

In Celebration of 25 Years

SEHN Statements: A Brief History

Much of SEHN's work over the past 25 years has been prompted by one difficult question or another. "Why is the media getting the science of dioxin so wrong?" "What alternatives are there to risk assessment for making environmental decisions?" "What are the ethical issues and values embodied in the precautionary principle?"

When we got an inkling of an answer, we frequently convened groups of people, crossing disciplinary boundaries to test the answer, flesh it out and articulate it in a compelling way. Once we had a consensus on the answer, we sometimes issued a declaration or statement. These function like manifestos -- the time-honored way of defining a problem, asserting principles and calling for action.

Twenty-five years ago, growing evidence showed that toxic chemicals were linked to birth defects, cancer, reproductive disorders and a whole host of endocrine problems in humans and other living things, but ironclad "proof" was often lacking. The reasons for this were myriad -- scientists were just discovering the whole field of hormone disruption; corporations were refusing to test chemicals and often challenged any studies showing health impacts; regulators were assessing risks but were required to assess costs and benefits and to use the "least burdensome" methods to reduce "unreasonable risks," giving the economy, rather than human health, the benefit of the doubt.

As a result, very few chemicals were being regulated or taken off the market. People were getting sick from exposure to hazardous chemicals in the workplace and consumer products, and entire communities were facing health crises from living near toxic chemical factories and waste dumps.

Enter the precautionary principle, which seemed to be an answer to the question, "What alternatives to risk assessment are available?"

The principle had been formulated in Germany as "forecaring" and began trickling into the United States through Greenpeace and the writings of Peter Montague, an environmental historian and publisher of *Rachel's Environment and Health Weekly*.

In 1997 almost nothing had been written explaining how to *implement* the precautionary principle. So, we convened the 1998 Wingspread Conference on the Precautionary Principle to bring together an international group of people from diverse backgrounds to hash out how to make the precautionary principle a usable tool for decision-making. Then we issued [the Wingspread Statement on the Precautionary Principle](#). This has proven to be a durable document, widely used by governments, academics, nongovernmental organizations and businesses. The key paragraph in the Wingspread Statement is: “When an activity raises threats of harm to human health or the environment, precautionary measures should be taken even if some cause and effect relationships have not been fully established scientifically.”

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Wingspread Statement

This definition has been widely cited and put verbatim into [legislation](#) or [regulations](#). [San Francisco](#) passed an ordinance adopting the precautionary principle in 2003 with subsequent ordinances passed in later years.

After the Wingspread Conference we grappled with how to fully realize the potential of the principle. We were primarily focused on all the dimensions of scientific uncertainty. Ted Schettler and I studied the philosophy of science to more fully understand the deeper concepts that were covered by the simple phrase “scientific uncertainty,” especially as it related to public health and the environment. But there was something missing.

“Failing to act today to conserve ecosystems and preserve species extinctions will have significant social and ecological costs tomorrow.” Missoula Statement

In one of those “Aha!” moments, a scientist at the National Institutes of Health made the offhand comment that the precautionary principle was the first decision rule that coupled ethics with epistemology. *Ethics*. That was the missing piece! So much of environmental law and policy is focused on the science. But the science doesn’t tell us what to do.

We convened another workshop to examine the underlying values of the precautionary principle and issued the [Blue Mountain Statement on Essential Values, 2000](#).

At the same time, we began working at applying the principle to conservation and wildlife issues. Conservation biologists were treating their field as a crisis discipline and the precautionary principle gave license to take precautionary action in the face of uncertainty. Thus, the [Missoula Statement: Conservation Decisions in the Face of Uncertainty, 2000](#) and the [Icicle Creek Statement on the Precautionary Principle and Ecosystems, 2001](#).

One unifying idea in all our work has been that human health is deeply entwined with the natural world. As goes the grizzly bear, so goes the human. As goes the Missouri River, so goes the baby’s amniotic fluid. As goes the Amazon rain forest, so go our lungs. But this was not the prevailing idea in medicine or health care. The fields of medicine and public health diverged widely. So we convened a meeting to develop the core concepts of Ecological Medicine. Afterward, we said this:

“Ecological Medicine is a new field of inquiry and action to reconcile the care and health of ecosystems, populations, communities, and individuals. The health of Earth's ecosystem is the foundation of all health. Human impact in the form of population pressure, resource abuse, economic self-interest, and inappropriate technologies is rapidly degrading the environment. This impact, in turn, is creating new patterns of human and ecosystem poverty and disease. The tension among ecosystem health, public health, and individual health is reaching a breaking point at the beginning of the Twenty-First Century.” From: [Ecological Medicine Statement: A Call for Inquiry and Action, 2002](#).

It was clear that the breaking point would have lasting consequences. We were not just facing an ecological breakdown that would affect present generations but also future generations. Our colleagues at the [Indigenous Environmental Network \(IEN\)](#) pressed the point that the precautionary principle with its future orientation was actually an ancient Indigenous decision-making idea calling for decision-makers to consider the seventh generation and make decisions accordingly. IEN and SEHN convened a group and issued the [The Bemidji Statement On Seventh Generation Guardianship, July 6, 2006](#).

