

PRESERVATION OF THE BIO-ENVIRONMENT

[Kumaran Fernando](#)

Secretary-General UNA of Sri Lanka
Sri Lanka

Part I

We are all aware that our environment is under the most severe threat, not from some external agency but from ourselves; while we daily talk about what we must do to save the environment, at the same time, and even more actively, we despoil that very environment. There is a side to us which is conservationist, while there is clearly a side to us which is ruthlessly destructive. In short, can it not be said that we are at war with ourselves?

We are all familiar with the arguments. Man needs food and, to achieve greater productivity in agriculture, he needs more cultivable land. For this, more and more areas of forest - usually precious tropical rain forest - must be cleared and sometimes whole populations moved from one part of a country to another, with a corresponding inability on the part of such uprooted peoples to function in entirely strange surroundings, which have been seriously transformed in order to receive these new inhabitants. Such transformations often lead to disaster: a primeval rain forest is cleared to provide arable land, then is discovered that such transformed land does not lead itself to the production of food.

It is time that we all stopped to think whether there is something very basically wrong with our approach to life and to the problems that confront us in the modern world. Whether, for example, a materialistic view of life, which the whole world has inherited from the West, has such serious drawbacks as can never be overcome by means wedded to those self-same values. The question must sooner or later be asked if Man has other values; and whether the solution to, say, the problem of environment, may not be more profitably sought in an altogether different view of life than the one which the so-called "developing" world is so busy copying from the West.

I am just as westernised and as modern as the other delegates to this conference, but there are people who do have a profound knowledge of eastern philosophies and perhaps we should all for a change pay attention to what such specialists have to tell us - not about their new discoveries but about their re-discoveries of concepts which are as old as man himself but which have been forgotten, especially in the West, and now increasingly in the East as well. This may well turn out to be a more fruitful form of international co-operation than the countries of the East merely echoing the ideas emanating from the West.

It may well be that the solutions we are seeking lie in the well-worn theses of international environmentalists. It is merely suggested that the solutions may perhaps lie elsewhere and that if the possibility does exist, it may well be prudent to consider whether there are different kinds of solutions to the problems of our environment.

In Eastern countries there are indigenous systems of medicine incorporating drugs largely of herbal origin. Such systems undoubtedly also existed in the West, but very little survives at the present time. In the East on the other hand, notably in India and China, much of these old systems still survive. Their true nature after a long period of western domination in science and ideas is scarcely understood despite the practical results achieved.

A decade ago, a modern western-trained medical practitioner working in the East would have regarded such systems with scorn. But now, following the policy of the World Health Organisation, these same practitioners are willing to concede them some degree of respectability and seriousness. However, it never appears to be realised that the basis of these eastern systems - the science behind them if you like - cannot be that which the West now knows and which the whole world now accepts as the only one possible. In fact, there may well be another kind of science behind these systems which we no longer know anything about but which can nevertheless be investigated. The investigators must first be willing to concede the possibility that another science, another point of view, may exist. Without such an admission, no fruitful investigation is possible.

If one persists in trying to subject these ancient systems to the laboratory techniques of modern science, then it is possible one may entirely lose all that one otherwise gets from these systems and continue to be victim of giant multinational drug companies and the international conspiracies that make money out of human sickness and helplessness. This shall perpetuate rather than provide a solution to the problem.

I have mentioned this example in order to make my point about finding possible solutions to the problems of environment. By looking into certain old and well-worn systems of thought in the East with a view to ascertaining how they looked upon the environment and man's place in it was understood, there is a chance to find solutions or at least to find ways of modifying our present view of life.

Part II

The nature of the bio-environment and the problems, arising from its exploitation, its beneficial and harmful effects are well known and need no repetition. Likewise, facts and concepts regarding the unity and interdependence of life are known to intellectuals and policy makers at both national and international level. Before dealing with the need and urgency for international co-operation to resolve bio-environmental problems. I would like to make some preliminary observations about life on earth and the nature of Man.

When man was at war with other life forms on the planet, his individual and social behaviour had only a minimal impact on the physical and bio-environment. Non-human life forms take from the environment only what is necessary for sustenance and the survival of the species. When man became a tool-making animal, his impact on the physical environment and other life forms assumed a new dimension. Man began to make greater demands on the environment than other life forms and as a consequence, upset the balance of nature. The social and political organisations and structures that he set up for the purpose were based on the assumption that Man is supreme. The concept of supremacy manifests itself in three ways - Supremacy of Man over the physical environment, Supremacy of Man over other life forms and the supremacy of one section of Man, usually the smaller and the more powerful, over other sections based on tribal loyalties, race, class, colour.

The unfolding of the process of development based on this assumption, gathered momentum during the last five or six thousand years and has reached unmanageable proportions with the development of modern technology during the last three hundred years. This concept of supremacy and human behaviour arising out of it has resulted in the exploitative wasteful and inequitable distribution of resources on a global scale. This has resulted in one third of the World's population enjoying a disproportionate share of the World's resources at the expense of the rest.

