

## Environmental Awareness

by

K.H.J. WIJAYADASA

(Chairman, Central Environmental Authority)

You are aware that today, the 5th of June 1987, is World Environment Day. It is being commemorated and celebrated, throughout the world. It has been declared by the United Nations Environment Programme as the World Environment Day. There is a special significance, particularly for the World Environment Day today, in that the theme as announced by the United Nations Environment Programme for this year, is Shelter and Environment. This is the International Year of Shelter for the Homeless. It is our Prime Minister, the Hon. R. Premadasa who made that proposal to the United Nations' 35th General Assembly in 1980. It is his indefatigable energy, enthusiasm and drive that enabled us to get the United Nations in 1983 to declare the year 1987 as the International Year of Shelter for the Homeless. So, in that sense this World Environment Day is particularly significant to all of us, because the theme this year is Shelter and Environment; because Sri Lanka mooted it and therefore every one of us should be proud of it.

The environment knows no boundaries. Environment is multi-sectoral. It is multidisciplinary. It is both national and international. It applies to our planet and the universe alike. That is probably why Professor Ponnampereuma very rightly detailed the dangers that are lying ahead of us vis a vis the planet and outer space and the universe, with regard to the destruction and depletion of natural resources. Indeed the damage we are causing to the eco-system on our planet is not only deplorable but irreparable.

Today, is a day of significance for us in another way because today is a National Day of Mourning. Terrorists have killed some thirty two Buddhist monks. Monks whom you know lead a very pious, peaceful and harmless existence in respect of the environment. In fact, I cannot think of any religion other than Buddhism that has taught so much about peaceful co-existence with Nature and the Environment. This can be seen not only in the teachings of the life of the Buddha but also in the numerous Jataka stories and the Sutras. In them there are numerous instances of the Vanavasi Order of Buddhist monks who led a peaceful life in the forest in perfect harmony with the environment.

In that sense the World Environment Day, at least for our purposes in Sri Lanka, will go down in history as one of the unusual World Environment Days when in this country we have had this tragic incident due to which the day had to be declared a Day of Mourning. Indeed, I am sure that all of us here are very sad about it. But it is something very much beyond our control.

Today is also significant in another sense. Our atmosphere stands polluted and violated. Our air space has been violated by our big neighbour in a most blatant manner. I believe there would have been some degree of chemical pollution too, because the war planes would have let off some amount of fumes. More than that, all of us stand mentally polluted by this act. So this World Environment Day will go down in history as another day in which the minds of the Sri Lankan people were polluted by the actions of our big neighbour.

In a few years time, we are going to move into the 21st century. With the dawn of that new century we will be entering the space age. This space age will also have its share of trials and tribulations, the infighting and the politics, trans-boundary and various other problems. They will arise due to efforts of various power hungry people, to divide up space. Over and above that, as far as our own atmosphere and the immediate space that is beyond it is concerned, there are several other problems that we will have to encounter in the 21st century.

In fact Professor Ponnampereuma gave an indication of several things that are of international concern to environmentalists and scientists, which will crop up, and indeed have shown, their ugly head in the last two or three decades. He mentioned the levels of carbon dioxide in the atmosphere that is on the increase, and what that will mean. He referred to the depletion of the ozone layer. He also mentioned the terrific calamity that will befall all of us in the event of a nuclear confrontation. He also mentioned several other dangers. Now these are the international and trans-boundary problems that we have to face. Already we have at our doorstep acid rain which is causing tension and friction amongst nations in Europe, America and in other places. So, there can be trans-boundary, inter-country, inter-regional and international problems in the future exploitation of space.

Therefore, we must plan ahead. Our strategies can be devised in institutions like the IFS. We will have to think not just of the next two or three years, not just of the next twenty five years, but we have to plan for the future beyond. We have to think and work out our strategies for the future so that we are at least to some extent conditioned and mentally prepared to meet these contingencies. I am happy that the Institute of Fundamental Studies ably led and guided by Professor Ponnampereuma, is thinking ahead. I am sure that he will be guiding his colleagues, in this direction.

I have been asked to talk on environmental awareness because that is the theme of this seminar. When we talk about land ownership and land disputes in our villages, we recognise the importance of possession. 'Possession' in Sinhala is 'bhuktiya' - that is, the development and enjoyment of the land that you occupy. Now lawyers say that possession is nine tenths of the law. That is, in common law and in case law, if a person had occupied a land for approximately thirty years or so, then by virtue of possession and development of that land you can claim title to it. There are innumerable cases where title to lands have been recognised without any documentation - on the maxim that possession is nine tenths of the law. In the same way, we in the Central Environmental Authority consider that environmental awareness is, if not nine tenths of environmental protection, at least six tenths of it.

Indeed, we in the Central Environmental Authority, in formulating our policies for environmental protection and management in Sri Lanka have given environmental awareness pride of place. In fact, some of the first projects we launched in Sri Lanka, in collaboration with the UNDP, the UNESCO and so on, are on environmental awareness. Also, some of the on going projects that we have are on environmental awareness. In fact of the four divisions in the Central Environmental Authority that we have; the Environmental Management Division, the Environmental Protection Division, Environmental Secretariat Division and the Environmental Promotion Division the last one i.e. Promotion Division deals totally with environmental awareness.

