

## THE BIO-ENVIRONMENT - POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

### [The Right Honourable Lord Ennals](#)

Member House of Lords,  
former Cabinet Minister  
United Kingdom

In a day which concentrates on international co-operation, and political solutions to a range of interrelated problems which will set the agenda for the next forty years, I can do no more than sketch in a rapid broad brush picture of the world as it seems to me today.

I mentioned 40 years because that sets me back to 1947 when we were shaping the United Nations as an organisation to "save succeeding generations from the scourge of war..." Then - with nuclear weapons in the hands of the USA and the USSR - war on a global scale seemed the greatest challenge of all. A generation ago, with East and West having the power to destroy each other and all life on earth, other problems of survival seemed insignificant.

Even the prospect of dramatic growth in world populations - especially in the poorer parts of the world - and the apocalyptic prophecies of Malthus, that by the turn of the century famine would spread across the globe, seemed like speculation. There was a sickening and yet realistic image of a world flattened and scorched by nuclear destruction and radiation, like the piles of bones we saw in Buchenwald, Kampuchea, Ethiopia, and now, in Mozambique. Man-made disaster.

The prophecies of population explosion have not been disproved, but we have discovered the way to produce enough food to enable the world's population to survive: but not the ability to see that it is in the right place at the right time. As the World Commission on Environment and Development reminded us last week, in the middle of the 20th century we saw our planet from space for the first time. Historians may eventually find that this vision had a greater impact on thought than did the Copernican revolution of the 16th century, which upset humans' self-image by revealing that the Earth is not the centre of the universe.

From space, we see a small and fragile ball dominated not by human activity and edifice but by a pattern of clouds, oceans, greenery and soils. Humanity's inability to fit its activities into that pattern is changing planetary hazards, from environmental degradation to nuclear destruction. These new realities, from which there is no escape, must be recognised and managed.

With the prospect of a nuclear holocaust seeming to be less likely, the picture emerges, clearer every day, of a world energetically planning its own destruction - not by weapons of mass destruction but by what, to the sophisticated, looks like the systematic destruction of the environment which sustains us. Unless we can halt the march to disaster, and turn back the forces of destruction, we could be on the way to that death and destruction to all that lives and grows on our planet as effectively as the nuclear holocaust.

The world is just beginning to wake up to what we are doing to our environment. It is not just a fad of "the Greens", or in Britain, the "Friends of the Earth". It is real. It is happening now, before our eyes, and in the sure knowledge of those educated enough to know. For the poor and ill-educated, it is survival this year, come what may. For the rich and technologically advanced, it is to make a quick buck this year, come what may. I should know because I am the citizen of one of the countries most responsible for the shape of things to come. The United Nations General Assembly was wise in establishing the World Commission on Environment and Development to see the link between the two.

One country's cheap electricity is paid for elsewhere by polluted air and acid rain; unchecked desertification and famine in one area leads to a flood of starving refugees elsewhere. What is seen by a creditor as a sound policy of exporting natural resources to pay foreign debts is seen by the debtor as a reckless squandering of irreplaceable capital. As Sir Shindath Ramphal, Commonwealth Secretary and Member of the Commission, said on March 10th, 1987, "The rigidity of disciplines is unhelpful." What a scientist sees as a valuable technological advance may be seen by the economist as economically unviable and by the ecologist as utterly irresponsible. In the two-and-a-half years the Commission has been at work, the world has been shaken by the tragedies at Bhopal, Chernobyl, the Rhine chemical spillage, forest destruction in Northern Europe, the Mexican liquid gas explosion and the unfolding human and ecological catastrophe in Ethiopia and elsewhere in Africa.

Sonny Ramphal again: "When Northern environmentalists turned their attention to the South they sometimes seemed more concerned about pandas than people; with the static needs of conservation rather than the dynamic needs of a growing population seeking to escape from poverty."

