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Private parties for a new world order: Maurice and Hanne Strong, global governance, and environmental imaginaries since 1970

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Abstract

Focusing on the private governance networks of Maurice Frederick Strong and his second wife, Hanne Marstrand, this article traces the origins of corporate environmentalism and flexible interpretations of sustainable development to the 1970s, the foundational years of international environmental governance. Shifting the analytical focus from official meetings to private gatherings in the Strong's' homes in Geneva, Nairobi, the Canadian Rockies, and Crestone, Colorado, I show that the environmental imaginaries among governance elites around Strong and Marstrand were shaped by the couple's entanglements with industrial philanthropy, New Age spiritualism, and cybernetics. Drawing on personal archives, correspondence, and publications, I argue that the Strong's' heterogeneous networks, which bridged counterculture environmentalism, technological optimism, and alternative approaches to international development, ultimately facilitated the growing role of corporations in environmental policymaking during the late 1980s and 1990s. This article, then, contributes to the history of global environmental governance and development by highlighting the lasting impact of private governance networks on the environmental policy landscape, exemplified by early linkages between United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP), oil industry actors, and private banking institutions.

Keywords: global environmental governance; environmental imaginaries; private settings; economic humanism; counterculture

Introduction

Much of our current architecture for international environmental policymaking, including international organizations and programmes, originated in the 1970s and 1980s, turbulent decades marked by public demands for stricter environmental regulations, calls for economic reform, and a rethinking of the global political order. Events like the United Nations Conference on the Human Environment, held in 1972 in Stockholm, have been seen as watershed moments for international and natural environmental politics, defining the playbooks for future UN environmental conferences.¹ Nonetheless, looking at the same period, economic and environmental historians have often pointed out how this rise in environmental awareness inconveniently coincided with the neoliberal economics that have been blamed for delaying environmental and climate action.² In this article, however, I argue that to understand the shortcomings of past and

¹Sverker Sörlin and Eric Paglia, *Stockholm and the Rise of Global Environmental Governance: The Human Environment*, Studies in Environment and History (Cambridge University Press, 2024).

²Ruth A. Morgan, *Climate Change and International History: Negotiating Science, Global Change, and Environmental Justice* (Bloomsbury, 2024), 6; Kristoffer Ekberg and Victor Pressfeldt, 'A Road to Denial: Climate Change and Neoliberal

current environmental regimes, we need to look more broadly. This article shows that the roots of flexible interpretations of environmental limits emerged from a variety of quarters, and not solely from proponents of free-market approaches.

This article focuses on key figures in the emergence of early forms of 'global environmental governance', a post-war mode of 'world politics' that extends beyond national governments to include a widening range of non-state actors, such as scientific experts, international organizations, social and economic institutions, and public intellectuals, in addressing environmental issues.³ In particular, this article looks at Maurice Frederick Strong and some of his close allies, including his second wife Hanne Marstrand, whose views were influenced by their diplomatic and corporate engagements in both the Global North and South, as well as by the North American counterculture. As a central figure in global environmental governance from the 1970s through the early 2000s, Strong has been a person of interest for scholars in the field of global and international history. His role as secretary-general of both the 1972 Stockholm Conference and the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development held in Rio twenty years later made him a key figure in the North–South dialogues about the environment and international development. As the first president of the United Nations Environmental Programme (UNEP), and as a member of the World Commission on Environment and Development (WCED) (Brundtland Commission) in 1987, he helped shape the UN's approach to resource development and environmental protection, as well as the international sustainable development agenda.⁴ Yet, so far, the ambivalent aspects in the background of the oilman and environmental advocate Strong, business-oriented yet a left-leaning liberal, and with strong religious views, have not been in the focus of the academic literature. Through their various networks and affiliations, Strong and Marstrand were friends with philanthropists, Latin American development thinkers, members of the North American New Age movement, and leading cyberneticists.

While the work by authors such as Ben Huf, Glenda Sluga, Sabine Selchow, and Cyrus Mody has looked at Strong's role in economic thought and his links to philanthropy, how Strong and his many and diverse acquaintances made sense of the relations between the themes of environment, social justice, international development, corporate interest, and technology has not been discussed.⁵ Sketching the heterogeneous and sprawling connections that linked high-level UN officials with alternative development thinkers, business executives, is the first aim of this article. The second aim is to analyse the type of environmental imaginaries, or forms of 'world-making', that these networks produced. Environmental imaginaries have been loosely defined as including the discourses, norms, and metaphors, often linked to perceptions of local environments, that

Thought in Sweden, 1988–2000', *Contemporary European History* 31, no. 4 (2022): 627–44; Anders Fremstad and Mark Paul, 'Neoliberalism and Climate Change: How the Free-Market Myth Has Prevented Climate Action', *Ecological Economics* 197 (2022): 107353; Adrian Parr, *The Wrath of Capital: Neoliberalism and Climate Change Politics* (Columbia University Press, 2014).

³Frank Biermann and Philipp Pattberg, 'Global Environmental Governance: Taking Stock, Moving Forward', *Annual Review of Environment and Resources* 33, no. 1 (2008): 280; Sörlin and Paglia, *Stockholm and the Rise of Global Environmental Governance*.

⁴See, for instance, Perrin Selcer, *The Postwar Origins of the Global Environment: How the United Nations Built Spaceship Earth* (Columbia University Press, 2018); Stephen Macekura, *Of Limits and Growth: The Rise of Global Sustainable Development in the Twentieth Century* (Cambridge University Press, 2016); Iris Borowy, *Defining Sustainable Development for Our Common Future: A History of the World Commission on Environment and Development (Brundtland Commission)* (Routledge, 2013); Eric Paglia, 'The Swedish Initiative and the 1972 Stockholm Conference: The Decisive Role of Science Diplomacy in the Emergence of Global Environmental Governance', *Humanities and Social Sciences Communications* 8, no. 1 (2021): 1–10; Felix Dodds and Chris Spence, *Heroes of Environmental Diplomacy: Profiles in Courage* (Earthscan, 2022); Maria H. Ivanova, *The Untold Story of the World's Leading Environmental Institution: UNEP at Fifty* (MIT Press, 2021).

⁵Cyrus Mody, 'Maurice Strong, Conspiracy Theories, and the Pitfalls of Environmental Diplomacy', Text, *NiCHE*, 21 May 2024, accessed 6 January 2026, <https://niche-canada.org/2024/05/21/maurice-strong-conspiracy-theories-and-the-pitfalls-of-environmental-diplomacy/>; Ben Huf et al., 'Business and the Planetary History of International Environmental Governance in the 1970s', *Contemporary European History* 31, no. 4 (2022): 553–69.

governance groups might represent.⁶ These imaginaries are not rigid policy agendas but rather evolving frameworks that help actors navigate approaches to complex themes such as the environment, economy, and technology. As I will show, the emerging environmental imaginaries developed by Strong, Marstrand, and others in their network were rooted in a form of ‘economic humanism’ that integrated elements of deep ecology and techno-optimist approaches, alongside a reimagining of corporate roles in international politics. Based on my analysis of Strong’s personal archives and the couple’s correspondences and publications, I show how the Strongs connected acquaintances from the worlds of business, development banking, international organizations, and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) from the preparation period of the Stockholm Conference with like-minded New Age environmentalists, Schumacherian economists, and cybernetic and Buddhist philosophers. These networks facilitated a growing role for businesses in environmental governance by the late 1980s and 1990s, while contributing to flexible interpretations of sustainable development and environmental limits.

By discussing the Strongs’ networks and the personae these contained, this article adds new insights on early environmental governance and its repugnancies to the literature in global history, the history of development, and the history of economic thought in the second half of the twentieth century, while making new links to histories of science and technology. Strong was part of a larger collective of administrators and thinkers that tried to navigate the changing and densifying international institutional landscape of the post-war period, while pursuing alternative ideas about economic and environmental development, related to local land-use traditions. As such, the focus of this article links in with literature in the history of development that has looked at alternative metrics and new approaches to world politics, including contested, yet popular concepts such as ‘basic human needs’.⁷ In this regard, the Strongs and members of their network can be seen as part of the scattered critique of modernization theory and the emergence of alternative ‘world orders’ that authors like Daniel Immerwahr, Sara Lorenzini, David Ekbladh, and Quinn Slobodian have identified for the 1970s.⁸ Like many of their contemporaries, Strong, Marstrand, and their circle of friends shared a strong trust in new approaches to development and international relations based on advances in the social sciences.⁹ At the same time, they were deeply interested in alternative forms of environmental ethics inspired by Christian, Buddhist, indigenous, and New Age philosophies, as well as by cybernetic ideas about human–environment interactions. As such, there are similarities to forms of humanistic thinking that historians have identified amongst leading intellectuals of the period in fields as diverse as psychology to economics, who also shared an interest in principles of self-organization and interconnectedness.¹⁰

⁶For instance, Andrew McGregor, ‘Sustainable Development and “Warm Fuzzy Feelings”: Discourse and Nature within Australian Environmental Imaginaries’, *Geoforum* 35, no. 5 (2004): 593–606. Similarly, scholars in Science, Technology, and Society have described the role of sociotechnical imaginaries, or shared visions of the future that shape policymaking and influence interpretations of technology and governance. Sheila Jasanoff and Sang-Hyun Kim, ‘Sociotechnical Imaginaries and National Energy Policies’, *Science as Culture* 22, no. 2 (2013): 189–96.

