

THE ROLE OF THE ENVIRONMENT

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To try and look far into the future requires more imagination than most of us are capable of. For this reason I have decided to take a few steps back and measure the millennium ahead with the yardstick of our past.

A millennium is a short span in human history. Our present civilization has been shaped by events that took place 2-2 1/2 millennia ago. Some of those events, thanks to written records, are still vivid in the mind's eye.

One example, not unrelated to this subject, is as follows: In Plato's Symposium there is a description of Socrates' meeting with a friend as he was walking to Athens. We are told that he had taken a bath, and was wearing sandals, which he normally did not do. He was going to a banquet to celebrate Agatone's victory in the tragedy contest of that year, 416 B.C. Later, we are introduced to the house and witness the eating, singing of the hymns, followed by drinking that lasted till dawn. What was the conversation about? The answer is at the end of this text.

Returning to the present, we should realize that for all the recent attention paid to the environment, man, since he has inhabited this planet, has always been concerned with his environment, tried to modify it to his own advantage, and has lived with the consequences. This is a long process as one or two examples will show. The introduction of agriculture meant selection of plants and animal species to the detriment of others, resulting in today's need to take positive and urgent action through protected areas and gene banks, to save many varieties and species from extinction. Other species have been favored by man, either directly or indirectly. Witness the ever-increasing numbers of house pets in the affluent societies, and the unwanted proliferation of rats in poor ones.

Fire has been in common use for a good many millennia. It has, amongst other things, greatly improved our food; allowed man to live in cooler climates and to work with metals. With fire comes its potential danger. The origin of stone architecture must have come from this fear of fire. See how, in many classical Greek temples, the marble consciously imitates wood.

The danger posed by fire is still present today and extensive damage is suffered every year by Mediterranean countries. Yet the possible damage has been contained as a result of persistent efforts at many levels: pre-school children are taught not to play with matches, safety measures are written into building codes, there are regulations on the storage and transport of flammable materials, while well-trained and equipped fire-fighting brigades are maintained in large and small cities around the world. An uncontrolled fire, a very old enemy, has been conquered through constant vigilance and expense.

Some 2 centuries ago we began to face a new and more insidious type of threat, that being the ever-growing number of chemical compounds introduced to the environment. Their direct and indirect side-effects have all too soon been realized: DDT, PCBs, CFCs, mercury discharges; all have been found to produce, often in minute concentrations, devastating effects. While we need most of the new chemical compounds, we must quickly develop defence mechanisms to effectively control them.

Not all chemicals, however, can be called essential. Some are made to give paint a brighter white, or an added lustre to cosmetic lipstick. Some enable us to operate an aerosol can by pressing once instead of a few times. The damage these chemicals cause and the damage inflicted by countless other human actions on the environment, is becoming widely known and yet is far from being accurately recorded and consistently reported.

Is it not ironic that economists who pride themselves on being able to measure such imponderables as "the degree of confidence in the economy", have not been interested in developing indicators of the state of our environment and the impact certain economic activities have on it?

So long as a tree cut down and not replaced adds to the GNP, and a load of toxic waste shipped to a country enriches its economy, we are looking at reality through distorted glasses. This is not unlike bankers who would record deposits but ignore withdrawals, or industrialists who add up sales but ignore costs. If proper accounts were kept, many economic miracles would appear, in reality, to be total disasters.

The impact on the environment has taken a quantum leap, and will need, in the foreseeable future, a response that is global, rooted in normality and a strong morality.

Environmental problems are truly international. They must be faced by uniting all our troops in battle including our best technology. Countries with vastly different economic and social levels must come together.

While the equality of nations regarding dignity and responsibility is not in question, every other parameter we choose makes them different; their resource endowment, climate and population, and their history. Some countries today enjoy infrastructures (roads, bridges, public buildings) that developing countries must build with resources diverted from other pressing needs.

If we accept the concept that the environment is "one", it follows that rich countries should devote vast resources to protect the environment in countries other than their own. This solidarity must mark the years to come or environmental disasters will prevail.

Some problems may work themselves out. As we are told that fossil fuels will not last beyond the next century, the problems connected with their burning will gradually diminish.

Most of man's impact on nature is the result of actions that, taken individually, may not appear negative. However, their repetition by an ever-growing population is the real threat. A house by the sea is charming - a uninterrupted wall along the coast, destroying all natural habitats is unacceptable.

To bring such actions under control will not only require planning and other administrative tools, but, above all, a change in moral standards with an end to the acquisitive society, the "beg-thy-neighbor" attitude. We must gain a respect for others and all creatures around us.

Referring once again to Socrates, this is why the events in Athens in that distant year seem to me to be still relevant today: for you see, the subject of that Symposium was love: for beauty, knowledge, and for other human beings.

Dr. **Aldo Manos** is a senior official of the United Nations. He holds degrees in international law and political science from the University of Genoa. He joined the United Nations in New York in 1962 and later, in Thailand, became responsible for the United Nations regional projects for Asia and the Far East. He was on the staff of the United Nations Conference on the Human Environment in Stockholm which approved a global plan for environmental protection and recommended the creation of the United Nations Environment Programme. Dr. Manos joined the new organisation in Nairobi, Kenya, as Chief of Programme Management and later became Deputy Director of the United Nations Environment Fund. In 1980 he was appointed as the first co-ordinator of the Mediterranean Action Plan in Geneva, at the same time acting as UNEP Director for Europe.