For developing countries, poverty lies at the heart of it all. Poor people very often destroy their own environment not because they are ignorant, but to survive. In economists' jargon, they have a high rate of time discount. Just as poor and hungry people eat next year's seed corn to stay alive, so they over-exploit forest stocks for firewood. Seen in the context of the short-term needs of an individual, each decision is rational; seen in a long-term and wider context, the effects are disastrous. Deforestation, desertification and soil erosion, the growing number of the hungry and destitute are a measure of just how disastrous the consequences are. Each year another 6 million hectares of productive dryland turns into worthless desert.

More than 11 million hectares of forest are destroyed yearly; over three decades, this would equal an area about the size of India. And, beyond all that, soil erosion destroys 20 million hectares of agricultural land every year. Some of the loss is due to commercial development; but most is due to the short-term pressure exerted by the growing numbers of people.

Poverty, then, is both a cause and an effect of major environmental degradation. But it would be simplistic to confine the issues in this way. Equally, there are severe, and unresolved, environmental problems in developed countries resulting from the increased use of chemicals in agriculture, from nuclear and fossil fuel energy, and from industrial pollution. Taken in a global perspective, the developed countries (of East and West) which account for a quarter of the world's population, consume around 80 per cent of its commercial energy and metals, 85 per cent of its paper, and over half of the fat intake of foods. These inequalities in consumption are not extraneous factors; they are an integral part of the environment-development connection.

Global water use, for example, doubled between 1940 and 1980 and is expected to double again by 2000; yet 80 countries with 40 per cent of the world's population already suffer serious water shortages. Fish stocks are under serious pressure in many of the main deep-sea fisheries; and there is little scope for increasing catches. There are other respects in which limits are being surpassed unknowingly. Some scientists believe that a mass extermination of species is taking place mainly as a result of the clearance of tropical forests, eliminating not only a large part of the earth's biological inheritance but stock of many species which could be of immense value to us in the long-term. A recent World Bank study estimates that over the next 20 years a fifth of the world's plant and animal species may become extinct.

The World Commission reports that "The long-term energy problem has traditionally been seen in terms of the world running out of non-renewable fuels. A more serious and immediate threat is the steady build-up in the atmosphere of carbon dioxide emissions from fossil fuel burning. Acid rain from emissions of sulphur dioxide and nitrogen oxides destroy forests thousands of miles away".

Let me elaborate a little on the problem of Acid Rain. Throughout Europe and North America, acid rain is killing lakes, rivers and streams. In southern Norway an area particularly affected by emissions from British power stations, lakes over an area of 13,000 square kilometres are virtually lifeless. The evidence of acidification in Britain is just as worrying, with more than 20 lakes seriously damaged in Galloway and hundreds more at risk elsewhere. Salmon and trout populations are now threatened in the Lake District and Mid Wales.

More than half of West Germany's forests have been afflicted by "Waldsterben", or forest die-back, and the story is being repeated throughout Europe. Trees in the Vosges, the Alps, the Pyrenees and the Apennines are now seriously affected, as well as those in the lowlands. In Britain, too, die-back is becoming increasingly apparent, with the symptoms of air pollution damage clearly visible on a wide range of species.

Conservative estimates put the annual cost of acid rain damage to buildings in the UK around 100,000,000 pounds. In Florence, Cracow, Seville, Prague, Cologne and many other European cities, historic buildings are being irreparably corroded. Parts of St. Paul's Cathedral have suffered more during the last 40 years than in the last two centuries.

Britain is western Europe's largest emitter of sulphur dioxide and more than 70 per cent of it comes from the chimneys of our oil and coal-fired power stations. Much of our pollution is exported for instance, 300,000 tonnes of British sulphur dioxide lands on southern Norway every year. This is more than double the total yearly sulphur emissions of Norway's own industries.

Let me give another example of a fearful environmental danger in which quite clearly Britain is dragging its feet. It has been brought into the open by the United Nations Environmental Programme. It is a challenge to the ozone layer, scattered between 15 and 30 miles above the earth's surface, but so thinly that if it were compressed into liquid form it would be no thicker than the sole of a shoe. Without this life preserving ozone layer, there would be no life on earth.