International co-operation for the re-structuring of the bio-environment to enjoy sustainable development must be based on the realisation that past actions and current practices are unjust. As concluded by the World Commission on Environment and Development chaired by the Norwegian Prime Minister, the basic environmental problem is world poverty resulting from the mistaken concept of supremacy based on financial and political power. This must be replaced by the concepts of equality between Man and Man and an understanding of the responsibility, role and future of Man in relation to other life forms and the physical environment. What is necessary is a change in attitude in order to bring about a reorganisation of human society rationally on a global scale. This involves the justification of wrongs done in the past.

International co-operation to save the bio-environment from certain catastrophe must take the following forms:

1. The global redistribution of the basic prerequisites of life - food. During the 35 years that witnessed the doubling of the World's population, there has been a threefold increase in food production. Enormous surpluses, when millions are subject to malnutrition, starvation and death, is a crime against humanity. The highest priority should be given to resolve this problem. The laws of supply and demand should not take precedence over the laws of God and Nature. Freedom from hunger and want is yet a dream to the majority of mankind.
2. The concept of the unity of life and the physical environment is being jeopardised by the exploitation of natural forests on a global scale. There are only three major rain forests remaining - in the Amazon, Zaire and Indonesia. These and smaller rain forests such as Sri Lanka's own Sinharaja, are being ruthlessly destroyed for private gain. Rain forests wherever they are located, are part of the inalienable heritage of Man. Like the Law of the Sea we must have a parallel Law which is internationally binding to save our forest cover. The consequences of this wanton destruction are too well known and need no repetition here.
3. Wild-life is being gradually decimated throughout the world for profit. International co-operation in this sphere must be buttressed by national laws that make it an offence to produce, sell or use articles and apparel made from the skins of rare species of wild life. Thinning out of wild-life forms must be resorted to only to maintain the natural balance.
4. The pollution of the seas and waterways by the release of industrial affluent and waste matter has assumed disturbing proportions. This necessitates the promulgation of internationally binding conventions since the effects of these practices are felt beyond national boundaries.
5. Few people realise the need to utilise non-renewable resources on a rational basis. Uncontrolled exploitation constitutes, as observed by the commission referred to earlier, borrowing from future generations; a debt that we are incapable of repaying. International co-operation must have as its objective the formulation of policies designed to conserve resources for use by future generations.
6. Scientific research has proved beyond doubt the harmful environment effects of the burning of fossil fuels and the use of chloro-flouro carbons (CFCs) resulting in the increase of world temperature and the thinning of the ozone layer that filters ultra violet radiation.
7. Co-operation to minimise the effects of acid rain.
8. International agreements to minimise the ecologically harmful effects of the use of nuclear power for peaceful purposes.
9. Although the UN's Consolidated List of Products whose consumption and/or sale have been banned, withdrawn, severely restricted, or not approved was compiled as far back as 1982, very little action has been taken to disseminate information contained therein. The document will remain a dead letter if follow up action is not taken to implement its objectives.
10. The FAO has formulated a Pesticides Code. Unfortunately its rules are being observed more in the breach than in practice. Trade

practices and indiscriminate use of pesticides has resulted in more than 15,000 deaths a year in Third World countries.

International co-operation for the protection of the bio-environment necessitates action at different levels and forms:

- a. Creating awareness at grass roots level of the far reaching implications of environmental abuse leading to attitudinal changes within individuals and groups to pressure policy makers at international levels to take remedial action in the fields outlined.
- b. Since environmental problems and their consequences go beyond national boundaries and natural barriers and are global in their impact, action at the national level must be strengthened through international co-operation, both governmental and non-governmental.
- c. Since vested interests thrive on environmentally harmful practices, action must be taken to coerce such interests through internationally binding laws and conventions, operating through the UN System.
- d. The Arms Race and Nuclear proliferation should be stopped. The protagonists of the Arms Race must be made aware of the futility of nuclear war. As observed by John Galbraith, in the event of such a catastrophe, the ashes of one system will be indistinguishable from the ashes of the other.

Judging from the ongoing dialogue between the nuclear powers it is reasonable to assume that the danger of nuclear war will be averted in the not too distant future but the adverse consequences of environment related practices posed by me have already begun to take their toll.

People must be awakened to the realisation of the fact that if these disturbing and dangerous trends are allowed to continue, we will be bequeathing to posterity a barren planet on which life in all forms will gradually become extinct. The signs of impending doom are already upon us. Let us recant, repent, and act before it is too late. Time is running out for the human race if we fail to see the writing on the wall.

Kumaran Fernando is Founder and Secretary General of the United Nations Association of Sri Lanka and has represented the UNA at conferences all over the world. Founder and Chairman of the Flag Research Centre of Sri Lanka, the only one of its kind in Asia and Africa, he has been a member of many professional organisations including the Audubon Society of America, and is an honorary member of the UN Associations of the UK and the USA, as well as the Sagala Trust and the VASLA Flag Society.