⁷Stephen Macekura, ‘The Historiography of Measuring Development’, in *Perspectives on the History of Global Development*, ed. Corinna R. Unger et al. (De Gruyter, 2022), 153; Christian Ruth, ‘Back to Basics: Neoliberal Development at USAID in the Cold War’, *Diplomatic History* 49, no. 4 (2025): 551–75; Joanne Meyerowitz, *A War on Global Poverty: The Lost Promise of Redistribution and the Rise of Microcredit* (Princeton University Press, 2023).

⁸For instance, Daniel Immerwahr, *How to Hide an Empire: A History of the Greater United States* (Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2019); Sara Lorenzini, *Global Development: A Cold War History* (Princeton University Press, 2019); Quinn Slobodian, *Globalists: The End of Empire and the Birth of Neoliberalism* (Harvard University Press, 2018).

⁹Michael E. Latham, *Modernization as Ideology: American Social Science and ‘Nation Building’ in the Kennedy Era* (University of North Carolina Press, 2003).

¹⁰This included individuals such as Abraham Maslow and Friedrich Hayek. Nadine Weidman, ‘Between the Counterculture and the Corporation: Abraham Maslow and Humanistic Psychology in the 1960s’, in *Groovy Science. Knowledge, Innovation & American Counterculture*, ed. David Kaiser and W. Patrick McCray (University of Chicago Press, 2016); Orit Halpern, ‘The Future Will Not Be Calculated: Neural Nets, Neoliberalism, and Reactionary Politics’, *Critical Inquiry* 48, no. 2 (2022): 334–59.

Methodologically, too, this article draws on approaches in both diplomatic and science history. Studying heterogeneous governance networks like the Strong's necessitates analysing private settings and informal gatherings, in addition to official meetings, documents, and statements. Strong and Marstrand frequently invited business leaders to official environmental governance fora, a practice that ultimately led to Strong's resignation from all UN posts in 2005.¹¹ Yet, to fully understand the couple's approach, it is necessary to examine the connections they fostered in private. Private settings have long been recognized as important spaces of study in fields such as the history of science and, to some extent, diplomatic history. Historians of science have shown that recognizing alternative spaces of knowledge production allows for a more symmetrical reflection of who participated in the making of science and ideas. In this context, 'the home' and other domestic spaces have been recognized as important places of knowledge production, showcasing the social aspects of knowledge making, including networking and entertaining.¹² Next to these discussions of undervalued forms of, often gendered, academic labour, historians have highlighted the role that domestic partners have played in the production of knowledge, for instance, in the work of collaborative couples.¹³ Similarly, within diplomatic history, domestic settings have been recognized as important in the making of politics, while the recognition of informal actors, such as diplomatic wives, has been linked mostly to the home.¹⁴ In recent years, domestic partners, especially in intellectual partnerships, have received additional attention.¹⁵ This article brings this approach to global history, expanding recent work in the field that has emphasized the diverse spheres of political influences outside of international organizations in the post-colonial era.¹⁶ Private gatherings and informal networks, from Crestone to Geneva, functioned not merely as retreats or think tanks but as arenas complementary to official UN settings, where participants cultivated environmental imaginaries that blended spiritual, ecological, and business-oriented world views. In this, the physical location, close to international institutions in Switzerland, the seemingly remote setting of Kenya's expat community in the 1970s, and the North American desert landscapes played a role. So did the unstructured, unbureaucratic, and informal nature of these meetings.

In what follows, I first outline the environmental ideas articulated by Strong and members of his network during the early to mid-1970s, a period in which Strong assumed a central role in building up UNEP. I then examine Strong and Marstrand's efforts to translate these ideas into practice through the development of a model sustainable community in the desert town of Crestone, Colorado. Finally, I analyse the environmental imaginaries that emerged from these

¹¹CBC, 'Strong Denies Part in UN Oil-for-Food Scandal', *CBC News*, 19 April 2005, accessed 6 January 2026, <https://www.cbc.ca/news/world/strong-denies-part-in-un-oil-for-food-scandal-1.540516>.

¹²Staffan Bergwik, 'An Assemblage of Science and Home: The Gendered Lifestyle of Svante Arrhenius and Early Twentieth-Century Physical Chemistry', *ISIS* 105, no. 2 (2014): 265–91; Emily Winterburn, 'Caroline Herschel: Agency and Self-Presentation', *Notes and Records: The Royal Society Journal of the History of Science* 69, no. 1 (2015): 69–83.

¹³Pnina G. Abir-Am, 'Collaborative Couples Who Wanted to Change the World: The Social Politics and Personal Tensions of the Russels, the Myrdals, and the Mead-Batesons', in *Creative Couples in the Sciences*, ed. Helena M. Pycior et al. (Rutgers University Press, 1996); Annette Lykknes et al., *For Better or for Worse?: Collaborative Couples in the Sciences* (Birkhäuser, 2012); Simone Schleper, 'Naturalizing Collaboration: Women, Lions, and Behavioural Field Research in East Africa during the 1970s', in *Gender and Animals in History*, ed. Sandra Swart et al., vol. 42 (Amsterdam, 2024), 225–42; Nancy J. Jacobs, 'Marriage, Science, and Secret Intelligence in the Life of Rudyard Boulton (1901–1983): An American in Africa', *Kronos*, no. 41 (2015): 271–97.

¹⁴This domestic role of diplomatic wives shifted in the 1970s from assistant to public persona and engaged citizen. Alexandra Penler, 'The Quiet Diplomats: American Diplomatic Wives and Public Diplomacy in the Cold War, 1945–1972' (PhD diss., LSE, 2023); Nevra Biltekin, 'The Performance of Diplomacy: The Residence, Gender and Diplomatic Wives in the Twentieth-Century Sweden', in *Women, Diplomacy and International Politics since 1500*, ed. Glenda Sluga and Carolyn James (Routledge, 2015), 254–68.

¹⁵Jennifer Burns, *Milton Friedman: The Last Conservative* (Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2023); Patricia Owens, *Erased: A History of International Thought Without Men* (Princeton University Press, 2025).

¹⁶For instance, Eva-Maria Muschik, 'Special Issue Introduction: Towards a Global History of International Organizations and Decolonization', *Journal of Global History* 17, no. 2 (2022): 173–90.

initiatives and trace their influence in Strong's contributions to environmental policymaking from the 1980s through the early 2000s, including their resonance in foundational documents on sustainable development, and subsequently within the UN's Agenda 21. I do not deny that the history of oil actors' involvement in environmental policymaking is contradictory or conflicting, and from today's point of view, literally incredible. Yet I argue that the environmental imaginaries promoted by actors like the Stronges were influential and widely shared. While initially positioned against the market environmentalism that emerged in the context of early 1980s neoliberal politics, they did, however, introduce flexible interpretations of environmental limits and a role for businesses as environmental agents. This, in turn, helped forge early connections between institutions like UNEP, the oil industry, international banking, and techno-optimist futurists, linkages that remain relevant today.

Stockholm, Nairobi, Banff, Geneva: Forging connections

To understand Strong's and Marstrand's initial environmental thought, it is first necessary to trace the heterogeneous connections that the couple entertained in the early 1970s. It gives insights into their initial environmental thought. Much has been written about Maurice Strong's background, much by himself. Growing up poor in rural Canada during the 1930s and 1940s, yet clever and with a high regard for education, Strong was ambitious and resourceful, leveraging opportunities in the fur trade and fossil fuel industries before moving into politics and international development.¹⁷ Hanne Marstrand, a Danish journalist with a background in interior design, had met Strong during the preparations of the Stockholm Conference. The two formed a couple shortly after and would marry in 1981 after Strong's divorce from his first wife, Pauline Olivette, the mother of their five biological and adopted children. In 1973, Marstrand and Strong moved to Nairobi, where he was responsible for establishing UNEP.

It is worth spending a bit of time on the early UNEP and the 'environment' as a new domain for UN politics. As Etienne Benson has shown, around 1970, the notion of the environment was still relatively loosely defined.¹⁸ The Stockholm Conference of 1972 played a big part in catalysing a common understanding. For Strong, such a definition needed to serve a second objective – namely, bringing estranged governments together while restoring their trust in the international importance of the UN system.¹⁹ On the one hand, conference delegates had to engage with the politics of decolonialization, independence, and shifting international relations, including calls for reforms in international development and aid. On the other hand, the conference itself had been a reaction to increased concern about the state of the natural world and new ecological ideas about planetary interdependencies, natural resources, and growing human populations. In particular, the publication of the contested *The Limits to Growth* report to the Club of Rome in 1972 strongly influenced the conference preparations.²⁰

The report's overall message of ecological constraints to development has received criticism from both industrialists in the Global North as well as governmental leaders in the Global South.²¹ Strong, himself a member of the Club of Rome, had at first been eager to have the study as background material for the Conference, yet soon worried about the many renunciatory reactions

¹⁷For instance, Maurice F. Strong, *Where on Earth Are We Going* (Knopf Canada, 2000).

