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# A better life through environmental conservation

## A Challenge for the new Millennium

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To my mind it is life in an environment where standard of living and welfare of people renders maximum satisfaction to the present generation while not curtailing the opportunities for the future generation to obtain maximum satisfaction.

This could be provided with development which is within limits of the capacity of our natural assets. As our environment is not what we have inherited from our ancestors, but what we have inherited from the future generations, we are faced with the greatest challenge of handing over our planet intact to our sons and daughters. Can we do it?

As we step into the new millennium, it is timely to reflect on the changes of environment, social, economic and political conditions on the conservation of nature. Conservation activities should prepare for the future on two related but distinct dimensions; first building greater understanding of the degree to which past human actions have set in motion irreversible and ongoing changes in the natural and physical environments altering the range of options available to human communities and second, building the capacity; of human societies to understand, adapt and respond to environmental change, a function of the cultural, social, economic and political contexts within which they operate.

During the past generation, the earth's environment has changed more rapidly than at any other time in history, primarily because of our careless interactions with its natural resources. Human numbers are 4 times the levels of a century ago, and the world economy is 17 times as large. Much of the economic growth pulls raw material from natural resources such as forests, soils, seas and waterways. This growth has allowed advances in living standards that our ancestors could not have imagined, but it has also undermined natural systems leading to total destruction of the world. Meanwhile, industries most heavily reliant on environmental resources and most heavily polluting are growing most rapidly in the developing world? Where there is both more urgency for growth and less capacity to minimise side effect.

When considering the situation in Asia? This region has witnessed high growth rates in the recent past; in 1994 the total GDP growth was 8.29% (ADB, 1995) Despite this poverty; looms large. Estimates indicate that of the world's 1.2

billion people who live in absolute poverty (with a per capita income of 1 US \$/day), more than 2/3 reside in this region. High population growth is exerting pressure on the environment and on natural resources in the region.

The root causes of different environmental problems vary considerably. Much of the increasing severity of problem is driven by the demographic situation, although other aspects of the human condition such as cultural, social and economic status; traditional and acquired technologies, institutional and legal systems and changing consumption patterns have all played a significant role. Impacts on the environment caused by the developed and the newly industrialized countries in the region as well as the unsustainable use of natural resources by those countries have also been considerable.

Among the major environment issues, deforestation, degradation of land, declining of the availability of fresh water and deteriorating water quality and the 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, the logging of tropical hardwoods and fire-wood gathering. With this countless number of unique animal and plant species have also vanished, sometimes even without our knowledge. According to IUCN, the decline of plants and vertebrates have accelerated 50-100 times than the natural rates, while the figure for birds is 500-1000. Since 1980s the decline rate of species is 1 per hour compared to the figure of 1 per year from 1900 -1975!

### Air pollution

No other region has as many heavily polluted cities and its rivers and lakes are among the world's most polluted. In the large megacities of the region such as Bombay, Bangkok, Jakarta and Manila air pollution is an increasingly serious problem. The small island states such as Fiji, Maldives and Western Samoa are grappling with solid waste disposal problems with irregular and inadequate disposal facilities. With rapid economic development and wealth. Asia has become environmentally vulnerable. As women are the primary natural resource managers in developing countries in this region, when the environment is degraded they are the most affected.

Despite the fact that Sri Lanka had a long historical tradition which dates back to some 25 centuries in caring for the environment and for judiciously managing its natural resources in the more recent times, the population which has grown rapidly (18.8 million in 1998 as compared to 4 million in 1990) has begun to exert considerable pressure on the natural resources



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and the environment. A projected population of 25 million by 2040 will create unprecedented demands for food, fibre, energy, developable land and other natural resources. Sri Lanka with a per capita income of US \$ 842 in 1998, and after 50 years of independence suffers from acute socioeconomic problems such as unemployment, inflation and poverty. Hence it is inevitable that the state of our natural resources are at stake. Deforestation, land degradation, soil erosion, pollution and other environmental stress add new dimensions to these economic problems because productive, sustainable environmental systems can no longer be maintained.

Clearing of forest land for chena cultivation, unsustainable farming practices, salinization and water logging of irrigated lands, soil erosion are said to be the main reasons for land degradation. The decline in agricultural productivity and change in land-use patterns are mainly attributed to soil erosion, and the associated

land degradation. As a result, the contribution from agriculture has declined from 26% in 1988 to 21% in 1998. It has been estimated that approximately 40 tonnes per hectare of topsoil is been lost per year. A classic evidence for this drastic erosion is the silting of the Polgolla reservoir upto 70% of its capacity by the end of 1988, barely 10 years after its commissioning.

Deforestation has been an acute problem over the years and the rate of deforestation at present is estimated to be around 6000 hectares per year, the high forest cover is around 23% of the country's land area. This is in comparison to the 70% of the natural forest cover which existed at the turn of the century. The main contributors for this deforestation are creation of settlements and hydropower schemes, shifting cultivation, extraction of timber, encroachments etc.

### Coastal erosion

Coastal erosion due to various reasons including sand mining and infrastructure devel-

opment and the loss of marine habitats are also severe issues confronting the nation. The damage to coral reefs, lagoons and wetlands due to their exploitation and due to development activities are significant. The flooding situation in the urban areas due to rains is due to unplanned land filling of wetlands areas and also unplanned and uncontrolled expansion of urban areas. The proliferation of unplanned prawn farms along the coastline has had a negative impact on the mangroves and other coastal habitats. Communities living along the coast and especially those who are making a living from marine resources and the tourist industry are at stake. Although our precious island is earmarked in the international arena as a 'biodiversity hotspot' having the largest biodiversity per unit area in Asia the current level of resource use/misuse may pave the way for their non renewability and extinction in the near future.

### Industrialisation

With the gradual move away from agriculture, the country is becoming over reliant on industrialization. Proper practices of industrial production causes pollution of air, soil and water. According to the records, there are about 600 high polluting industries in the country, where most of them discharge their waste water bodies. Water pollution due to discharge of fertiliser and pesticides, raw sewage, unplanned solid waste disposal are common. The abundant use of polythene products and their resistance to natural decomposition has created immense problems in waste disposal. Air pollution from vehicles and industries resulting in health and climate change issues, unplanned expansion of urban areas resulting in slum creation, health issues have aggravated the situation. The demands for water for domestic and industrial uses are increasing creating a competition for this commodity among the irrigation, power, industrial and domestic sectors.

(Continued tomorrow)



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