



# **EARTH KEEPERS**

*A SURVIVAL GUIDE FOR A PLANET IN PERIL*  
*A FILM BY SYLVIE VAN BRABANT*

**RAPIDE  
BLANC** **FINO** **MFB** 

**DISCUSSION HANDBOOK**

# **EARTH KEEPERS**

A film by Sylvie Van Brabant

## **Discussion Handbook**

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## INTRODUCTION

This DISCUSSION HANDBOOK is not a lesson plan. Its purpose is to invite viewers of the film *Earth Keepers* to use the film as a starting point to delve more deeply into the issues and, with the help of a discussion leader, to examine what they have learned, analyze their reactions and come up with concrete actions that they can carry out.

## OBJECTIVES

The three objectives of the discussion handbook are:

- Introduce various environmental visionaries from around the world and inform the public about their methods and experience.
- Help viewers gain a deeper understanding of some of the issues featured in the film and reflect on their own points of view.
- Raise viewers' interest in taking concrete steps to ensure the planet's survival.

## DISCUSSION PREPARATION

Since the content of the film *Earth Keepers* is dense in its presentation, discussion leaders ought to view the film in its entirety at least once before screening it for a group. In addition to using the questions suggested below to reach the above-mentioned objectives, discussion leaders can set their own overall objectives based on their personality type, the target audience or the time scheduled after the screening.

The personal objective plays an essential role in promoting an effective discussion by enabling the leader to emphasize certain points; after recap, it allows the leader to analyze the degree of satisfaction of the work accomplished during the discussion process. This is the most effective approach, since any further analysis of the degree of awareness achieved or actions undertaken in subsequent days or weeks requires an analysis grid beyond the scope of this discussion.

A final word regarding the personal objective chosen: the discussion leader ought to read all the questions and make a choice, depending on the total time available for both the screening and discussion period. He also must take into account that since some parts of the film are in French, the subtitles will make it more difficult for unilingual audiences to understand.

When screening for secondary school students, you will need two one-hour periods. If you choose to screen and discuss only one part of the film, you will need less time.

## DISCUSSION PROCEDURE

To ensure an effective discussion, describe the procedure to the group at the beginning of the session.

Before screening the film, the discussion leader briefly describes the procedure:

The leader introduces himself and briefly explains why he has chosen to screen this film.

He asks participants if they often think about the environment. He accepts a number of very brief answers.

He states that this film will introduce a number of well-known dedicated activists, from various parts of the world, who are conducting research and applying concrete environmental solutions aimed at ensuring our planet's survival.

The leader announces that after screening the film, he will use the questions to develop a deeper understanding of certain themes featured in the film. Since the themes are multi-faceted, he will briefly review each one before raising the issues related to them. He also mentions that he will explore their reactions and their points of view.

He explains that once the issues have been examined, he will sum up the entire activity, and follow that up by asking them to list a number of relatively easy concrete actions that they can personally carry out in their own neighborhoods. He adds that by implementing a very specific project, some of them will even be able to raise the awareness of the general public.

## EXAMINING THE ISSUES

Each question is followed by a brief answer or discussion topic in italics.

Since the questions are generally open-ended, they will, obviously, lead to personal answers. At this stage it is advisable to give only a few hints to begin the discussion.

### **Mikael Rioux, Activist**

Committed activist and environmentalist Mikael Rioux is present throughout the film, guiding the viewer through the film's various themed "chapters."

As the film begins, we see the young, passionately committed activist pouring water on the head of Hydro-Québec's CEO, staging a sit-in on a platform suspended above the Trois-Pistoles River, and later, taking to the streets with his fellow citizens to make his position clear.

## Questions

1. Not everyone can carry out these kinds of actions that, while important, may be seen as excessive in certain situations. In your opinion, should some people become role models of committed activism (with the exception of provocative acts)? Why?
  - *Throughout the ages, human beings have needed sources of inspiration that appeal to their conscience, which then spurs them to action. Extreme acts that seem justified to some, but are decried by most, are driven by a profound desire for change*
  -
2. Do you believe that sincere and unwavering commitment to actions away from the public eye and media can also provide major support to humanitarian causes? If yes, how?
  - *Great things are rarely accomplished alone. Leaders need people branching out and working at the grass roots, just like the individuals featured in this film.*
3. What is your first reaction to this film? Are you discouraged or hopeful?
  - *While the film predicts imminent catastrophe if we do not change our ways, it also shows successful actions which should leave us hopeful that human beings are able to see the urgent need for action and have the ability to bring about change.*

## **Christian de Laet**

Mikael Rioux is inspired by his mentor, Christian de Laet, an environmental pioneer and a “wisdom keeper.” Christian states that the disastrous consequences of human activity on our environment are not readily apparent. He feels that a profound collective awareness is yet to come. Mikael emphasizes that the Beaver Syndrome is still alive and well in Quebec, where dams are still being built without any forethought.

