

A call to act

by Dr. Hemanthi Ranasinghe

Head/Department of Forestry & Environmental Science
University of Sri Jayewardenepura

World Environmental Day, commemorated each year on June 5, is about us. It is a people's event with colorful activities such as street rallies, bicycle parades, green concerts, essays and poster competitions in schools, tree planting, as well as recycling and clean-up campaigns. This day was first established by the United Nations General Assembly in 1972 to mark the opening of the Stockholm Conference on the Human Environment. Today it is one of the principle vehicles through which the United Nations stimulates world-wide awareness of the environment and enhances political attention and action.

It is also a multi-media event which inspires thousands of journalists to write and report enthusiastically and critically on the environment. It is a visual event with television documentaries, photo exhibits and displays, as well as an intellectual event for those who organise and participate in seminars, round-table meetings and symposia. In many countries, this observance provides an opportunity to sign or ratify international conventions and sometimes leads to the establishment of permanent government structures dealing with environmental management and economic planning.

With the theme, 2000 The Environment Millennium, Time to Act, World Environment Day 2000 calls for each and everyone of us to demonstrate our commitment in protecting the environment and to prevent further damage to our one and only Earth.

Broadly, the agenda is to give a human face to environmental issues; empower people to become active agents of sustainable and equitable development, promote an understanding that communities are pivotal to changing attitudes towards environmental issues; and advocate partnership which will ensure all nations and peoples enjoy a safer and more prosperous future.

On this World Environment Day, let us examine the state of our environment. Let us consider carefully the actions which each of us must take, and then address ourselves to our common task of preserving all life on earth in a mood of sober resolution and quiet confidence.

In the last millennium, particularly in the last century, realizing this role has proved to be a great challenge. Never in the history of mankind have we done so much, in so little time, to destroy the wonderful ecosystem that sustains us. The repercussions of our destructive action will be felt for generations to come. It may take us another millennium to put things right.

Man's greed has led to overuse of natural resources in a unsustainable way without caring for their health or protection. With the advent of industrial revolution, more economic avenues were opened, thus the increase of the needs of people. Population increase from 800 million at the start of the industrial revolution to 6000 million now has accentuated this problem.

Of the more environmental problems of global nature, Greenhouse Effect caused predominantly by carbon dioxide has increased the earth's atmospheric temperature, rise the sea levels and thus submerges land, kills corals and other life at sea, accelerates desertification, etc. The depletion of ozone layer caused primarily by the CFCs (carbo fluoro carbon) affects crop production and fish resource and human health adversely. Acid rain caused by gases emitted from industries and vehicle fumes reduce productivity of forests and crops. In Europe and North America large extents of land and lakes have been destroyed due to this.

rates. Since 1980s the decline rate of species is 1 per hour compared to the figure of 1 per year in 1975.

Crop productivity in the world has been reduced by desertification. The depletion of fertile land is 6 million ha/yr and in 30 years time this would be equivalent to the size of Saudi Arabia. World urban population is around 50%. Due to the limited space and facilities, many waste disposal and sanitation problems arise leading to unhealthy living. It has been reported that of the world's population, 33% are without proper sanitation facilities and 22% do not have access to safe drinking water!

Environmental problems in developing nations

Due to poverty, environmental problems are greater in developing countries compared with developed ones. About 80% of this world's population live in developing countries and about 30% of the population live below the poverty line (1 US \$/capita/year). This is highest in South Asia. There are marked disparities in the income distribution and consumption of resources; 20% of population living in developed countries having about US \$ 10,000 per capita incomes consume 80% of the energy and contribute substantially to global warming, ozone depletion and other environmental hazards.

Man's greed has led to overuse of natural resources in a unsustainable way without caring for their health or protection. With the advent of the Industrial Revolution, more economic avenues were opened, thus the increase of the needs of people. Population increase from 800 million at the start of the industrial revolution to 6000 million now has accentuated this problem.

Among the major environmental issues facing developing nations with special emphasis on South and Southeast Asian Region, deforestation, degradation of land, declining availability of fresh water and deteriorating water quality, degradation of marine and coastal habitats can be cited. During the past 30 years this region has lost half of its forest cover as a result of the clearance of forest land for farming, logging of tropical

hardwood and firewood gathering. Countless number of plant and animal species had gone on the path of extinction along with it.

No other region has as many heavily polluted cities and its rivers and lakes are among the world's most polluted. Availability of safe drinking water has become a big issue in this region where Singapore is already water scarce having only 200 cum/capita/year. India is fast approaching the mark in 2025 and if current trends persist Sri Lanka will also follow suit. In large megacities like Bombay, Bangkok, Jakarta and Manila, air pollution is an increasingly serious problem.

With the advent of urban cities the cities are grappling with the solid waste disposal problems with irregular and inadequate disposal facilities. The abundant use of polythene products and their resistance to natural decomposition has created problems in waste disposal. Due to improper sanitation, 13 million children in developing countries under 5 years of age die due to contagious and parasitic diseases. Due to the proliferation of unplanned prawn farms along the coast line has had negative impacts on the mangroves and other coastal habitats in most of the countries in this region.

The process of trade liberalisation and globalisation have facilitated the expansion of Transnational Corporations

The requirement of the World Trade Organisation's TRIPs provision for governments to afford patent protection for all biological material, has posed immense difficulties to the developing nations. Despite the fact that these are store-houses of world's biological diversity, the inability to inventorise all biological material due to monetary constraints and the existence of traditional knowledge which cannot be pinpointed to an individual has placed these countries in a disadvantageous position. This was apparent from the recent examples of Neem, Tumeric, Basmati rice, Kotala himbutu which were patented by developed nations although the country of origin was among the developing nations.

A call for action

As the title of World Environment Day 2000 depicts, action is needed to curtail this mass degradation of our home, the earth. This action should be taken as a global community, nationally as countries and every one of us as individuals.

The Environmental Agenda of the 21st Century should be one that drives environmental improvements to accompany economic and social gains. The global community must implement an integrated approach to environment management. This approach must be underpinned by the need to involve the various actors in the civil society in the formation and implementation of policy measures.

In the new millenium, we need global cooperation that promotes sustainable development. The numerous global agreement/conventions signed and ratified over the past few years, i.e. Convention on Biodiversity, Convention on Climate Change, Ramsar Wetland Convention, World Heritage Convention, Basel Convention, International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora etc. should be implemented properly and in order to make these more effective the countries should formulate the required policies and legislation requested therein. Global agreements that ensure trade and environment policies are mutually supportive must succeed in helping the poorest of the poor in the world. They must succeed for the sake of the environment.

As nations we need to integrate environmental conservation in their development agenda. Existing policies, laws and institutional capabilities should be reviewed in a holistic manner and not in isolation. In this regard, the co-ordination mechanism should be strengthened and supported by holistic policies legislative and institutional framework and most important by the people themselves, if we are to obtain the desired results.

As the agenda for the World Environment Day clearly depicts, it is time to put thoughts to action. We need to give a human face to environmental issues. People need to be empowered to become active agents of sustainable and equitable development. The understanding that communities are pivotal to changing attitudes towards environmental issues should be promoted and partnership should be advocated which will ensure all nations and peoples enjoy a safer and more prosperous future.

Awareness of the value and services afforded by earth's invaluable but finite natural resources is a key factor by all beings, let it be politicians, developers, school-children and general public. Everyone of us can contribute in our own small way in this magnifi-