“Values become actions. Too many of our actions are killing our planet, our communities, and our spirit. Our actions are killing our loved ones. We are diminishing the future for everyone and everything.”

Blue Mountain Statement

Then we turned to Harvard Law School's Center for International Human Rights to develop a legal framework to recognize the legal right of future generations to inherit a clean and healthy environment. [We generated two reports](#) that created a legal framework to recognize these rights. We included a constitutional provision, a statute, and institutional models that political jurisdictions can adopt.

As we continued to work on the rights of future generations, we encountered a stark fact: many of the worst environmental problems of our day threatened not just seven generations, but ten thousand generations: [high level radioactive waste](#), climate change, and mining waste, among many long-lived problems.

Carolyn had been called to help a project on the [Principles of Perpetual Care for the Giant Mine](#) near Yellow Knife in the Northwest Territories of Canada. The city of Yellow Knife and nearby First Nations had been contaminated by thousands of tons of toxic arsenic trioxide from mining gold. How could we protect future generations so far into the future? The arsenic was likely to be hazardous for at least 250,000 years.

As we prepared to write the Principles of Perpetual Care, we consulted with Joanna Macy who had proposed a way to [protect future generations from high-level radioactive waste, which was to designate guardians](#) who would be charged with warning and protecting future humans from the horrible legacy we were leaving them.

“Because ecosystems are more complex than we can know, our relationship with nature must be a conversation. We must conduct all activities with both humility and courage, studying effects and making appropriate adaptations.”

Icicle Creek Statement

Out of that meeting, we decided to gather women to consider the responsibilities present generations hold for future generations. Women are uniquely responsible for bringing future generations into the world and yet their voices are often missing from policy forums. We convened three Women’s Congresses for Future Generations. At the first Women’s Congress we issued the [Declaration of the Rights of Future Generations and the Responsibilities of Present Generations](#). We stood together, as women and men, saying:

“We seek to galvanize a civil rights movement for future generations through the collaborative articulation of ideas and to influence policy.”

“We call for new institutions, ideas and laws that recognize the rights of nature and Future Generations, and legal guardians for nature and future generations. Many cultures, particularly indigenous cultures have practiced these principles for millennia. It is time to bring them back. Humanity is capable of critical and mass change. The time for exercising that capability is upon us.”

“We withdraw our consent from the institutions and practices that have put the world in peril.”

We extended that fundamental idea of giving and withholding consent at the second Women’s Congress in the [Declaration of the Rights of All Waters](#). The legitimacy of every government rests upon the consent of the governed. Water is threatened around the world, from Flint Michigan to the Missouri River to the Ganges to the Ogallala Aquifer to the Pacific Ocean. As goes the water, so goes the amniotic fluid of all babies.

All of these statements and declarations led to a great deal more work to implement these calls to action. We worked with government agencies, wrote books, collaborated with academicians, and served as invited technical experts for grassroots groups.

“Health in humans and ecosystems is not a steady state but a dynamic one marked by resilience. Both medicine and ecosystem science and management should focus on promoting and restoring the innate ability of biological systems to protect themselves, recover, and heal.”

Ecological Medicine Statement

[The books we wrote](#) deserve a special mention here. Ted Schettler authored or coauthored several books that implicitly made the case for using the precautionary principle and that began our exploration of the ecological framework for health. We wrote two books on the precautionary principle.

We will be building our next body of work on all that has gone before. One major project for 2020 and beyond is to establish the core idea is that the main purpose of government is not to protect the “free market” but instead to create conditions in which all people can thrive, prosper, and pursue happiness. This basic idea creates new language, arguments, and opportunities for social justice advocacy on every issue.

"As humans we have the responsibility to withdraw our consent from practices that do not fulfill our responsibilities to uphold the rights of all waters and to give our free, prior and informed consent to practices that repair, restore and protect the waters.

Declaration of the Rights of All Waters

After 50 years of being told that government's primary responsibility is to promote the free market, we now know that this has proven to be disastrous for public health, the natural world, and democracy. Yet social justice advocacy rarely challenges the prevailing neoliberal view of government's main role as protector of free markets.

We are reimagining government, spelling out the principles of democratic governance, asserting the primacy of well-being and the common wealth over predatory corporations and crony capitalists. These principles include a rationale to decouple corporations from government, a description of the appropriate relationship of government to the economy, and an elaboration of the foundational concepts of democracy based on one person one vote. We are gathering a diverse group of thinkers, advocates, and activists to study, write, design and implement these principles, intending to develop new language, arguments, and strategies for all social justice advocates.

We will keep you up to date with our progress on this new re-imagining government project. We welcome your thoughts on it and your on-going financial support. It is **you** who have made the past 25 years possible. So, thank you.

"We have the responsibility to replace, re-imagine, and create systems that health rather than harm."

Declaration of the Rights of Future Generations and the Responsibilities of Present Generations