

THE UTILIZATION AND MANAGEMENT OF
NATURAL RESOURCES FOR SUSTAINABLE GROWTH

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I owe a debt of gratitude to the Director, Professor Cyril Ponnampereuma, and to the Associate Director, Professor I. Balasooriya of the Institute of Fundamental Studies, for organizing this seminar to commemorate the World Environment Day, in close collaboration with the Central Environmental Authority. The theme of the seminar is the Conservation and Management of our Natural Resources. Therefore, I thought of speaking a few words on the Utilisation and Management of Natural Resources for sustainable Growth.

Environmental degradation of the type and magnitude in which it is experienced today is of comparatively recent origin in relation to our recorded history of over 2500 years. Our forefathers utilised and managed the country's natural resources in a rational and judicious manner. In Sri Lanka the destruction of the environment in response to short term economic interests began about 150 years ago with the opening up of large areas of the hill country for plantation agriculture. Since then, environmental issues revolved round the use of the most valuable natural resource, which is land. Deforestation and soil erosion have resulted in the depletion of the soil which has led to the removal of organic matter, a reduction of the water retention capacity, the receding

of the water table and the periodic drying up of springs and water courses which were once perennial.

Not more than 50 years ago with the advent of industrialisation another dimension was added to environmental degradation. As a result of the unplanned and haphazard location and growth of polluting industries our water bodies, rivers and estuaries, coastal areas and even the atmosphere and the soil have been adversely affected. In fact, as recently as 25 years ago there were not many who thought that our environment might be in jeopardy or that our natural resources could ever be exhausted.

In Sri Lanka today the degradation of the natural resource base on which we depend for our physical, spiritual and economic well-being continues unabated as witnessed by the following examples :

(a) Unrestricted and uncontrolled coral mining has removed the first line of defence against the onslaught of the angry sea on land resulting in accelerated sea erosion, vanishing beaches, loss of species and habitat and of course the loss of income by way of depleted coastal fisheries and the loss of foreign exchange from tourism.

(b) Very little of the mangroves are now left. They have been cut down for firewood, building materials and reclaimed for hotels and housing. With the destruction of mangroves a valuable second line of defence against cyclonic fury, storm surge and

tidal waves has been permanently removed. The linkages that existed between mangrove eco-systems and the coastal fisheries, the shore line and estuary protection have been disrupted.

- (c) High intensity chena cultivation has not only de-forested well over 50% of the land area in the Dry Zone but has also pushed such lands to the brink of desertification. The unauthorised clearing of steep slopes and stream reservations in the hill country for high value cash crops, such as tobacco, potatoes and vegetables, have resulted in heavy erosion, earth slips and land slides.
- (d) In our quest for development we have not paid sufficient attention to the maintenance of essential ecological processes and life support systems. Now we have paid sufficient attention to the preservation of genetic diversity and the sustainable utilisation of species and eco-systems.

It has been said that the most dramatic environmental degradation that is taking place around us is the result of a vicious circle of poverty, rapid population growth and the over exploitation and the shrinking of natural resources. Therefore, the utilisation and management of natural resources for sustainable growth assumes serious and complex proportions. Obviously, there is no simple solution nor is there a single solution. These are not problems that can be solved by legislation alone. Let us now examine some

of the measures that can be adopted:

- (a) Poverty alleviation is one of the basic solutions to the problems of environmental degradation that has been set in motion by those living below the poverty line for the sake of survival. But poverty alleviation is intricately interwoven with economic development and the utilisation of natural resources both renewable and non-renewable. Therefore, all programmes of poverty alleviation and economic development should be modelled on a National Conservation Strategy. I am glad to announce that the Sri Lanka National Conservation Strategy is now nearing completion and should be available to all decision makers, planners, scientists, and administrators, very shortly.
- (b) Another essential prerequisite to achieving sustainable growth is the adoption of a population policy in relation to carrying capacity of the country's resource base. In Sri Lanka the land-man ratio is very high compared to many a developing country.
- (c) The application of conventional theory in the economic planning process has also contributed to the continued degradation of the environment. Environment is being over exploited, degraded and polluted because environmental functions are seen as free goods and services. Therefore, it is high time that environmental parameters were incorporated into

the totality of the national planning process. A

functional eco-system evaluation must precede economic analysis.

- (d) Another important technique of resource management for sustainable growth is the application of environmental impact assessment, on all development programmes and projects. Sri Lanka has been one of the first few of the developing countries to have made environmental impact assessment mandatory for all development projects, both in the public and private sectors. This is not enough. We must also accept the principle that the polluter must pay for any adverse impacts on the environment until such time those adverse impacts are mitigated or eliminated.
- (e) Sooner or later we will have to think in terms of an integrated approach to national planning. The decision making process should take into account environmental as well as socio-economic factors.

Sustainable development does not imply a fixed state. It is a process of change in which economic and fiscal policies, trade and foreign policies, energy, agricultural and industrial policies all aim to induce development paths that are economically, socially, and ecologically sustainable. For example, we have to look for environmentally sustainable agricultural practices, cropping systems and farming systems. The extensive farming practices with intensive use of fertilisers and agro chemicals over exploit

farmlands and contaminate food, soil and water. I am not advocating that we should go back to the 18th century. We must develop an appropriate technology based on indigenous systems and practices some of which have been ingenious. An institute like the IFS could combine, for instance, bio-technology with appropriate technology in evolving a sustainable growth strategy.

There are of course, several external factors over which small countries like ours have no control. It is well known that the dumping of surpluses by developed countries tend to depress prices fetched by poor farmers in the developing countries. It is also well known that multi-national companies are engaged in the lucrative business of marketing toxic and hazardous chemicals in the name of agro-chemicals in many developing countries. Industrial plants are sold without effluent treatment and disposal systems. Some development assistance agencies are still not environmental conscious. They can play a meaningful role in the resource management if they re-orient their policies to ensure that all projects support sustainable development.

In conclusion, I would like to thank the Institute of Fundamental Studies for hosting this seminar. We in the CEA look forward to further fruitful collaboration with the IFS in the furtherance of our main objective of achieving the rational and judicious utilisation and management of natural resources for sustainable growth.