Therefore, the theme you have chosen today is the correct one and it is indeed a very significant one at that.

All of us agree that awareness is good and serves a purpose. But with all the awareness you create, if the people are helpless, what is the use of all the awareness in the world? They know that you should not desecrate the environment; that you should not degrade the environment; that you should not rape the environment; that you should not cause injury to the environment. But if they are helpless; if hunger and poverty are the predominant and immediate reasons, then what can one do?

It is important that we try to answer this question. For instance due to a series of historical events - our mountain eco-systems in the central hill country have been opened up since British occupation. Some of these lands are steep slopes, sometimes, near ninety degree slopes, that have been opened up by the villagers - the landless peasantry, who for various historical reasons have been relegated to the valley bottoms. Their precious lands have been taken forcibly because they could not show title to that land under the Crown Lands Ordinance and the Waste Lands Ordinance. These lands were sold for five shillings an acre to British planters.

The legitimate owners of that land, the people who have a rightful claim to that land are today landless in these areas and some of the settlers who have been brought subsequently in the recent past are today claiming that land. After the landslides the earthslips in the hill country a C.E.A. multidisciplinary team conducted an immediate survey and on the spot investigation as to the cause of the earthslips and the nature and extent of the damage caused. After that, the government decided that certain unproductive and degraded tea and rubber lands be given to those peasants who cannot any more remain in those lands. But still the surveyors have not been able to enter some of those lands because of certain trade union actions and as a result, out of those landslide victims about 6,000 families still remain landless. They cannot be given an alternative quarter acre of land each in our own hill country to construct their houses, leaving aside land to cultivate and eke out a living. They have no employment either in those areas.

Therefore, ladies and gentlemen, do you ask those helpless people to keep quiet in the name of environmental awareness? Won't they go and cultivate 80 degrees hill slopes just to eke out a living? If the children are crying for milk, if they are crying for food can the parents just wait? This is the tragedy of our time.

We have introduced various laws, emergency regulations and various ordinances to protect the coral reefs, the first barrier against cyclones, against the fury of gale force winds. During the 1978 cyclone, as an Additional Secretary in the Ministry of Local Government, Housing and Construction, I was in charge of several studies leading to the impact of cyclones on environment and on human settlements. We prepared a handbook for cyclone preparedness, with the assistance of the Australian and the UNDP experts and I can tell you both these teams pronounced that if the coral reefs had been properly protected, they would have served as the first line of defence when the cyclone came. When the tidal waves came, twenty to thirty feet high, with houses and trees going under them, the mangroves would have taken the beating.

They said that if the tree cover had remained, especially the mangroves in those parts, then the fury of the cyclone, at least fifty percent of it, would have been taken up by them. But they are no more. About eighty per cent of our mangroves have been destroyed. Chena cultivation has destroyed our very valuable tree cover in the country. Slashed and burnt over the years, through several generations, and how can we put that back now? I don't think there is any prospect of doing that. Erosion is at its highest. Some of the lands they say, with a precipitation of 150 to 200 inches per annum and with a fragile ecosystem and soil structure in the hill country, have been used for plantations. We cannot help it now, for it is a historical fact. We can't put it back to forestry for then our economy will crash. There are a lot of contradictions that we have to face.

I think that we have to evolve a sensible policy by combining employment for people, good land use and export oriented agriculture. Such a policy should aim at crop control of adverse environmental impacts. For instance, I can remember there was an FAO-UNDP study which was conducted in the Kandyan Districts in the 1970's. I remember at that time Dr. Colvin R. de Silva was the Minister of Plantation Industries. I still remember the speech he made presenting the Crop Diversification Report to Parliament. I was there in the old Parliament House and there he said, "This study gives important recommendations for the future of our hill country." Have these recommendations been implemented? The important recommendation was that all degraded tea and rubber lands in the hill country, all the heavily eroded lands and at least those lands that

are over 60 degrees in gradient should be put back into what is called the "Kandyan Forest Garden" type of land utilization. That is very good mixed farming practice. It involved the three canopy system consisting of tall and large trees like jak and breadfruit, the medium sized canopy fruit trees and the ground cover of creepers and various other yams and things that grow at ground level. This three canopy system of the Kandyan Forest Garden System offers the best protection for our central hill country.

Are we moving in that direction? I am sorry to say that I don't think so. Therefore, there are contradictions. I am sure that during the course of your deliberations today, many of the speakers will come out with this type of issue and this type of answer.

Before I conclude, I would like to assure you that the Central Environmental Authority, contrary to popular belief, is a policy formulating body. I am the Chairman of the C.E.A. which is a co-ordinating body. There are some seventy laws in the Statute Book concerning environment, being administered by about 20 Ministries and about 200 Departments and Corporations. The C.E.A has not usurped any of their powers. The C.E.A is there to give central directions, guidance, formulate policy, create awareness in the country and centrally direct research, development and good management. I thank you for your very patient hearing and for your presence here today. I hope you will all carry this message to your friends and relations, in all parts of the country to the institutions where you are working and help us spread this message of environmental conservation, protection and management.