¹⁸Etienne S. Benson, *Surroundings: A History of Environments and Environmentalisms* (University of Chicago Press, 2020).

¹⁹Richard A. Holman, 2 June 1975, 'Interview with Maurice Strong' for *Delegates World Bulletin* [transcript], 3, Box 27, Folder 267 'IV Interviews', Papers of Maurice Frederick Strong, Environmental Science and Public Policy Archives, Harvard University, Cambridge, MA (hereafter, PMFS); also see Simone Schleper, *Planning for the Planet: Environmental Expertise and the International Union for the Conservation of Nature and Natural Resources, 1960–1980* (Berghahn Books, 2019), 98–134.

²⁰Sabine Höhler, *Spaceship Earth in the Environmental Age, 1960–1990* (Routledge, 2015).

²¹Stephen Macekura, 'The Growth Debate, North–South Politics, and the Fate of Environmental Internationalism in the 1970s', *Diplomatic History* 49, no. 3 (2025): 371–9; Donella Meadows et al., *The Limits to Growth: A Report for the Club of Rome's Project on the Predicament of Mankind* (Universe Books, 1972).

to the report. In 1971, Strong had convened a meeting in Founex, Switzerland, in an attempt to recruit supporters for the UN's environmental agenda at Stockholm amongst intellectuals and politicians from the Global South.²² At the many UN events where he presented the plans for the Stockholm Conference, his rhetoric had always linked in with the goals of the Second Development Decade to improve international economic relations.²³ In this, the conference's key concept of the 'Human Environment' could help redefine the relations between science and policymaking by providing a managerial framework for the environment that incorporated local, regional, and national development objectives.²⁴

Strong himself did not oppose the idea that there were external limits to the development of natural resources or that the Earth should be treated as a planetary system. He explained that natural resources made up the 'principal basis' for development.²⁵ In fact, Strong had chosen the work of the systems thinker John McHale, husband of designer and futurist Magda McHale, to support his argument.²⁶ According to McHale, the main environmental problem was not the inevitable physical limits of the environment. It was the 'software', or 'social thinking' in development approaches that was 'less than adequate' and in immediate need of 'reevaluation and redesign'.²⁷ These concerns also influenced Strong during the staffing of UNEP's secretariat. Rather than ecologists, Strong believed that the experts needed were manager types, 'generalists with the integrative grasp, broad technical base, systems training and international orientation needed to understand complex trans-disciplinary problems'.²⁸ According to Strong, the main purpose of UNEP, after all, was to 'extend the limits of social capacity to cope with environmental problems'.²⁹

These were some of the ideas that Strong took to Nairobi and which would shape his network-building during the programme's early years. In this period, the Strong's homes in Kenya and Europe became informal yet strategic gathering places, where private meetings blended personal relationships with official environmental and economic discussions. These gatherings, while less documented, were instrumental in shaping the networks Strong cultivated and in laying the foundations of some of the environmental imaginaries they advanced. Examples of this type of networking are plenty. Many of these meetings were meticulously planned, with guest lists tailored to strategic objectives.³⁰ A telling one is a 1974 meeting, when UNEP under Strong, together with members of the United Nations Trade and Development organization (UNCTAD), was planning a symposium on Patterns of Resource Use, Environmental and Development in Cocoyoc, Mexico, based on one of the recommendations from the 1972 Stockholm Conference. While visiting Europe during the preparation phase of the symposium, Strong convened an 'off-the-record' weekend retreat in La Bettex, near Geneva, where he owned a chalet, inviting a select group of economists, bankers, and development experts to exchange views on the future of the global economy in the years after Stockholm.³¹ Attendees included representatives from the Economic

²²Macekura, *Of Limits and Growth*, 117–19.

²³'Reference Materials', n.d., Box 28, Folder 183, PMFS.

²⁴'The Crisis of Our Environment and Quality of Life', address by Maurice F. Strong, Secretary-General, United Nations Conference on the Human Environment at the Fourth Session of the UN Commission on International Trade Law, 17 November 1971, Box 28, Folder 281, PMFS.

²⁵Bruce Martin, March 1975, 'Interview with M.F. Strong', for the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation, [transcript], 23, Box 27, Folder 266 'TV Interviews', PMFS.

²⁶Environmental Fact File, 23 May 1972, Box 29, Folder 291 'TV Scientific and Conceptual Framework', PMFS.

²⁷John McHale, *The Future of the Future* (G. Braziller, 1969), 11.

²⁸UNEP Governing Council. Second Session, Nairobi, 11–22 March 1974, Item 8a of the Provisional Agenda, Box 65, Folder 611, PMFS.

²⁹*Ibid.*

³⁰For instance, in 1976, Marstrand and Strong organized a cocktail and dinner party for their friend, the German banker Hans Wuttke. The archives contain lists and lists of potential invitees to the meeting. See Box 133, Folder 1270: Ranch, PMFS.

³¹Maurice Strong to Allison Ayida, Permanent Mission of Nigeria to the United Nations Office, Geneva, 18 July 1974, Box 23, Folder 230 'Chronological Files 1974 Jul', PMFS.

Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean, the World Bank, and the Centre for International Environment and Development in Paris, alongside business leaders from international banking firms such as Schrodgers and Dresdner Bank, the Japanese Overseas Economic Co-operation Fund, the Club of Rome, and the Centre d'études industrielles (CEI) of which Strong himself was a member and future chairman. All invitees were asked by Strong to prepare short, informal presentations on a topic in their expertise, ranging from international trade perspectives from the Global South to the Canadian energy landscape and the European financial sector.³² Through meetings like these, UNEP's work on the environment, from the programme's inception, was linked to corporate and business interests. Such intellectual exchanges in unofficial settings also exemplify what Strong had in mind when describing UNEP as a 'catalyst' rather than an engine for new ideas about complex 'concepts of growth and development', while such ideas had to come from 'outside' of the UN system.³³

Meetings like these, where Strong solicited the insights from political, financial, and industrial sparring partners in private, highlight that in the delicate negotiations between environmental considerations in the context of UNEP and other types of social and economic demands, relationships were never simple. In 1975, for instance, the Strong's invited Justice Thomas Berger to Nairobi. Berger had been commissioned by the Canadian government in 1974 to evaluate various possible impacts of a proposed gas pipeline, potentially extended by an oil pipeline along the same route through the Northwest Territories. Berger would advise against the pipeline plans that were backed by corporations such as Exxon, Shell, Conoco, and Imperial Oil, based on a combination of environmental and social reasons, including the potential disruption of indigenous communities' ways of life, a decision that presented a landmark moment in North American environmental policy.³⁴

The Strong's engagement with Berger is important because it evidences Strong's complex positioning within both the oil industry and environmental advocacy. Earlier in 1975, Strong had met with Berger in Vancouver during the Mackenzie Valley pipeline hearings, just after UNEP had opened its Industry and Environment office in Paris to address the environmental impact of industrial activities like oil and gas extraction. Strong was particularly interested in how environmental and social arguments shaped the discussions about the Mackenzie Valley pipeline and the resulting environmental impact report.³⁵ He supported the idea that industrial partners, especially from the energy sector, were important 'influences' on 'governments in their framing of environmental legislations'.³⁶ In fact, in 1975, Strong had accepted Prime Minister Pierre Trudeau's offer to help launch the consolidated energy corporation Petro-Canada. Yet, in 1977, even as Petro-Canada, under Strong, partnered with Mobil and Texas Eastern to drill for oil in Nova Scotia, Strong congratulated Berger on his negative report, calling it a 'real milestone in integrating environmental and social considerations into economic decision-making'.³⁷ The meetings with Berger, then, underscore that for Strong, the cultural and social dimensions of resource development were as crucial as its ecological implications, while both could trump industrial interests.

Private meetings from the late UNEP period also point to the Strong's involvement with the cybernetics community and their stance on environmental limits. Already during the Stockholm

³²Ibid.

³³Holman, 2 June 1975, 'Interview with Maurice Strong', 30–1.

³⁴Robert Page, 'Arctic Pipelines and Permafrost Science: North American Rivalries in the Shadow of the Cold War, 1968–1982', in *Cold Science. Environmental Knowledge in the North American Arctic during the Cold War* (Routledge, 2019), 109–21.

³⁵More than a Pipeline Is at Issue for Northerners, Environmentalists at Berger Inquiry', *Globe and Mail*, 6 March 1975, 10, accessed 19 September 2023; Paul Sabin, 'Voices from the Hydrocarbon Frontier: Canada's Mackenzie Valley Pipeline Inquiry (1974–1977)', *Environmental History Review* 19, no. 1 (1995): 17–48.

