

## Global Environmental Consciousness

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### Opinion

Man's historic record shows that he has spent 99 percent of his time here on this planet as hunter gatherer and only some 10,000 years ago, he began cultivation of plants and domestication of animals. Until 2000 years ago, half of the terrestrial earth was still inhabited by the hunter gatherers. Man, in nature's best promise and worst enemy' has been more or less substantiated and proved through his multifaceted activities on earth's surface since he emerged on this planet only about two million years ago, although the first living form appeared on this globe some 2.5 billion years ago. Thus, agriculture and animal husbandry have influenced less than one percent of man's existence on this earth. As primitive agricultural systems developed, man could afford a settled life and leisure, necessary for the development of his mind. Scientific inventions and discoveries led him to industrial revolution and towards his greater security, stability and more leisure. Thus, the industrial revolution and the advancement of science and technology not only created the climate for faster growth of population but also provided means to support such a growth. However, this process of over exploiting nature and natural resources, and polluting his environment invited doom not only for man himself but for all other forms of life on this planet [1-3].

Much of our environment stands modified today and is far away from being 'natural' as such. We have burned and cleared a naturally balanced ecosystem and replaced it with something more productive only from our selfish point of view. As long as our numbers were small and technology primitive, the effects on our global ecosystem were only peripheral. However, irreversible change led to imbalances in the once rich ecosystems which were subsequently depleted, simplified, unbalanced and finally destroyed and consequences are visible on earth's surface in areas of ancient civilizations in the form of raging deserts, dried-up river courses, widespread soil erosion and accelerated frequency of either famines and floods, or deforestation, devastations, loss of animal and human lives, etc. Our earth stands as a wounded planet today and this compels us to think globally but act locally for a brighter common future [4]. The past four decades have witnessed major changes in the way the issues of economic growth, human development and environmental protection are approached. Two international conferences serve as landmarks.

The United Nations Conference on the Human Environment, held at Stockholm in 1972, was the first major discussion of environmental issues at the international level. The agenda was immense, touching on virtually all aspects of natural resource use, but the focus (reflecting the concerns of the developed countries which proposed the conference) was on the threat to the natural environment posed by economic growth and industrial pollution [5-6]. During the 1980s, a new political and developmental paradigm emerged which appeared to reconcile these conflicting objectives. In 1987, the World Commission on Environment and Development published its report "Our Common Future", better known as the Brundtland Report. Publication of the "Brundtland Report" set in motion a process which culminated in the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development (UNCED), held at Rio de Janeiro in 1992 [7]. Modern environmental problems hit the global agenda in 1972 when the Stockholm Conference on Human Environment was held to discuss the emerging problem between 1972 and 1992, the problems of water pollution, extinction of species, deforestation, desertification, depletion of the ozone layer and climate change became increasingly evident.

Treaties were developed to deal with them. Over time, it was decided that a United Nations Conference on Environment and Development (UNCED) would be held at Rio in

Brazil in 1992, to review the 20 years since the first international conference on environment and to develop an agenda for the 21<sup>st</sup> century. This conference was attended by more than 170 countries and 103 heads of governments and several hundreds of NGOs. The conference covered 18 sectoral environmental and developmental issues and some cross sectoral issues [8]. The outcomes of the conference include the Declaration of Rio (a set of 27 principles), Agenda 21 (an 800-page policy program on 40 different issues), the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change, the Convention on Biological Diversity and a set of forestry principles. A comparison of the action plans produced by the Stockholm and Rio Conferences illustrates a major shift in our understanding of, and approach to, the problems of long-term human development. Where Stockholm adopted an issue oriented approach to pollution and nonrenewable resource depletion, Rio emphasized integrated strategies to promote human development through economic growth based on sustainable management of the natural resource base.

The UNCED action plan, Agenda 21, thus reaffirmed the Brundtland Report's central message: socio-economic development and environmental protection are intimately linked and effective policy making must tackle them together. Sustainable development is a dynamic concept with many dimensions and many interpretations. Some argue that there is no need for one agreed definition of sustainable development; instead, sustainable development should be seen as a process of change that is heavily reliant upon local contexts, needs, and priorities. Clearly, while there is no one definition, the global dimensions and impacts of the challenges facing the 21<sup>st</sup> century require extensive international cooperation, political commitment and stewardship, and energy to move forward into a sustainable future. The concept of sustainable development gained worldwide support with the publication of "Our Common Future" by the World Commission on Environment and Development in 1987. The Commission defined sustainable development in the publication as "development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs." This definition considers that while development may be essential to satisfy human needs and improve quality of life, it should occur in such a way that the

capacity of the natural environment to meet present and future needs is not compromised. All over the world, efforts are on to save the ozone layer. The United Nations formed a committee which drafted an agreement that calls for a stepwise reduction of CFCs [9]. This agreement, called The Montreal Protocol, came into effect in 1987. Under this legally binding agreement, the consumption and production of CFCs is to be stopped within a stipulated time. The committee keeps a regular check on the amount of ozone depleting substances in the world. It also provides technical and financial assistance to developing countries to reduce CFC consumption. Under the Montreal Protocol, all the signatory countries have to assess their consumption and production of ODS every year. All signatories were to phase out their consumption and production of ODS by the year 2000. At a meeting of member countries held at Kyoto in December 1997, delegates approved the Kyoto protocol, which set terms for legally binding commitments for the industrialized countries. It also proposed mechanisms to enable countries to move towards cleaner technology. The Kyoto Protocol lists six greenhouse gases whose emissions should be reduced and controlled.

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