who gives his life to earn the pleasure of God; and God is full of kindness to (His) devotees.

(2:204-207 Al-Baqarah - The Cow)

Bahá'í Faith

Nature is God's Will and is its expression in and through the contingent world.

(Bahá'u'lláh, Tablets of Bahá'u'lláh, p. 142)

Nature and Spirituality

When... thou dost contemplate the innermost essence of all things, and the individuality of each, thou wilt behold the signs of thy Lord's mercy in every created thing, and see the spreading rays of His Names and Attributes throughout all the realm of being.... Then wilt thou observe that the universe is a scroll that discloseth His hidden secrets, which are preserved in the well-guarded Tablet. And not an atom of all the atoms in existence, not a creature from amongst the creatures but speaketh His praise and telleth of His attributes and names, revealeth the glory of His might and guideth to His oneness and His mercy....

(‘Abdu’l-Bahá, Selections from the Writings of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, p. 41-42)

Nature and Spirituality

And whensoever thou dost gaze upon creation all entire, and dost observe the very atoms thereof, thou wilt note that the rays of the Sun of Truth are shed upon all things and shining within them, and telling of that Day-Star's splendours, Its mysteries, and the spreading of Its lights. Look thou upon the trees, upon the blossoms and fruits, even upon the stones. Here too wilt thou behold the Sun's rays shed upon them, clearly visible within them, and manifested by them.

Loving kindness to all creatures

Briefly, it is not only their fellow human beings that the beloved of God must treat with mercy and compassion, rather must they show forth the utmost loving-kindness to every living creature.... The feelings are one and the same, whether ye inflict pain on man or on beast.

Train your children from their earliest days to be infinitely tender and loving to animals. If an animal be sick, let the children try to heal it, if it be hungry, let them feed it, if thirsty, let them quench its thirst, if weary, let them see that it rests.

(Abdu'l-Bahá, Selections from the Writings of 'Abdu'l-Bahá, p. 158-159)

Nature as an integrated system

The laws of nature

This nature is subjected to an absolute organization, to determined laws, to a complete order and to a finished design, from which it will never depart - to such a degree, indeed, that if you look carefully and with keen sight, from the smallest invisible atom up to such large bodies of the world of existence as the globe of the sun or the other great stars and luminous spheres, whether you regard their arrangement, their composition, their form or their movement, you will find that all are in the highest degree of organization....

(‘Abdu’l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, Chpt. 1, p. 3)

Ecological principles

The innumerable created things that are found in the world of existence - be they man, animal, plant, or mineral - must each be composed of elements. There is no doubt that the completeness seen in each and every thing arises, by divine creation, from the component elements, their appropriate combination, their proportionate measure, the manner of their composition, and the influence of other created things. For all beings are linked together like a chain; and mutual aid, assistance, and interaction are among their intrinsic properties and are the cause of their formation, development and growth.

(‘Abdu’l-Bahá, Some Answered Questions, Chpt. 46, p. 205)

Ecological interdependence

Consider for instance how one group of created things constituteth the vegetable kingdom, and another the animal kingdom. Each of these two maketh use of certain elements in the air on which its own life dependeth, while each increaseth the quantity of such elements as are essential for the life of the other. In other words, the growth and development of the vegetable world is impossible without the existence of the animal kingdom, and the maintenance of animal life is inconceivable without the co-operation of the vegetable kingdom. Of like kind are the relationships that exist among all created things. Hence it was stated that co-operation and reciprocity are essential properties which are inherent in the unified system of the world of existence, and without which the entire creation would be reduced to nothingness.

(Abdu'l-Bahá, in *Compilation on Social and Economic Development*, p. 12)

Higher orders of complexity

In surveying the vast range of creation thou shalt perceive that the higher a kingdom of created things is on the arc of ascent, the more conspicuous are the signs and evidences of the truth that co-operation and reciprocity at the level of a higher order are greater than those that exist at the level of a lower order. For example, the evident signs of this fundamental reality are more discernible in the vegetable kingdom than in the mineral, and still more manifest in the animal world than in the vegetable.

(Abdu'l-Bahá, in *Compilation on Social and Economic Development*, p. 12)

Re-establishing an
ecological balance



The elements and lower organisms are synchronized in the great plan of life. Shall man, infinitely above them in degree, be antagonistic and a destroyer of that perfection?

('Abdu'l-Bahá, talk at Leland Stanford Junior University, Palo Alto, California, 8 October 1912. Promulgation of Universal Peace. Wilmette, Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1982. p. 350)

Preserving the ecological balance

For the sustainable economic and social development of all countries, agriculture and the preservation of the ecological balance of the world are fundamental.

(adapted from Universal House of Justice 1985)

Preservation of ecological diversity

Bahá'í Scriptures describe nature as a reflection of the sacred. They teach that nature should be valued and respected, but not worshipped; rather, it should serve humanity's efforts to carry forward an ever-advancing civilization. However, in light of the interdependence of all parts of nature, and the importance of evolution and diversity "to the beauty, efficiency and perfection of the whole," every effort should be made to preserve as much as possible the earth's bio-diversity and natural order.

(based on Bahá'í International Community, *Valuing Spirituality in Development*. 1998)

Climate Change

One of the most pressing problems of humanity in the current century is how a growing, rapidly developing, and not yet united global population can, in a just manner, live in harmony with the planet and its finite resources.... The limited availability and inequitable distribution of resources profoundly impact social relations within and between nations in many ways, even to the point of precipitating upheaval and war [and] devastating consequences for the environment. The question of the impact of climate change... is today a major aspect of this larger problem. The Revelation of Bahá'u'lláh directly and indirectly touches on a range of such concerns in a manner that speaks to a harmony between society and the natural world.

(Universal House of Justice, letter of 29 November 2017 https://www.bahai.org/library/authoritative-texts/the-universal-house-of-justice/messages/20171129_001)

Sustainability - valuing nature

As trustees or stewards of the planet's resources and biodiversity, we must:

- ensure sustainability and equity of resource use into distant future
- consider the environmental consequences of development activities
- temper our actions with moderation and humility
- value nature in more than economic terms
- understand the natural world and its role in humanity's collective development both material and spiritual

Sustainability - fundamental responsibility

Sustainable environmental management must come to be seen not as a discretionary commitment mankind can weigh against other competing interests, but rather as a fundamental responsibility that must be shouldered, a pre-requisite for spiritual development as well as the individual's physical survival.

Global Environmental Governance

- Stockholm+50 in June 2022

<https://iefworld.org/Stockholm50> and <https://iefworld.org/conf26>

- Rethinking Global Systems Accounting to replace GDP as the primary measure of progress https://iefworld.org/ddahl_accounting

- Climate Governance Commission

<https://globalchallenges.org/initiatives/partnerships/climate-governance-commission/>

Global Environmental Governance

An example of participation by Baha'is in public discourse

<https://globalchallenges.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/11/FINAL-%E2%80%93-Towards-a-Global-Environment-Agency-2021-11-03.pdf>



Climate Governance Commission

Towards a Global Environment Agency Effective Governance for Shared Ecological Risks

SYLVIA KARLSSON-VINKHUYZEN AND ARTHUR LYON DAHL

Questions for discussion

What are the most important environmental problems in your community?

Are you taking action to respond to climate change?

What is the state of local biodiversity?

Do you have problems of pollution?

How might you contribute to environmental discourse?

Have you changed your lifestyle to be more sustainable?