³⁶Holman, 2 June 1975, 'Interview with Maurice Strong', 13.

³⁷'Press Release', 11 January 1977, Box 162, Folder 1530 'MacKenzie Valley Pipeline', PMFS; Maurice Strong to Judge Berger, 11 May 1977, Box 162, Folder 1530 'MacKenzie Valley Pipeline', PMFS.

Conference, Strong had taken a position on environmental limits that acknowledged ecological boundaries to development, but at the same time highlighted the room for technological innovation to sustain economic growth. In 1975, Strong and Marstrand invited Geoffrey Oldham of the Sussex University Science Policy Research Unit (SPRU), who chaired the Unit's Institute of Development Studies, in the context of the Pugwash conference on Technologies for Self-Reliance held in Dar es Salaam.³⁸ Participants at the conference critiqued traditional aid models and advocated for nationally adapted technological solutions to development challenges.³⁹ SPRU had been instrumental in shaping Strong's approach since the Stockholm Conference. The unit had formal links to Canada's International Development Research Centre (IDRC), where Strong had been a governor in the early 1970s.⁴⁰ In 1970, Oldham had co-authored a report to the UN in the context of the Second Development Decade.⁴¹ The report, which would become known as the Sussex Manifesto, had been influential in Strong's approach during the preparation phase of the Stockholm Conference, especially in his attempts to integrate Global South interests into the conference discussions. Together with Marc Nerfin, a Swiss development thinker and contributor to the Jackson report on the UN Development Programme, Strong continued to work on the 'inner limits' of development. These had been defined in 1974 in the Cocoyoc Declaration as basic human needs, such as shelter, food, health, education, and clothing. These discussions on the inner limits, including meetings with economic thinkers such as Ignacy Sachs, who, too, had contributed to the Tanzanian Pugwash meeting, had a strong focus on technological self-reliance, as suggested by Oldham at SPRU.⁴²

As has been shown, the concept of basic human needs that emerged in the context of UN development reforms in the late 1960s and early 1970s needs to be seen as an attempt to reconcile ideas for alternative development from the left and early neoliberal interventions.⁴³ Here, we see how the concept was moreover linked to discussions on global environmental limits and alternative, computerized world models and forecasting technologies in which Strong and researchers at SPRU were involved. The Sussex group, under the directorship of Chris Freedman, another co-author of the Sussex Manifesto, had been involved in discussions regarding the notion of environmental limits as captured in *The Limits to Growth*.⁴⁴ At the time that the Stronges were meeting with Oldham, Strong had been part of discussions with Freedman that criticized the World 3 Model devised by Jay Forrester at MIT, which underlay the report. In contrast to the model used by Meadows et al., the Sussex group suggested that the ecological limits to development were sociopolitical in nature and hence could be renegotiated in the future, similar to Strong's approach at Stockholm that had been influenced by the work of the McHales. As important as determining these physiological limits, so Strong and Nerfin thought, was the development of alternative world models that allowed for a comprehensive definition of planetary limits that was linked to an ethics of redistribution.

In this, Nerfin and Strong were trying to liaise UNEP with the Swedish and the Canadian International Development Agencies under the aegis of the Dag Hammarskjöld Foundation, while sounding out the interest of the International Institute for Applied Systems Analysis (IIASA) in working on such a model in the place of MIT.⁴⁵ In their plans, Nerfin and Strong referred to Hollis Chenery, Montek Ahluwalia, C. L. G. Bell, John Duloy, and Richard Jolly's *Redistribution with*

³⁸Maurice Strong to Geoffrey Oldham, 17 November 1975, Box 24, Folder 248 'Chronological Files 1975 Nov', PMFS.

³⁹'The Role of Self-Reliance in Alternative Strategies for Development', *World Development* 5, no. 3 (1977): 257–65.

⁴⁰Ángela Campos, *Celebrating SPRU 1966–2016. SPRU History Project. A Report on Its Qualitative Angle* (University of Sussex, 2016).

⁴¹Adrian Ely and Martin Bell, *The Original Sussex Manifesto: Its Past and Future Relevance* (ESRC, 2009).

⁴²UNEP, *In Defence of the Earth: The Basic Texts on Environment: Founex, Stockholm, Cocoyoc*, UNEP Executive Series 1 (Nairobi, 1981); Cable by Marc Nerfin, 29 October 1974, Box 92, Folder 879 'Project Survival', PMFS.

⁴³Lorenzini, *Global Development*; Ruth, 'Back to Basics'.

⁴⁴Hans Singer et al., *The Sussex Manifesto: Science and Technology to Developing Countries during the Second Development Decade* (Institute of Development Studies at the University of Sussex, 1970).

⁴⁵Marc Nerfin, 'A Feasibility Report on the Imperative for International Co-Operation to meet Minimum Human Needs without Transgressing the Outer Limits', 20 September 1974, Box 877 'Project Survival', PMFS.

Growth, which demanded an alternative measure of development other than GNP, which would play a role in the work of Mahbub ul-Haq, another attendee of Strong's La Bettex weekend, on the Human Development Index in the 1990s.⁴⁶ Despite his links to the oil industry, Strong embraced the work by the Sussex group on appropriate technology and renewable energy, exemplified, for instance, by the Nigerian promoter of local solar energy projects, Abdou Moumouni Dioffo. Nerfin and Strong were moreover actively engaging with cybernetics groups such as Fundación Bariloche in Argentina, whose Latin American world model, similar to the thinking represented in the Sussex group, suggested that technological innovation could increase global resource stocks. The Latin American model was particularly outspoken about the assumption that planetary redistribution of both resources and political power was key to future development, while social and political limits needed to be challenged.⁴⁷ Strong and Marstrand met Oldham shortly after Nerfin and Strong had brought their proposal to the UN General Assembly's special session in September 1975.⁴⁸ The proposal was eventually rejected by the World Bank, as it was perceived to rival the bank's own programme to reduce urban poverty.⁴⁹ Yet, the project and meetings in this context provide further insight into the Strong's' understanding of environmental limits as existing, but defined at least in part by social factors.

While Strong negotiated with development banks, he and Marstrand cultivated relationships with rising elites who bridged the private sector, international organizations, and global politics. Again, private meetings rather than official gatherings give insights into these contacts. In January 1976, the Strong's co-hosted a retreat at Lake Turkana with the palaeontologists Richard and Meave Leakey. The guests included Diego Arria, a Venezuelan politician with extensive industrial ties.⁵⁰ Arria, who would pursue presidential ambitions as an independent candidate in the elections of 1978, and his wife had extensive links to the OPEC country's industrial sector and had managed the private investors of Caracas's infrastructural renewals during the 1970s. Similar to Marstrand, Arria was a proponent of indigenous land rights.⁵¹ Other invitees were James Wolfensohn and Pehr Gyllenhammar, both of whom had long-standing affiliations with Strong through organizations such as the CEI in Geneva.⁵² Members of the CEI, especially Strong, and Gyllenhammar, who would succeed Strong as the CEI's chairman, saw the centre as complementary to the structure of the UN, reinforcing links between industry and governance, actively seeking 'council' from and 'establishing new relationships' with recruited like-minded partners from UN bodies, such as, for instance, the Japanese economist Saburo Okita.⁵³ It is then not

⁴⁶Hollis Chenery et al., *Redistribution with Growth: Policies to Improve Income Distribution in Developing Countries in the Context of Economic Growth: A Joint Study [Commissioned] by the World Bank's Development Research Center and the Institute of Development Studies, University of Sussex* (World Bank and the Institute of Development Studies, University of Sussex, 1974).

⁴⁷Gilberto C. Gallopin, 'The Latin American World Model (a.k.a. the Bariloche Model): Three Decades Ago', *Futures* 33, no. 1 (1 February 2001): 77–89; Gerhart Buckmann, ed., *Latin American World Model: Proceedings of the Second IIASA Symposium on Global Modelling* (Laxenburg: IIASA, 1974); Elodie Vieille Blanchard, 'Modelling the Future: An Overview of the "Limits to Growth" Debate', *Centauros* 52, no. 2 (2010): 91–116.

⁴⁸Maurice Strong to Olaf Palme, 25 November 1974, Box 92, Folder 879 'Project Survival', PMFS.

⁴⁹Hollis B. Chenery to Maurice Strong, 28 October 1974, Box 92, Folder 879 'Project Survival', PMFS.

⁵⁰Maurice Strong to Pehr Gyllenhammar, 16 September 1975, Box 24, Folder 245 'Chronological Files 1975 Sep', PMFS.

⁵¹*Report of Habitat: United Nations Conference on Human Settlements, Vancouver, 31 May–11 June 1976* (United Nations, 1976).

⁵²Arria himself would go on to work for the UN Security Council, where he installed the Arria-formula meetings, informal meetings between members, behind closed doors, to sound out positions. *Diego Arria's Potential Presidential Candidacy – an Assessment*, Wikileaks Public Library of US Diplomacy, 1978CARACA02960_d (Venezuela Caracas, 1978), accessed 6 January 2026, https://wikileaks.org/plusd/cables/1978CARACA02960_d.html; 'Arria Sets Presidential Bid', accessed 31 October 2024; David J. Myers and Henry A. Dietz, *Capital City Politics in Latin America: Democratization and Empowerment* (Lynne Rienner Publishers, 2002); Howard Handelman, 'The Making of a Venezuelan President: 1978', *South America* 45 (1978): 1–20.