## Questions

1. Is Christian right in saying that we do not see the consequences of our actions on the environment? If you believe that he is right, give a specific example and state your opinion.
  - *Ask the audience for some examples. If no one gives an example, supply one yourself.*
2. Do you think that Quebec’s energy and economic needs justify the continuing construction of dams? Do you know anything about other sources of energy?
  - *Various answers.*
  - *Greener technologies exist that are energy efficient, simple, readily available and affordable.*

## **John Todd and Nancy Jack Todd**

John Todd has been named one of the 35 most important inventors of the 20th century. He has created innovative projects, notably in energy and in water purification. In addition, he and his wife, Nancy, were the precursors of the organic food movement, creating projects whose impressive results are visible today.

### Questions

1. John developed natural water filtration processes for a canal in China that had fallen into serious disrepair. How is this canal an example of “life returning?”
  - *The quality of the canal water has been improved and “life” has returned in the form of the many birds and butterflies that enhance the restored beauty of this waterway.*
2. John and Nancy are convinced that environmental design projects can reduce our negative impact on the earth by 90%. On what do they base their claim?
  - *By mimicking nature we cannot really go wrong. Returning to nature and using it as a model is essential and even urgent, as Christian de Laet states in this scene: “We must be provisional catastrophists!”*

## **India : Ashok Khosla and Development Alternatives**

As young men, Christian de Laet and Ashok Khosla worked at the United Nations. They travelled all over the world, meeting with many prominent political figures, but not building anything concrete. This led them to found Development Alternatives in India 25 years ago.

The Development Alternatives Centre is built at the edge of a large urban forest. The staff watch over the forest and take their inspiration from being so close to nature. The construction of the centre itself respected the basic principle of using only what was strictly necessary in materials and human energy.

Development Alternatives also promotes the use of technologies that are environmentally friendly and adapted to each milieu. Companies applying to the centre must meet three basic criteria: 1) social equity, 2) economic efficiency, 3) environmental quality.

With the help of a Development Alternatives specialist, women process cotton rags into paper; a small agricultural community revitalizes its soil through irrigation, and an inner-city school implements intelligent and effective recycling.

Running parallel to all the projects mentioned above is the constant evocation of climate change and its disastrous effects on our planet. In addition, attention is focused on the concentration of the world’s wealth in the hands of a minority of nations, in contrast to the poverty endured by others. These environmental issues are all so deeply intertwined that, as he searches for solutions, Mikael fears that he will come up against a brick wall – despite the impressive projects he discovers in India!

## Question

Are young people in the 21<sup>st</sup> century right to be discouraged? Is it still possible to be hopeful?

*Ashok evokes two things with which one can make connections:*

*He and Christian observe the fissure in time between the past and the highly technological future that was rushing towards them at lightning speed **in their own generation**. They reacted, they found solutions, and they created viable projects.*

*Ashok also says that it is now up to us to find the tipping point – like the iPod – which will scatter like a fine mist and mobilize the energies of the world’s youth in the right direction.*

*Why wouldn’t today’s young people, the generation of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, be able to find this element, this new path for their own time, as Christian and Ashok had done? Mikael and other passionately committed young people like him all over the world will know how to carry on being consciousness raisers, and builders of innovative projects, and so avoid “hitting a brick wall.”*

## **Switzerland: Peter Koenig**

Peter Koenig is an organizational development specialist working at the very heart of the world economy that Switzerland represents. He specializes in helping companies develop according to their values. However, he has often observed that when it comes time to discuss budgets, values are quickly thrown out the window, as if they suddenly became less important. His business experience led him to change the way that he thinks about money: he no longer sees it as economists do. Money is no longer simply a means of exchange, as it should be. It has become the symbol of freedom, security and even happiness.



## Questions

What happens if the amount of money we possess cannot fulfill our desires and our wishes for happiness?

*Constant unhappiness, in Peter's words.*

*He continues, "We have to reach the point where we take money for what it is, only for what it is. It was created for our collective needs for exchange. This is what we have lost sight of. We must, therefore, work to change our perception of it."*

2. What does the principle of voluntary simplicity mean to you?

*Various answers.*

### **Sweden: Karl-Henrik Robèrt – The Natural Step**

In welcoming Mikael, Karl-Henrik Robèrt points out that finding solutions is as important as becoming aware of the problems.

Karl-Henrik, a physician, first became aware of the damage to human health caused by the lack of environmental awareness when he was examining a patient's cancer cells. He had a personal revelation when he realized that we were all at risk. At that point he committed himself to searching for solutions to our environmental problems.

