Interactive Dialogue of the U.N. General Assembly on Harmony with Nature
“Towards achieving sustainable development goals including addressing climate change in the post-2015 Development Agenda”
27 April 2015, 10:00 a.m. – 1:00 p.m.
U.N. Secretariat Building, New York City, NY, USA

Thank you for the opportunity to submit this Statement regarding the April 2015 U.N. General Assembly Interactive Dialogue on Harmony with Nature. The ongoing international negotiations over the post-2015 development goals, as well as the critical climate change discussions leading up to the December 2015 Conference of the Parties in Paris, demand careful attention to how we characterize our relationship with the Earth.

As noted recently by the U.N. Secretary-General,¹ we live in an “irreversibly interconnected world,” one where “the challenges faced by any become the challenges faced by each of us.” This is true not only with respect to threats faced by human populations, but also by the natural world, on which we utterly depend. If we do not prioritize care for the Earth, we will find that its ongoing degradation will contribute, directly and irreversibly, to our own.

Accordingly, we offer three observations on the occasion of this Interactive Dialogue on Harmony with Nature. First, despite all warnings, we continue to degrade the Earth rapidly, well past the point of planetary boundaries in some instances. We risk irreversible damage to the Earth and our own well-being as a result. Any international agreements that do not commit to immediately begin to reverse – not merely slow – this degradation by definition are not in “harmony” with the Earth. Our goal must be planetary health and well-being, not less degradation.

Second, this goal of planetary health must be reflected clearly in international agreements, including the final post-2015 development and December 2015 climate change agreements. Among other things, agreement language must include a commitment to recognize and implement the inherent rights of the natural world to exist, thrive and evolve. The significance of “rights of nature” legal systems are discussed in the final outcome document for the 2012 U.N. Conference on Sustainable Development, and in subsequent outcome documents from past U.N. General Assembly Interactive Dialogues on Harmony with Nature.

Finally, we strongly agree with the U.N. statement for the current Harmony with Nature Dialogue that “the damaged inflicted by unsustainable economic activity ... on our fellow humans including poverty and other deep social inequalities, and to the Earth are inextricably linked and

cannot be overcome independently of each other.”

Our goal is not to “balance” unsustainable economic activity against social and environmental well-being. Our goal instead is to create a sustainable economic system that works to ensure social and environmental well-being. Economics is a tool; if it is not serving the well-being of people and planet, it must change. Neither we nor the Earth should change for the well-being of our current economic system. As a result, we agree with the Secretary-General’s call for “alternative measures of progress, beyond GDP.” These measures must include metrics clearly illustrating progress toward the “health” of the natural world, rather focusing on human progress or economic progress. Assessment of our progress toward “sustainable development” or any similar goal will fail unless it includes the well-being of the Earth’s ecosystems and species.

In sum, we urge the assembled parties to commit to and begin implementation of strategies and actions that reverse the trend of ecological degradation and move us measurably toward a healthy Earth, consistent with the inherent rights of ecosystems and species to exist, thrive and evolve. We also urge the U.N. to actively and publicly measure and report on our progress toward environmental well-being. The damage done to date has been enormous; with increasing pressure on the planet from all sides, any commitments short of these goals will fall short.

We look forward to working with you to achieve these important goals. Thank you for your consideration of this Statement.

Sincerely,

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3 Synthesis Report, supra n. 1.