

“What on Earth is the Matter? The Environmental Crisis....and Christianity”

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Speech by

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First, let me express my sincere gratitude to the organizers, A Rocha Kenya for having invited the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) to give the keynote speech at the opening of this conference. I appreciate the opportunity to address this important gathering that will for the next two days be deliberating on this very challenging topic of “What on Earth is the Matter? The Environmental Crisis....and Christianity”. We all agree that we are facing unprecedented environmental challenges not seen for a generation, perhaps longer.

As you are aware, UNEP is the voice for the environment in the United Nations system. UNEP's mission is "to provide leadership and encourage partnership in caring for the environment by inspiring, informing, and enabling nations and peoples to improve their quality of life without compromising that of future generations." UNEP's approach to environmental management revolves, among others, around the creation of effective partnerships. In doing so, UNEP makes a particular effort to nurture partnerships with other United Nations bodies possessing complementary skills and delivery capabilities as well as enhancing the participation of other major groups, including faith-based organizations.

The year 1972 stands as a watershed in modern environmentalism. The first international conference on the environment — the United Nations Conference on the Human Environment — was convened in Stockholm in that year, bringing together 113 nations and other stakeholders to discuss issues of common concern. Since then, the world has made great strides in placing the environment on the agenda at various levels — from international to local. The result has been a proliferation of environmental policies, new

legislative regimes and institutions, perhaps an unspoken acknowledgement that the environment is too complex for humanity to address adequately in every sense.

Decisions made since Stockholm now influence governance, business and economic activity at different levels, define international environmental law and its application in different countries, determine international and bilateral relations among different countries and regions, and influence individual and society lifestyle choices. As a result there have been some key environmental successes:

- The ozone layer is projected to have largely recovered within half a century as a result of the Montreal Protocol;
- The first international steps - the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change and its Kyoto Protocol - have been taken to tackle the issue of global climate change;
- The public is now much more concerned about environmental issues. Popular movements in many countries are forcing authorities to make changes;
- Voluntary action taken by many of the world's major industries is reducing resource use and eliminating waste. The happy discovery that what is good for the environment can also be good for business may do much to reverse trends for which industry itself was originally largely responsible. This 'win-win' situation bodes well for the planet;
- Governments in developed regions have been markedly successful in reducing air pollution in many major cities. Innovative legislation has been introduced;
- Deforestation has been halted and reversed in parts of both Europe and the North America;
- Local *Agenda 21* initiatives have proved an effective way of developing and implementing sustainable development policies that involve communities and political agencies alike.

But there are problems: some things have not progressed, for example, the environment is still at the periphery of socio-economic development. Poverty and excessive consumption continue to put enormous pressure on the environment. The unfortunate result is that sustainable development remains largely theoretical for the majority of the world's population. The level of awareness and action has not been commensurate with the state of the global environment today; it continues to deteriorate.

We have increased our ecological footprints not only through industrialization but also by the intensity - one might say hunger - with which we consume on a scale greater than many of our parents or grand-parents. We also have a planet today where consumption in one part of the world often exceeds that of most poorer nations put together. It's an imbalance in the way that we use resources. So when we talk about environment in the year 2007 it should not be surprising that it is very much associated with issues of peace, conflict and increasingly also security.

We are stressing our planet and through stressing our planet we are stressing our communities. Many of you in this room here today, perhaps have more experience of that than I do. You only have to open the newspapers and read about the daily competition for resources amongst different communities in Kenya, to see how a local community is ultimately bound up with the fate of the planet as a whole.

We have reached in some parts of the world the limits of what our ecosystems can sustain if they are exploited in the ways that we have done for the last 20-30 years. The tragedy of the past 3 decades is that we have failed to comprehend that the environment is in many ways the foundation for sustainable economic development.

We now know we have gone beyond the local to fundamentally impacting the global life support systems that underpin existence on the planet. The scale of environmental mismanagement is underscored in the Millennium Ecosystem Assessment, - a UN initiated and UN-led multilateral initiative whose findings were published in 2005. The Assessment says around 60 per cent of all the ecosystems studied are being degraded or used unsustainably. Statistics available from the assessment report are worrying:

- More land was converted to cropland in the 30 years after 1950 than in the 150 years between 1700 and 1850, and one quarter of Earth's terrestrial surface is now occupied by cultivated systems.
- The global area of naturally regenerating forest has declined throughout human history and has halved over the past three centuries. Forests have effectively disappeared in 25 countries, and more 90% of the former forest cover has been lost in a further 29 countries.
- Coastal ecosystems are among the most productive yet highly threatened systems in the world. Approximately 35% of mangroves for which data are available and 20% of coral reefs are estimated to have been destroyed, and a further 20% of corals degraded globally since 1960.
- Drylands cover 41% of Earth's land surface and are inhabited by more than 2 billion people, about one third of the human population. Worldwide, about 10-20% of drylands are judged to be degraded
- Growing competition for water is sharpening policy attention on the need to allocate and use water more efficiently. Irrigation accounts for 70% of global water withdrawals (over 90% in developing countries), but chronic inefficiencies in irrigated systems result in less than half of that water being used by crops. The burden of disease from inadequate water, sanitation, and hygiene totals 1.7 million deaths and the loss of up to 54 million healthy life years per year. Some 1.1 billion people lack access to improved water supply and more than 2.6 billion lack access to improved sanitation.

Certain key areas of attention have been identified for global action at all levels to ensure the success of sustainable development. Prime among them are alleviating poverty for the world's have-nots, reducing excessive consumption among the more affluent, reducing the debt burden of

developing countries, and ensuring adequate governance structures and funding for the environment.