He created The Natural Step, an organization with a serious commitment to rigorous research of what sustainable development implies. Karl-Henrik states that, first and foremost, we have to have a global understanding of the problems and then investigate possible global solutions. By developing a global vision we can define actions that will truly bring us closer to realizing the global objective of true and lasting sustainable development.

Karl-Henrik first worked with scientists who used rigorous principles and, after reaching a consensus, was able to move on to more intelligent actions. The Natural Step also shows several errors perpetuated and even accentuated by today's society. His most notable example is the mining industry. Does this mean that we have to abandon all mining activities? Karl-Henrik answers, "No. Even nature possesses chemical substances. We have to understand nature's process and imitate it."

## Questions

1. What 'smart steps' process did Karl-Henrik use himself to make more people aware of his theory?

*He established a rigorous process with his scientific collaborators. Together, they arrived at a consensus regarding the true definition of 'sustainable development.' Based on this definition, Karl wrote his first book.*

*Then, using 'smart steps,' he made a series of contacts: a public speaker, a television broadcast, the government and finally the king of Sweden. Lastly, he distributed his book, *The Natural Step*, in which he explains what is to be done, to every household and every school in Sweden.*

*N. B. Even if all points are not covered, the important thing is to understand that we need patience, commitment, perseverance and a step-by-step approach.*

*Karl-Henrik also says that we need to go beyond the present urgent need for global action and its details. We ought to pay more attention to the connections between local and global problems and we ought to examine the connections between the economy and noble objectives realistically.*

2. As he leaves Sweden, Mikael asks himself an important question: "How can we conquer our fear as we realize the enormity of our planet's situation?" What answer does he find for himself?

*To conquer our fear, we must first develop a long-term vision and then make this vision a reality step by step.*

*In addition, university students say that while their anger about the current state of affairs is justified, they must use it creatively and fight against despair. They have no choice but to hope and to act.*

## **Putting sustainable development into practice**

Towards the end of his visit to Sweden, Mikael visits a series of rather amazing places where sustainable development principles are being put into practice.

## Questions

1. Can you name one of these principles that made an impact on you?
2. What qualities were necessary, in your opinion, to develop these projects?

*Any principle can be named. Step-by-step organizational sense, creativity, perseverance, a collective conviction to improve the environment.*

## **Marilyn Melhmann : Seeking the right balance**

Marilyn Melhmann, specialist in environmental education, emphasizes the importance of understanding our mutual dependence on this small planet, our Earth. We must develop a feeling of responsibility towards those who produce what we consume. In her words, if there is too much dissatisfaction and no hope, there is no possibility of change. On the other hand, a high degree of hope and satisfaction may result in no reason to change anything at all.

### Question

What path should those people take who are seeking a balance between dialogue to effect change and anger that is manifested in street demonstrations when no change comes about?

*“Change occurs when there is a certain balance between dissatisfaction and hope. If there is too much dissatisfaction and not enough hope, no change is possible. A great deal of hope and no dissatisfaction means there is no reason to change. We must have the hope that what we do will make a difference.”*

*(Marilyn Melhmann)*

## **Wangari Maathai and the Green Belt Movement**

Mikael meets Wangari Maathai, Founder of the Green Belt Movement and Nobel Peace Prize recipient while she is on a speaking tour in the United States.

Wangari explains that her own awareness was developed when she observed the destruction of the environment due to soil erosion. “We are losing contact with the earth,” she explains, “even though we are all dependent on her for our survival.” In particular, she speaks about deforestation. She is convinced that this plague is responsible for the many evils threatening vital resources for human beings. This led her to become a committed activist.

### Questions

1. How does her action resemble other actions already mentioned in the film?

*She began with a small action: planting trees, gathering a small group of women around her. Then, with a widening impact, she began to stand up for her convictions in the face of the reigning political powers, and finally, she saw her ‘small’ project grow into a broad-based movement calling for justice.*

*In her words, the earth’s population is steadily increasing, yet its resources are finite.*

2. What solution does Wangari propose?

*Realizing that our resources are limited.  
Taking care of these resources.  
Changing our way of thinking about sharing.*

3. How does this solution fit in with the statements made by Marilyn Melhmann?

*Finding the right balance.*

### **Home from the Quest**

Mikael Rioux takes Christian de Laet to his home in Trois-Pistoles. They are shown in conversation, talking about a crisis that will certainly happen if the planet continues to suffer destruction in this way. And yet, applicable models already exist and are available to be implemented. Young people must be encouraged to become involved on a massive scale to recreate a cooperative spirit that no longer exists. It's important to reach consensus with collaborators, but dialogue must begin with our opponents. In good faith, Mikael meets his opponents, the elected officials of the MRC des Basques, who finally agree to meet with him, leading him to believe that they all want to take a sustainable development approach in the area.