⁵³Maurice Strong to Saburo Okita, 16 October 1971, Box 54, Folder 530 'CEI 1971–72', PMFS; Bohndan Hawraylyshyn to Maurice Strong, 11 October 1971, Box 54, Folder 530 'CEI 1971–72', PMFS. Susumu Kitagawa, 'Emergence of Global

surprising that during the 1970s, Strong used UNEP funds to sponsor CEI training seminars on environmental management and education for industrial leaders.⁵⁴

This pattern of network-building extended beyond Nairobi, taking an even more strategic form in the second half of the 1970s. While such meetings might have been common practice in energy business circles, for Strong, private meetings were also a way of bypassing UN bureaucracy.⁵⁵ Scripted private meetings, then, not only become important moments to investigate if we want to understand the making of governance networks that transgressed the domains of politics, business, and environmentalism. They also provide insights into some of the interconnected topics that the Stronges and their various affiliations pursued. These included alternative visions for international development that reconciled environmental limits with economic adaptability, technological self-reliance, and partly romanticized ideas on indigenous ways of living. This would become even more important in the years to come.

Crestone: Building a model village

In 1978, the couple bought property in Crestone, Colorado. This section discusses how, in Crestone, the Stronges' environmental imaginaries took a more concrete form, presenting in a miniature format the type of approach that the Stronges pursued for environmental governance. Strong had left Petro-Canada in 1977 to pursue private investments, partnering with Paul Nathanson, heir to the Odeon cinema group, in real estate ventures in Toronto. These investments helped finance the purchase of Prochemco Inc., a Texas-based agricultural development firm. After merging with Arizona Land and Cattle, Strong rebranded the company as AZL Resources, shifting its focus to oil development.⁵⁶ In 1978, the Stronges bought the Luis Maria Baca Ranch near a large landholding belonging to AZL in Crestone, Colorado. In the same year, Marstrand moved in with her mother, her sister, and her daughters. Correspondence from the time shows that Strong left most of the management of Crestone in the hands of Marstrand. She became a driving force behind Crestone's transformation from a private landholding into a centre for alternative models of sustainability and spirituality. Marstrand later recalls a mystical experience meeting a local who prophesied the Stronges would build a community in Crestone near the Sangre de Cristo Mountain Range.⁵⁷ While the account is hard to reconstruct, much of the couple's work in Crestone would indeed relate to community building. Crestone became a microcosmos for the environmental imaginaries of the Stronges, demonstrating the role played by technological innovation, social reform, and more spiritual ideas about planetary connections.

In the following years, the Stronges, in the name of AZL, made a number of land donations to environmentalist, humanist, and spiritual groups, such as the Lindisfarne community in 1979, the Aspen Institute for Humanistic Studies in 1980, and a Carmelite and a Tibetan order in 1981.⁵⁸ These donations were not only philanthropic gestures but part of a broader vision Marstrand helped shape and that would turn Crestone into a site where alternative forms of knowledge,

Environmental Policy in Japan: Saburo Okita and the Ad Hoc Group on Global Environmental Problems', *ZINBUN* 53 (2023): 111–35.

⁵⁴Minutes of thirty-second meeting of the board of the foundation of the Centre d'études industrielles held in Geneva on Friday, 24 September 1976, Box 53, Folder 519 'V CEI General', PMFS.

⁵⁵Paula DiPerna, 'Maurice Strong', in *Remembering Maurice F. Strong: Tributes and Reminiscences*, ed. Federico Mayor et al. (European Center for Peace and Development, 2018).

⁵⁶Maurice Strong to Thomas W. Honig, 8 April 1987, Box 421, Folder 4008 'Personal 1987', PMFS; Mody, 'Maurice Strong, Conspiracy Theories, and the Pitfalls of Environmental Diplomacy'.

⁵⁷'In Conversation with Hanne Strong', Global Peace Initiative of Women, 3 August 2022, accessed 6 January 2026, <https://www.gpiw.org/news/in-conversation-with-hanne-strong>.

⁵⁸William Irwin Thompson to Steven Rockefeller, 2 January 1982, Box 184, Folder 719 'VII Alpha Lindisfarne/corr', PMFS; Molly Ivins, 'Expansion Blocked, Aspen Institute Is Leaving Its Namesake City', *New York Times*, 5 September 1979, A16, accessed 19 September 2023.

ecological sustainability, and spirituality could converge. It is important to unpack these connections one by one. Strong was connected to Aspen through his work for the Stockholm Conference, for which the Aspen Institute had run a series of preparatory meetings in 1971, and through Aspen's chairman, his fellow oilman Bob Anderson, who, too, was a member of the CEI. Another active CEI member was Harlan Cleveland, at the time the Aspen Institute's director of international affairs and a friend of Richard N. Gardner, who had advised Strong at Stockholm.⁵⁹ While Strong's business allies, such as Aspen's chairman and oil executive Bob Anderson and his banking friend and Aspen member Hans Wuttke, brought corporate support, Marstrand's connections linked Crestone to a more experimental intellectual and spiritual landscape. Her sister, for instance, worked as a secretary for a Tibetan Zen centre, while Hanne had long-standing ties to Buddhist and ecological thinkers.⁶⁰ The Lindisfarne group brought together thinkers interested in science, technology, and culture, including *Small Is Beautiful* author E. F. Schumacher and cybernetics theorist Gregory Bateson.⁶¹ The group was connected to the Strong's through common acquaintances and Lindisfarne fellows such as the New Alchemists and solar energy promoters Nancy and John Todd, as well as through connections that the Lindisfarne organization had with various Zen Buddhist centres. This mix of corporate and alternative New Age influences shaped the 'Baca project', a planned summer institute and retreat centre funded by both the Strong's' wealth and contributions from Strong's business contacts, including the Rockefeller Foundation, the Boettcher Foundation, and Anderson's oil firm Atlantic Richfield Company (ARCO).⁶² These – at first sight rather different – organizations, tied in with some of the discussions that the Strong's were already a part of, especially their interests in reforming international development politics and alternative views on environmental limits.

Similar to the members of the CEI, Aspen members saw a strong role for companies in international politics, establishing a corporate leadership committee in the late 1970s. Strong was asked to serve on this committee alongside Gyllenhammar, ARCO's Thornton Bradshaw, IBM's Frank Cary, and Gulf Oil's Jerry McAfee.⁶³ While business elites dominated these networks, Aspen was also deeply embedded in international development debates. In 1979, the institute was asked to develop a new theoretical framework on development and knowledge for the UN Conference on Science and Technology for Development. Cleveland, himself a critic of *Limits to Growth*, argued that environmental constraints were not absolute but instead shaped by ethical, distributional, and managerial factors.⁶⁴ At Crestone, Strong and Cleveland corresponded much about Cleveland's *The Third Try at a New World Order*, suggesting a 'pluralistic world community', depending on multilateral agreements shaped, in part, by NGOs and corporations.⁶⁵ Strong, who held comparable ideas about how energy companies played a big role in international diplomacy, praised the book for its approach and synthesis, and hoped it would be picked up by the Carter administration.⁶⁶

⁵⁹Thomas G. Weiss, 'Transcript of Interview of Richard N. Gardner', Transcript, New York, 29 February 2002.

⁶⁰See Harlan Cleveland to Hans Wuttke, 3 May 1979, Box 232, Folder 2184 'VII Aspen Correspondence mid-1970s', PMFS. Jack Austin, for instance, recalls how Hanne was a strong promoter of Buddhism and how both couples visited Bhutan in 1981. Federico Mayor et al., eds. *Remembering Maurice F. Strong: Tributes and Reminiscences* (European Center for Peace and Development, 2018); William Irwin Thompson to Maurice Strong, 23 January 1982, Box 184, Folder 719 'VII Alpha Lindisfarne/corr', PMFS.

⁶¹E. F. Schumacher, *Small Is Beautiful* (Blond & Briggs, 1973).

⁶²William Irwin Thompson to Maurice Strong, 25 May 1981, Box 184, Folder 719 'VII Alpha Lindisfarne/corr', PMFS.

⁶³Josef Slater to Maurice Strong, 23 September 1980, Box 232, Folder 2184 'VII Aspen Correspondence', PMFS.

⁶⁴Harlan Cleveland and Alexander King, 'The Renewable Way of Life', *The Futurist*, April 1980, 51; Harlan Cleveland, 'The Future of the Pacific Basin', *Pacific Viewpoint* 25, no. 1 (1984): 1–14.