Underlying this action, however, must be the greater provision of and access to information in all its forms as the fundamental basis of successful planning and decision-making. The information revolution holds the possibility of providing cheap and reliable information in appropriate forms to all stakeholders in the environment — decision makers, local communities, religious groups, the general public — thus enabling them to participate more meaningfully in decisions and actions that determine the courses of their daily lives and of those of succeeding generations.

Means must be found to tackle the root causes of environmental problems, many of which are unaffected by strictly environmental policies. Changes are needed in the ways we think about the environment and in the ways in which we manage it. First, environmental issues need to be integrated into mainstream thinking. Better integration of environmental thinking into decision-making about agriculture, trade, investment, research and development, infrastructure and finance is now the best chance for effective action. Secondly, environmental policies that move away from strictly sectoral issues to encompass broad social considerations are the most likely to make a lasting impact. Thirdly, there is a need for better integration of international action to improve the environment - particularly in relation to regional and multilateral environment agreements.

The role of faith in promoting responsible behaviour and encouraging a self-discipline that overcomes the urge for instant gratification without responsibility and self-interest for the sake of some long-term and comprehensive benefit for humanity and the environment cannot and should not be underestimated. The Millennium and Malmö Declarations and the World Summit on Sustainable Development (WSSD) Plan of Implementation, all mention the spiritual dimension and the need for a common ethical framework for sustainable development.

Each of us lives in and interacts with our environment. Each day we interact with the natural world (the air we breath, the trees we climb), the engineered world (the cars we drive, the clothes we wear), and the human world (the people we know and the people we don't know). How we approach these interactions, both as individuals and collectively as humanity, determine how we live now and how people will live in the future. Although most people seldom think about it, the "how we approach these interactions" is based on one's worldview (the beliefs and values that are held, the virtues that are lived out).

Ecologists emphasize the dependence of all living things, including mankind, on one another and on their environment. This view is entirely compatible with a spiritual interpretation of the universe in which the material world is seen as a part of the divine gift of life.

There are many reasons for this: some are purely utilitarian, for example it is essential for human welfare to protect our sources of food, water, air and other necessities. But more than this, we have obligations to others and to future generations, who depend not only on the planet's resources but also on the aesthetic and restorative properties of both natural and man-made environments. Above all, we recognize that our fundamental beliefs imply an obligation upon us to act as stewards and trustees of the complex world in which, as part of a divine plan, we have evolved.

Some Christians reject any environmental concern, saying that since God is in control overall, we should just let Him look after it. But in the scriptures, the sovereignty of God never allows us to evade our responsibility. For instance, we don't expect God to take out our garbage (even though we know He is in control) nor to look after the sewage problems for a village or a city. So why should we not support efforts to keep clean the atmosphere or the oceans?

All Christians seem to agree that man has been given dominion over the Earth, as a steward under God. But what are the limits of responsible stewardship? Man's dominion extends to the fish of the sea (Genesis 1:26). But where is the fine line between catching a fish to feed one's family, and huge factory vessels, towing the 'walls of death'-kilometres-long drift-nets scouring everything clean, edible or not, and devastating long-standing fishing grounds?

The same concepts apply to forestry and tree-felling. The Christian does not see nature as sacred in itself. While respecting a tree as a creation of God, and thus not to be wantonly destroyed, he will have no problem as such with chopping down a tree to build a house. But in our high-tech age, rainforests are disappearing at a rate equivalent to one football field in area every few seconds.

Determining the boundary between use and abuse, between responsible resource management and rapacious plunder, is obviously a complex 'wisdom' issue, not one with a single Biblical answer that fits all cases. Scientific data, if one can separate out the biases of the researchers, is vital—for instance, reliably knowing the regenerative capacities of logged forests and fresh plantations. Many Bible-believing Christian professionals who have access to much relevant data are becoming increasingly convinced that talk of crisis, particularly in the area of waste accumulation, cannot easily be dismissed as simply scaremongering

God owns the Earth, not man, so as responsible stewards we are not free to do as we please with it (Psalms 24:1). But we have also been given dominion (rule) over it, and told to subdue it for our own needs (Genesis 1:26—28). But man was required to dress and keep the garden, not plunder it (Genesis 2:15).

In the early days Christians had a strong sense of the sacredness of the natural world, and their approach to it was one of reverence and concern. Today, in a society preoccupied with the exploitation of natural resources,

often regardless of the environmental consequences, a return to these values is badly needed. If, as Christians, we accept this responsibility, we are bound to put renewed effort into environmental conservation, starting in our own neighbourhood and extending to the wider world at home and abroad.

There is much that can be achieved: first in small ways, for example by revising shopping habits, use of cars, and management of the countryside; and then seeking to increase awareness of the many environmental problems that urgently need attention throughout the world, such as forest destruction, loss of habitats for wildlife, over-fishing, excessive use of pesticides and fertilizers, or the emission of "greenhouse" gases. It is vitally important that wherever possible we as Christians should give practical support towards the solution of such problems.

We at UNEP remain convinced that if we are to overcome the challenges facing this planet and its people, there is no room anymore for narrow self-interest or single interest group solutions. It is not anymore a task that government alone can either lead on or accomplish. Partnership, mutual self-interest, cooperation and collaboration are our allies—allies that should and must operate together to ensure that fundamental environmental conditions can and will get steadily better, not stealthily worse.

I thank you.

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