



Beyond Stockholm

BACK in 1972 at the Stockholm Environment Conference, a new hope was ignited that governments would recognise the importance of natural resource conservation, and a clean and healthy environment. Today, 15 years later, the global situation has actually become much worse.

Each year, 5 million hectares of tropical rainforest are destroyed due to commercial logging. Countries once rich in timber (like Thailand and Nigeria) are now importing to meet their domestic demands. Many more countries including Malaysia will meet the same fate at the present rate of deforestation.

With the loss of forest cover millions of tons of agricultural soils are washed away each year, causing floods and soil infertility. Farmlands are literally disappearing due to flash-floods. Global climatic conditions are also seriously affected.

At the same time, wildlife is systematically decimated by wildlife trade and deforestation. Vital life support systems are being destroyed as animals, birds and insects face extinction. Without the natural biological checks and balances, agricultural pests and disease ravage cultivated lands. Insects and other creatures which have positive roles to play in agriculture are becoming rare too.

Another major life sustaining resource which is being sucked away is water. Ground water is currently used indiscriminately. Traditional ecological agricultural practices have been overtaken by modern technology which draws out immense quantities of water, often to be wasted. Contamination of soils and hence water by toxic substances and other pollutants also contribute to the destruction of such non-renewable water resources. Without water the survival of mankind will undoubtedly be cut short.

Deserts are also fast spreading. Every year, 60,000 square kilometres of land becomes a desert. In Sudan, desert has advanced 100 kilometres in

one decade. In Ethiopia, 2,000 tons of soil per square kilometre is disappearing. In the sub-Sahara, trees have shrunk back by four million hectares each year. Drought hit 60% of the Sudan-Sahel regions in the 1970s and 1980s.

The rapid destruction of global resources has serious social implications. There is increasing poverty and unemployment as the resource stock for economic development runs out. Millions, especially in the Third World, are leading a barely human existence.

The scenario is equally bleak when we consider the negative impact of modern science and technology. Bhopal, Chernobyl, thalidomide, minamata, acid rain, pesticide poisoning of the food chain, contaminated and adulterated food and drinking water... the catalogue of disasters grows steadily.

Each year the accumulation of toxic waste continues. Since 1950 industries in the United States have generated some six billion tonnes of toxic wastes, and they grow by 250 million tonnes a year.

Poisoned rivers, poisoned soils and poisoned air. The polluting tide has upset the natural environmental balance. It now threatens to upset the delicate chemistry of our own biochemistry. Technology has colonised farming, food manufacturing, packaging, pharmaceuticals, energy production: in every sector the material returns have created chemical compounds, products or processes that are toxic to human beings. Humanity is facing what James Bellini has called the high tech holocaust.

The signs have emerged. A survey in Kenya reveals that 40% of vegetables examined contain pesticide residue above the officially acceptable level. Livestock feed made from cotton seed is found to be contaminated by highly toxic 'aldrin' and 'dieldrin'. Vegetables on sale in Sri Lanka have high pesticide residue. In Malaysia, more than ten types of vegetables grown in Cameron Highlands were found to be contaminated.

Until the arrival of toxic chemicals, insects and other wildlife kept pests under relative control. However, chemical warfare in agriculture has created more problems in the long-term. Pests soon re-establish themselves and farmers are forced to apply heavier measures of chemicals.

The spiral of pesticide overkill escalates until the pests become resistant. Today more than 500 species of insects are immune to insecticides. About 10 to 15 are resistant to just about anything.

Our human habitat has also changed for the worse. Millions of people are driven from their lands as the industrial and urban sprawl spreads its tentacles. Urban centres are also becoming increasingly congested. In many cities, basic services of water and energy supplies, housing, transportation and employment have collapsed. The bulk of urban dwellers lead a sub-human existence in many countries.

True, some efforts have been made, nationally and internationally, to deal with some of the problems. Laws and treaties among nations exist. But these fall extremely short of the extent and urgency of the global crisis. Short-term financial and political interests are blinding many governments and their elites to the fate of humankind.

As for laws, I am not too hopeful. Business lobbies with only profits in mind dictate the law-making process. The history of environmental legislation is often 'too late and too little'.

Although the situation as I have outlined looks hopeless, yet there is a growing environmental movement in both the Third World and the rich countries.

People everywhere are awakening to the fact that there is a resource and environmental crisis. The Chipko Movement to protect forests in India, the efforts to save the Amazon forest in Latin America, the Bukit Merah residents' fight against radioactive waste in Malaysia, are all sparks of the growing resistance against further environmental damage.

It is thus very important to expand environmental education — through schools and universities and through the mass media. Policy makers and politicians should realise that long-term consideration for the environment is far more important than short-term profits or political gain.

Hopefully the sparks of people's environment movements will become a fire of environmental awareness burning in the minds of people around the world. Then there will still be a chance that we will win the battle to save earth and its environment.

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