⁶⁵Harlan Cleveland, 'General Mailing from the Aspen Institute's Program in International Affairs', 18 June 1980, CIA Reading Room, accessed 6 January 2026, <https://www.cia.gov/readingroom/docs/CIA-RDP05T00644R000200690011-6.pdf>; Cleveland, 'The Future of the Pacific Basin'; Harlan Cleveland, *The Third Try at World Order: American Self-Renewal in an Interdependent World* (World Affairs Council of Philadelphia, 1976).

⁶⁶Maurice Strong letter to Harlan Cleveland, 30 December 1976, Box 184, Folder 719 'VII Alpha Lindisfarne/corr', PMFS.

At the same time, Crestone became a centre for blending alternative economic and spiritual thinking. Crestone's proximity to both the Lindisfarne Association and the Crestone Mountain Zen Center reinforced this direction.⁶⁷ Strong and Marstrand were both spiritual. Strong, before Stockholm, had been active in the YMCA and the World Council of Churches.⁶⁸ While at Crestone, he was on the board of directors of the Interreligious Peace Colloquium, which approached international relations through calls for a New International Economic Order (NIEO), and addressed ideas around development and basic human needs from an ecumenical perspective and with a strong focus on the economies of the Global South.⁶⁹ Marstrand, in the late 1970s, made headlines with her involvement in native spiritualism.⁷⁰ At Crestone, the Aspen Institute hosted Buddhist seminars, while Baker Richard Roshi of the Crestone Mountain Zen Center joined Lindisfarne's board. Lindisfarne had been founded in 1972 by art historian William Irwin Thompson. Thompson, an ex-MIT scholar, had met Strong and Marstrand in 1979 at a conference on solar villages organized by Nancy and John Todd. Like Strong and Cleveland, Thompson rejected *The Limits to Growth's* rigid environmentalism, advocating instead for a new 'mythical age' that harmonized science, technology, and spirituality in line with Schumacher's ideas for a 'planetary culture'.⁷¹ In 1980, Strong and Thompson discussed using Crestone as a model village for sustainable communities, drawing on Thompson's concept of a 'meta-industrial village'.⁷² Inspired by Schumacher and alternative technology advocates like Oldham, and envisioning a solar-powered village demonstrating self-reliant, sustainable technologies, Thompson suggested 'we could say: this is the future, and it works'.⁷³

Next to the Todds, the Crestone Lindisfarne fellows included Dana and Wes Jackson of the Land Institute and the economist Hazel Henderson, who permanently moved to Crestone in 1981. Henderson, too, belonged to the futurist circles of which the McHales were members. These expanded to other influential counterculture thinkers, such as Stewart Brand, author of the *Whole Earth Catalogue*, equally influenced by both cybernetic and Buddhist ideas.⁷⁴ In 1978, Henderson had argued in *The End of Economics* that traditional economic models failed to account for emerging alternative energy systems and ecological constraints to traditional ones. Instead, she promoted the creation of markets for solar energy and highlighted the social responsibility of companies in the energy and resource sector.⁷⁵ Another notable fellow who linked various interests represented in the groups at Crestone was the atmospheric scientist James Lovelock, most known for his work on planetary – partly self-regulating – chemical cycles. Lovelock, like the Strong and Anderson, had links to big oil. He had worked with Shell and, as Leah Aronowsky has suggested, in this context his work can at least partly be seen as having paved the way for climate change denialism.⁷⁶ At Crestone, we see how his Gaia hypothesis resonated not only with oil executives but also with a group of environmental and economic thinkers, concerned with energy

⁶⁷Pierre Sublet to Maurice Strong, 1980, Box 184, Folder 719 'VII Alpha Lindisfarne/corr', PMFS.

⁶⁸Maurice Strong, 'Speech to Be Delivered at Bloomsfield United Church on Sunday, April 28th, 1963', Box 6, Folder 55 'II Prayers and Sermons', PMFS.

⁶⁹Joseph Gremillion, 'The Changing World Economic Order: Challenge to the Five World Faiths. A Symposium of the Interreligious Peace Colloquium', Lisbon, 7–11 November 1977, Box 82, Folder 789 'V Interreligious Peace Colloquium', PMFS; Joseph Ogbonnaya, 'Religion and Sustainable Development in Africa: The Case of Nigeria', *International Journal of African Catholicism* 3, no. 2 (2012): 1–22.

⁷⁰Zena Cherry, 'British Jurist Entertained', *Globe and Mail*, 18 April 1979, 12.

⁷¹William Irwin Thompson, *Passages about Earth: An Exploration of the New Planetary Culture* (Harper & Row, 1974).

⁷²*Ibid.*

⁷³William Irwin Thompson to Maurice Strong, 17 December 1980, Box 184, Folder 719 'VII Alpha Lindisfarne/corr', PMFS.

⁷⁴Fred Turner, *From Counterculture to Cyberculture: Stewart Brand, the Whole Earth Network, and the Rise of Digital Utopianism* (University of Chicago Press, 2010); Stewart Brand, *Whole Earth Catalogue* (Portola Institute, 1968–1998).

⁷⁵Hazel Henderson, *Creating Alternative Futures: The End of Economics* (New York, 1978).

⁷⁶Leah Aronowsky, 'Gas Guzzling Gaia, or: A Prehistory of Climate Change Denialism', *Critical Inquiry* 47, no. 2 (2021): 306–27.

politics, global interdependencies, and rethinking society and the environment as a larger unity. In fact, both Cleveland's and Thompson's writings show influences of earlier intellectual work on planetary systems and self-regulation, linked to, for instance, Pierre Teilhard de Chardin's idea of the noosphere as planetary consciousness, and Lewis Thomas's work on the Earth as a one immense organism, with self-regulating chemical signals, as well as more recent interpretations of the biosphere as composed of planetary interconnected ecosystems. All of these were writings that, too, influenced Lovelock's Gaia.⁷⁷ Ideas about planetary consciousness and self-regulation, in turn, resonated with the thinking of some of the members of the Buddhist community at Crestone.⁷⁸ In 1981, Lindisfarne, together with the Zen Center San Francisco, a sister organization of the Crestone Zen Center, hosted a conference on these concepts, with presentations by Henderson, John Tood, Lovelock, the cyberneticist Heinz von Foerster, and Francisco Varela, one of the promoters of autopoiesis, a contemporary theory on self-sustaining life.⁷⁹

As a utopian model village, Crestone remained a rather isolated community.⁸⁰ By the mid-1980s, the project almost unravelled amid controversies over water extraction in the San Luis Valley, in which the Strongs were implicated.⁸¹ While the Baca Ranch was sold in 1995, Marstrand remained in Crestone, continuing aspects of their work through her Manitou Foundation. Into the 1990s, Strong, Marstrand, and Thompson were able to use it to draw funds from oil philanthropists like Laurance S. Rockefeller for their environmental model project.⁸² In combination with private meetings, the links that the Strongs built with different communities at Crestone can shed light on some of their less well-known associations and influences. At Crestone, business executives, New Age thinkers, cyberneticists, Buddhist philosophers, and environmentalists collectively envisioned a future where technological innovation, ecological sustainability, and corporate engagement were not opposed but intertwined. The community at Crestone, then, reflected a broad reimagining of planetary governance, blending aspirations for self-regulating ecosystems, planetary consciousness, and alternative visions for development. By networking figures like Thompson, Cleveland, Henderson, and Lovelock, the Strongs helped cultivate an intellectual climate that challenged rigid environmentalism and market orthodoxy alike, promoting instead a seemingly more flexible vision of global change.

Rio and beyond: Enacting imaginaries, economic humanism, and flexible limits

What does tracing these private gatherings, both in Geneva and at Crestone, tell us about the form of environmental imaginaries that the Strongs advanced in their official roles and how was this representative of larger networks? The private meetings, organized by the Strongs in African national parks and remote North American environments, fostered a collectively imagined future, which I discuss in this section. In this future, business, decentralized governance, and technological adaptation could balance environmental and economic needs without imposing rigid ecological constraints. The ways in which industrial, fossil, and conservative interests have consciously undermined environmental and climate agendas of the post-war period have been

⁷⁷Rafai Serafin, *Vernansky's Biosphere, Teilhard's Noosphere, and Lovelock's Gaia: Perspectives on Human Intervention in Global Biogeochemical Cycles* (IIASA, 1987); Cleveland and King, 'The Renewable Way of Life', 52.

⁷⁸Charles Redenius, 'The Lindisfarne Association: An Exemplary Community of the New Planetary Culture', *Journal of General Education* 37, no. 3 (1985): 245–58.

⁷⁹Memo to Lindisfarne Fellows, 14 April 1981, Box 184, Folder 719 'VII Alpha Lindisfarne/corr', PMFS; Lindisfarne Association, *Gaia, a Way of Knowing: Political Implications of the New Biology* (Lindisfarne Press, 1987).

⁸⁰Gail Thompson, Thompson's wife, refused to live in the remote place for more than half of the year. William Irwin Thompson to Maurice Strong, 30 December 1981, Box 184, Folder 719 'VII Alpha Lindisfarne/corr', PMFS.