Two years ago, British scientists analysing data collected by balloon since 1957 found that a hole had opened up in the ozone level over Antarctica. The hole is only apparent once every year but for years it has been steadily growing in size. Latest reports suggest that in the past ten years there has been evidence of growing ozone depletions and last year Swiss scientists suggested that there might be evidence of another hole over the Arctic. UNEP explains these almost science fiction phenomena by chemicals used in aerosol cans, plastic foam containers and air conditioning. UNEP's Executive Director has called on the European Commission to take vigorous action to contain chlorofluor-carbon and halogen pollution.

An older and better documented threat not just to food supplies but to other forms of vegetation and animal life is desertification. The Independent Commission on International Humanitarian issues, also set up by a UN General Assembly decision, has just published a study of "The encroaching desert", which shows that 230 million people are directly threatened by desertification. The report documents the steady relentless growth of the desert in terms similar to a project in which I was involved forty years ago - "Men against the desert". Yet the report shows that "despite the magnitude of the threat, people, their leaders and their organisations have shown little ability or willingness to tackle the problem. In the struggle between man and the desert, the facts show that the desert is winning, to the tune of 21 million hectares a year."

This occurred in spite of the United Nations Conference on Desertification in 1977 with its 28-point Plan of Action. The nations - developed and developing - knew the problems, and they knew the answers, but they failed to implement the plan. As a result, hundred of thousands of people have died in Africa in the last few years. It would have cost much less to finance the plan when it was published than to finance the famine relief

that resulted from their lack of foresight.

So my final question is how can we get the UN member states to take effective action to avoid the scourge of death which stares us in the face as clearly as the scourge of war when the founding fathers met in San Francisco to draft the UN Charter?

The World Commission has recommended a major re-orientation and refocusing of programmes and budgets on sustainable development in and among all UN organisations. Within such a new system-wide commitment and priority effort on sustainable development, UNEP should be the principal source on environmental data, assessment, reporting and related support for environmental management, as well as be the principal advocate and agent for change and co-operation on critical environment and natural resource protection issues. But:

1. If we are to provide powers to require action by nation states, will the UN system be effective enough? The UN and its Specialised Agencies have no power to require compliance. Is the nature of the environmental challenge so profound that nations and people may demand more powers to force compliance?
2. How are we to prevent selfish (or ignorant) nations from taking actions to destroy the environment? Are regional agreements (like the EEC) the first step? Or a Mediterranean Agreement?
3. Are there issues on which the application of sanctions may be appropriate?
4. The UK exports 11 times as much air pollution as it receives from other countries. Some have suggested that the polluter should pay. What of the opposite solution - that the polluted should pay to avoid the damage?
5. Japanese and US companies now have to observe environmental rules that are far stricter than their European equivalents. Stiff fines ensure that they have to install anti-pollution equipment. Is it not far cheaper to prevent pollution than to pay the appalling price of long-term neglect?

For me, it is sad to realise that Britain is near the bottom of the EEC pollution league when 25 years ago we led the world environmental safeguards. But do not misunderstand me. Britain is not the only culprit. It is a political imperative for each of us to see that accepted standards are greatly improved. Do the recommendations of the World Commission point the way?

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The Right Honourable Lord **David Ennals** was educated in the U.K. and the U.S.A. He has held ministerial posts in the Home Office, the Foreign Office, and the Ministries of Defence, Health and Social Security. During the late 1970s he was member of the British Cabinet and became a member of the House of Lords in 1983. He is presently the Chairman of the UN Association of the UK, the Ockelden Venture for refugees, the National Association for Mental Health, the Parliamentary Food and Health Forum, the Children's Medical Charity, and the Asian Committee of the British Refugee Council, and President of the College of Occupational Therapy and the National Society of Non-Smokers.