Not long after, however, the dam project is again being promoted by the authorities.

### Questions

1. How does Mikael react?

*We are not going to let this happen.*

2. What connection does his reaction have to the remarks of the Swedish students in environmental education (Strategic Leadership towards Sustainability)?

*Creative anger gets better results than discouragement. That is why Mikael and his collaborators created Échofête, an environmental festival that has such a resounding economic and social success that he says: "Our festival is a success. We can make more money with a festival than with a dam."*

3. What other projects, inspired by Échofête, illustrate the approach of Natural Step by Karl-Henrik Robèrt in some way?

*In addition to holding its annual festival, Échofête has become a grass-roots company operating all year long; its staff are developing an intergenerational organic garden, promote active transportation, work together with the green Bruntland schools, etc.*

## Passing the torch from one generation to the next

The best way to support hope is to realize the degree to which the movement has become irreversible. People are developing and implementing projects all over the world, they are disseminating information broadly, undertaking valuable concrete actions everywhere, in many different ways.

### Questions

1. What images or which people represent passing the torch from one generation to the next?

*Christian's empty wheelchair, Mikael at the water's edge thinking about possible solutions, possible actions, the little boy looking out over the ocean into his life and into his future.*

2. What feelings do these images evoke?

*Answers: admiration, impact on heart and conscience, desire to participate in this great movement of rising awareness of sustainable development, the desire to take action in one's own neighbourhood by undertaking concrete actions. Ask a few audience members to identify concrete steps they intend to take in their daily lives.*

## RECAP

Recap is a closing exercise that can turn out to be a basic but useful tool to measure the general level of understanding of audience members and what the audience will take away after the screening. The discussion leader does not have to use all the given types of recap exercises, but can choose any one or more, according to the participants and their receptiveness.

Type 1: Screening and analysis or judgment based on a specific indicator.

In the airplane, Mikael says: *"I'm looking for ways to save the planet and here I am, burning up tonnes of carbon..."*

Based on what you took away from the film, do you think that his words are really in contradiction to the urgent need for passionate commitment to the planet's environment?

Type 2: Connections to information already acquired

Have you already heard about a major experiment in environmental protection that would fit in with those featured in this film? What are the similarities? How could this experiment be a hope for the future?

### Type 3: Counter example

Have you already seen another film about the environment? Are there any elements in that film that are similar in nature to the statements made in *Earth Keepers*?

### Type 4: Experimentation

Group reflection on the following sentence placed in the context of awakening of an environmental conscience:

**We cannot change our habits if we don't first become aware of the assumptions on which they are based and how they were acquired.**

Definition of the word "habit:" ...*a behaviour pattern acquired by frequent repetition...*

Using examples given by participants, "work" on certain habits by emphasizing that they are acquired, often through preconceived ideas or simple negligence.

- *Letting the tap water run too long*  
Preconceived idea – Claude Gauthier sings "Je suis de lacs et de rivières." *In Quebec we talk about the wealth of water as if it were inexhaustible*
- *Not taking reusable bags for shopping*  
Negligence – This lack of individual effort has consequences for all of us
- Preconceived idea: Hydro-electricity is the greatest asset for clean development in Quebec!

Given that awareness of the preconceived ideas dictating our habits can lead us to change them, what are the daily concrete steps you can take to respond to the urgent need to save our environment? **In other words, how open are you to experimentation in terms of changing your habits?**

Following the example of the innovators you have met in this film, could you imagine launching a simple and feasible project in your neighborhood that would go beyond a personal action? Christian de Laet states that in its grass-roots beginnings, local development is a means of persuading each individual that he can become a force for change. If you don't find any ideas right now, would you like to form a research team in your neighbourhood to design a project that you can implement?

## **CONCLUSION** (an inspiration for the discussion leader)

At the start of the film, Mikael Rioux states that we can no longer afford to limit our awareness to those problems directly around us. Rather, the time has come to develop an urgent planetary vision. His child is born...but into what world, he wonders. After seeing the film can we dare to hope for a healthy world and a healthy planet? If we believe the following quote, yes we can dare to hope.

*...education can help in two ways. It can promote a behavioral technology capable of correcting troublesome contingencies and it can teach precurrent behaviors of self-management which permit a man to escape from possible contingencies in which ultimate consequences are aversive.<sup>1</sup>*

This sentence was written in 1968 by B. F. Skinner, leading contemporary behaviorist. Surely it is still valid today?

We must never stop educating ourselves about the environment; it produces changes in our behaviour.

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<sup>1</sup> Skinner, B. F. 1968. *The Technology of Teaching*. New York: Appleton-Century-Crofts.