⁸¹Mody, 'Maurice Strong, Conspiracy Theories, and the Pitfalls of Environmental Diplomacy'; 'Struggle over Water Is a Fight for Future of San Luis Valley', *Colorado Springs Gazette*, 12 June 1989, B1, accessed 19 September 2023.

⁸²William Irwin Thompson to Laurance S. Rockefeller, 10 November 1992, FA1325 'Crestone', Box 20, Rockefeller Family and Associates (Room 5600), Laurance S. Rockefeller General Files, 1992–1996, RG 43, Education, Series 13, Rockefeller Archive Center, Sleepy Hollow, NY (hereafter, RAC).

shown.⁸³ Here we see a heterogeneous and sprawling alliance that included religious, business, and counterculture members, promoters of renewable energy, and alternative development schemes, resulting in an imaginary that encouraged rethinking GNP, decoupling growth through renewables, and prioritizing conservation and redistribution.

At the core of this imaginary was a vision we might call ‘economic humanism’, a model of planetary governance that combined faith in corporate and technological actors with commitments to social equity and environmental stewardship.⁸⁴ Three interrelated themes structured this outlook. First, Strong and his allies sought to rethink the current world order in response to post-war shifts, advocating reforms to international organizations, elevating alternative institutions and corporations in global politics. Second, they promoted technologies as essential for locally adapted development as well as for extending global resource limits, positioning technical innovation centrally in environmental governance. Third, they stressed the need for a strong ethical commitment to environmental governance. This perspective shaped not only the networks they built from UNEP to Crestone, but they were also embedded in Strong’s work on the Brundtland Commission between 1983 and 1987, the Rio Summit of 1992, and policy efforts into the 2000s.

A central tension in Strong’s career lay in his simultaneous fascination and disillusionment with international organizations, especially the UN. As early as the Stockholm Conference, he envisioned UN reform as a key, if implicit, objective.⁸⁵ His connections to the Pearson Commission reinforced his scepticism toward the development strategies of the UN and World Bank, which often fell short in addressing poverty and environmental degradation in the Global South.⁸⁶ At UNEP, Strong, along with thinkers like Nerfin, positioned poverty alleviation and economic development as preconditions for effective environmental policy, aligning in part with NIEO discussions.⁸⁷ Yet the Strong’s networks resisted the NIEO’s structural critique of global capitalism. Instead, influenced by figures like Cleveland, they embraced decentralized models of development that emphasized local adaptation and resource self-sufficiency, rather than large-scale redistribution.⁸⁸

This orientation meant a shift in global governance toward networked, decentralized authority, privileging new forms of organizations outside the traditional UN framework. Strong’s involvement in initiatives such as the CEI and the Aspen Institute illustrates this approach: networks of states, corporations, NGOs, and humanist think tanks were imagined as intermediaries capable of steering global environmental and developmental agendas.⁸⁹ These ideas were further crystallized in Strong’s work for the Brundtland Commission. In 1985, for instance, he and his fellow CEI member Okita co-chaired a WCED working group on corporate roles in development, concluding that ‘transnational actors, in particular transnational corporations’, would be indispensable in achieving sustainable development.⁹⁰ Strong consistently argued that

⁸³Geoffrey Supran and Naomi Oreskes, ‘Assessing ExxonMobil’s Global Warming Projections’, *Science* 379, no. 153 (2023): 1–9; Naomi Oreskes and Erik M. Conway, *Merchants of Doubt: How a Handful of Scientists Obscured the Truth on Issues from Tobacco Smoke to Global Warming* (Bloomsbury, 2010).

⁸⁴Glenda Sluga has explored how early UN organizations like UNESCO were shaped by scientific humanism, a framework that merged science with human-centred governance to promote the idea of ‘one world’ and universal standards of education and development. Glenda Sluga, ‘UNESCO and the (One) World of Julian Huxley’, *Journal of World History* 21, no. 3 (2010): 393–418.

⁸⁵Schleper, *Planning for the Planet*, 113.

⁸⁶Peter Stockdale, ‘Pearsonian Internationalism in Practice: The International Development Research Centre’ (PhD diss., McGill University, 1995).

⁸⁷Tim E. J. Campbell, ‘The Political Meaning of Stockholm: Third World Participation in the Environment Conference Process’, *Stanford Journal of International Studies* 8 (1973): 138–53; Macekura, ‘The Growth Debate, North–South Politics, and the Fate of Environmental Internationalism in the 1970s’.

⁸⁸Cleveland, *The Third Try at World Order*, 12, 65, 83.

⁸⁹For instance, Hazel Henderson, *The Politics of the Solar Age: Alternatives to Economics*, rev. ed. (Knowledge Systems, Inc., 1988), xxi; Henderson, *Creating Alternative Futures*, 7.

⁹⁰*World Commission on Environment and Development. Fourth Meeting, São Paulo, Brazil, 25 October–4 November 1985*, 22, IDRC Digital Library, accessed 4 September 2025, <https://idl-bnc-idrc.dspacedirect.org/items/e43b5cd6-c721-417a-b115-01ad9fcdac2e>.

systemic challenges, such as environmental and development issues, demanded cooperation between corporations, financial institutions, and governments, insisting that global sustainability agendas would only gain traction when embedded in community and corporate practices. By the 1990s, he was urging the UN to become more 'business-like', and to draw on private-sector expertise to better meet the needs of 'developing' and the 'least developed' countries.⁹¹

Strong's faith in corporate actors was closely linked to his belief in technological solutions. For him and his associates, the scale of sustainable development challenges necessitated heavy reliance on technological innovation, with the private sector as a primary driver. Rejecting the rigid ecological ceilings seemingly proposed in *The Limits to Growth*, the Strong's and their allies, such as the McHales, Henderson, Oldham, and the Todds, instead advanced alternative forms of systems thinking, portraying planetary boundaries as flexible and adaptable through social and technological intervention.⁹² This emphasis aligned with their advocacy for renewable energy to counterbalance OPEC countries' political leverage through sustainable energy independence. Strong carried this agenda into the Brundtland Commission, where he stressed the importance of locally appropriate technologies and renewable energy as 'a key importance for the resolution of many environmental and national resource dilemmas', themes later enshrined in Agenda 21, a global action plan adopted by UN member states at the Rio Summit.⁹³ In this broader vision, engineers became some of the most 'important agents of change'.⁹⁴

Importantly, these corporate and technological emphases were underpinned by a moral commitment first visible at Crestone. In the Strong's network at Crestone, this normative appeal had been linked to humanist ideals of Thompson's new planetary culture, to New Age ideas about planetary consciousness as captured in Buddhist ideologies and inspired by second-order cybernetics by Mead and von Foerster, and in biochemical terms, to Lovelock's Gaia. Strong, too, framed environmental governance as inseparable from ethical responsibility. Survival required a collective redefinition of growth, guided by new values and an 'integrated view of the international dimensions of environmental management and development'.⁹⁵ This moral dimension aligned with emerging calls to rethink GNP, decouple growth from fossil dependence, and pursue conservation and redistribution, for instance, by ul Haq, the McHales, and Henderson.⁹⁶ It also underlay the basic human needs approach formalized under Strong's UNEP successor, Mostafa Tolba, later incorporated into the Brundtland Commission's work. Strong was one of the Commission's members, stressing that structural changes in the North needed to accompany the development efforts of the South. Only then could growth be redefined to meet global basic needs.⁹⁷ Against this backdrop, Strong's calls for a 'new eco-industrial civilization based on fundamental changes in economic behavior and in relationships between rich and poor', made in the context of Agenda 21, attains significance beyond mere rhetoric. It needs to be seen as the ultimate expression of the future envisioned by the Strong's and the many influences that helped shape their vision.⁹⁸

Yet, while this 'economic humanism' was meant to reconcile international development and environmental stewardship, it carried contradictions. The Strong's environmental imaginaries

⁹¹'Making the UN More Businesslike', accessed 25 August 2025, https://mauricestrong.net/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=102:un-reform&catid=27&Itemid=52.

⁹²Henderson, *The Politics of the Solar Age*, xxi; Henderson, *Creating Alternative Futures*, 57–9.

⁹³Maurice F. Strong, 'Agenda 21: Sustaining the Spirit of Rio', *Proceedings of the American Philosophical Society* 139, no. 3 (1995): 233–9; *World Commission on Environment and Development. Fourth Meeting, São Paulo, Brazil, 25 October–4 November 1985*, 12, 24.

⁹⁴Maurice Strong, 'The Engineer as Agent of Global Change (4 August 1995)', Speech, American Association of Engineering Societies and Engineering Foundation Conference, 1995, accessed 6 January 2026, https://www.mauricestrong.net/t/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=130:engineer-global-change&catid=13&Itemid=59.

⁹⁵*World Commission on Environment and Development. Fourth Meeting, São Paulo, Brazil, 25 October–4 November 1985*.

⁹⁶Giorgos Kallis et al., 'Research On Degrowth', *Annual Review of Environment and Resources* 43 (2018): 291–316.

⁹⁷Borowy, *Defining Sustainable Development for Our Common Future*, 115.

⁹⁸Strong, 'Agenda 21', 233.

allowed for differentiated approaches, tailor-made solutions, and locally adapted forms of technological and development aid, giving seemingly more agency to Global South countries and their needs. But in practice, it also maintained Western economic hegemony, offering a vision in which nations did not all need to reach the same level of industrial development, as long as their basic needs were met. This, in turn, reduced the threat posed by ecological limits to the lifestyles of wealthier nations. Similarly, the approach was based on blunt generalizations. It did not engage critically with the problems of existing injustices and inequalities on international and subnational levels, as had been demanded by the authors of, for instance, the Latin American World Model.⁹⁹

Some in the Strong's networks were truly committed to environmental protection. At the same time, the flexibility of their approach allowed for the continued flow of oil money into environmental projects. This had been evident at Crestone, where Strong's oil wealth helped fund experimental sustainability initiatives to which Marstrand's New Age planetary spiritualism provided the ideological backdrop. In the context of the Lindisfarne Association and the Aspen seminar centre, for instance, Strong not only financed Thompson's salary but actively sought funding from ARCO and the Rockefeller Foundation for seminar buildings and a library for Gregory Bateson's papers.¹⁰⁰ Laurence S. Rockefeller, in turn, funded Lindisfarne with Apple Stocks, while loaning oil-based funds to Marstrand for her private and her Manitou Foundation business. Similarly, Thompson sought Rockefeller's help to attract funding from Mobile Oil, Exxon, and Chevron to finance Lindisfarne education projects on sustainable living that also involved Lovelock.¹⁰¹ Strong himself remained deeply invested in oil throughout his career, privately and professionally, even as he became one of the world's most prominent environmental advocates.

It is clear that this was not outright climate change denialism. As early as the Stockholm Conference, Strong had been involved with the Man's Impact on the Climate project at the Royal Swedish Academy of Sciences.¹⁰² Similarly, people in the Strong's surroundings had been involved in climate research early on. In 1976, the Aspen Institute organized a conference on 'climatic change' together with the MITRE Corporation, a US military think tank, at which climatologists agreed that 'the fact of increasing climatic variability' was 'more important than the uncertainty whether the trend will result in warmer or cooler climate'.¹⁰³ Yet, already at the same conference, Walter Orr Roberts of the Aspen Institute emphasized the potentials of geoengineering and climate adaptation, while Cleveland reframed planetary limits not as constraints on growth, but on 'thoughtlessness, unfairness, and conflict'.¹⁰⁴

By the 1992 Rio Summit, Strong himself had become a leading voice on climate change.¹⁰⁵ In the 2010s, he took an openly pessimistic stance, distancing himself from climate denialism.¹⁰⁶ Yet, the elasticity of the environmental limits discussed in the Strong's networks, as well as the more or less explicit belief in self-regulatory environmental cycles, allowed for a pragmatic coexistence of oil wealth and environmental advocacy, as demonstrated by the heterogeneous, private networks

⁹⁹Gallopín, 'The Latin American World Model (a.k.a. the Bariloche Model)', 80.

¹⁰⁰Maurice Strong to Fred Nelson (ARCO), 12 June 1981, Box 184, Folder 719 'VII Alpha Lindisfarne/corr', PMFS.

¹⁰¹Hanne Marstrand to Laurance S. Rockefeller, 11 November 1997, FA 1353, 'Crestone', Laurance S. Rockefeller papers, Office and Home Files, Mary French Rockefeller and Family Files, Series 1_2, RAC; Williman Irwin Thompson to Laurance S. Rockefeller, 20 June 1982, FA1504, 'Lindisfarne', Box 227, Rockefeller Family and Associates (Room 5600), General Files, 1982–1986, RG 37, Education A–Z, Subseries 1, RAC.

¹⁰²MIT, *Inadvertent Climate Modification: Report of the Study of man's Impact on Climate (SMIC)* (MIT Press, 1971).

¹⁰³Edwin Keitz and Dorothy Berks, eds., *Living with Climatic Change. Phase II. A Summary Report from a Symposium and Workshop Held by the MITRE Corporation, McLean, Virginia, November 9, 10, and 11, 1976* (MITRE Corporation, 1977), 1.

¹⁰⁴*Ibid.*, 3.

¹⁰⁵'Opening Statement to the Rio Summit (3 June 1992)', accessed 10 October 2024, https://mauricestrong.net/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=165&Itemid=86.

¹⁰⁶Leo Hickman, 'Maurice Strong on Climate "Conspiracy", Bilderberg and Population Control', *The Guardian*, 23 June 2010, accessed 6 January 2026, <https://www.theguardian.com/environment/blog/2010/jun/22/maurice-strong-interview-global-government>.

of both Marstrand and Strong. And while the Stronges might have been sincere in their approach to living within alternative limits, it is not hard to imagine how some of the Stronges' corporate allies preferred their ideas on flexible, business-friendly approaches to sustainability over rigid environmental restrictions.

Conclusion

'It is a mistake to see Maurice Strong as an environmentalist. The environment was but a component of his systemic vision of the world, as he was able to put it in the context of development, of policy, and into the international agenda', UNEP's former senior officer Paolo Bifani writes in a volume published on the occasion of Strong's passing in 2015.¹⁰⁷ While such a view may easily arise from Strong's many contradictory investments and involvements, I have shown in this article that it is essential to engage with the heterogeneous networks of the Stronges, and with the type of environmental thinking they helped to shape. Their environmental imaginaries influenced an impressively diverse set of actors while facilitating the emergence of flexible forms of corporate environmentalism in the late 1970s.

The networks in which Strong, Marstrand, and their allies were entangled were important influences on environmental imaginaries held by actors in UNEP and other international organizations from the 1970s onwards. By examining the Stronges' networks beyond official meetings and fora, we see how they integrated environmental concerns with economic development, policy innovation, and global governance. During the UNEP period and later in the North American Rockies, Strong's and Marstrand's private networks blended development thinking with spirituality and second-order cybernetics that enabled a flexible understanding of ecological limits and, in turn, facilitated a fusion between environmental advocacy and business interests. Through these collaborations, they crafted a form of economic humanism that reconciled fossil capital with ecological futurism. This vision relied on flexible imaginaries of environmental limits, spiritual cosmopolitanism, and decentralized governance, defining sustainability not as a constraint on capital but as an approach to its ethical reinvention.

This article highlights the role of alternative settings, such as the domestic spheres of the Stronges' homes in Nairobi and Crestone, in shaping environmental thought. Likewise, it shows the importance of recognizing the contributions of alternative actors, such as that of Marstrand and other members in the Stronges' network, which can be found there. By tracing the influence of these private gatherings and intellectual exchanges, we gain a deeper understanding of the tensions inherent in the Stronges' approach to environmental governance. The Stronges and their networks facilitated a discourse in which environmental limits were not absolute constraints, but flexible parameters, stretchable by technological progress and socioeconomic reform, and influenced by intellectual schools that proposed regulatory systems on a planetary scale, similar to Lovelock's Gaia hypothesis.

The economic humanism at the core of the Stronges' environmental imaginaries, then, did not reject environmental limits but redefined them, embedding environmental concerns within an economy-driven framework that accommodated corporate and political elites, while seemingly preserving a vision of shared and interconnected planetary stewardship. And while not part of and partly opposed to environmental leave-it-to-the-market approaches, their network's links to resource-producing industries possibly laid some of the earlier foundations for the flexible market environmentalism of the 1980s. Such framing blurred the lines between environmental urgency and economic pragmatism, allowing for interpretations that could accommodate both environmentalism and the preservation of existing power structures. Even as the Stronges' network worried about Reagan's election in 1980 and the challenges it posed to their Crestone project, their flexible interpretation of planetary limits was already connecting environmental policymaking to

¹⁰⁷Mayor et al., *Remembering Maurice F. Strong*, 36.

economic elites.¹⁰⁸ The interconnections they fostered in the process linked institutions such as UNEP with the oil sector and international banking.

Overall, then, this article extends interpretations of environmental governance as either a product of institutional frameworks or of corporate influences, interpretations often linked to simple notions with complicated histories, such as environmental greenwashing.¹⁰⁹ Instead, it reveals a complex and heterogeneous set of networks and intellectual approaches to development, environmentalism, and international politics that underlay the environmental imaginaries that the Stronges and their acquaintances tried to shape behind the scenes of official UN gatherings. These official gatherings were perceived as unsuitable for the generation of new ideas and approaches to international relations. The resulting flexible interpretations of environmental limits seemed to have laid some of the foundation for contemporary approaches to sustainability that continue to navigate the tensions between ecological responsibility and economic imperatives, extending to the oil-backed techno-utopian and post-humanist environmental visions of present-day elites.

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¹⁰⁸William Irwin Thompson to Maurice Strong, 17 December 1980, Box 184, Folder 719 'VII Alpha Lindisfarne/corr', PMFS.

¹⁰⁹See, for instance, Odinn Melsted et al., 'Introduction: Joining the Histories of Oil and Environment', *Journal of Energy History* 12, no. 1 (2024): 1–13.

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