Stockholm. The Summer of ‘72: An Affair to Remember?

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The United Nations Conference on the Human Environment staged last June in Stockholm was intended to galvanize international action to protect the global environment from continued pollution. It adopted a Draft Declaration on the Human Environment and an Action Plan to put it into effect. The declaration and plan went before the United Nations General Assembly this fall.

We are experiencing a new ... revolution in our way of life. ... Slowly, but inexorably, we are moving into an age when social, spiritual and aesthetic values will be prized more than production and consumption.

WILLIAM D. RUCKELSHAUS
Administrator,
United States Environmental Protection Agency

THE United Nations General Assembly, originally prompted by a Swedish initiative, decided in December of 1968 to convene an international Conference on the Human Environment in Stockholm from June 5 through June 16, 1972, and to give purpose and meaningful direction to what has been considered an environmental revolution. It was to be the first conference of this type ever convened—a conference with a goal of developing various plans of action needed to improve the global environment instead of a conference for the mere exchange of papers by experts. It was also to be a meeting where the mood of the apocalyptic prophets was eclipsed by reasonable men and women of good will and hope who finally became aware of their sacred trust in preserving the life systems of this planet.

"Only One Earth" was selected as the conference theme in order to stress the very fact that all things—both living and inanimate—among which man dwells are part of a single, interdependent system and that man has no place to turn if he despoils his own surroundings through thoughtless abuse.

A twenty-seven nation preparatory committee met four times after 1970 to develop the conference program. Various intergovernmental working groups held meetings throughout the 1970-1972 period. Nearly 400 national reports from eighty countries were assembled for study and analysis by the various working groups. These papers in turn were reduced to approximately 700-800 pages of official documentation for the Stockholm meetings. Some 120 countries participated in one way or another in preparing for the conference.

In order to increase citizen participation in the United States in the conference, Secretary of State Rogers established an advisory committee headed by Senator Howard H. Baker, Jr., of Tennessee. Composed of representative persons and interest groups, the advisory committee met frequently, commented on all papers prepared for the conference by the United Nations secretariat and held public hearings on several of the proposals of the United States. It published a report, Stockholm and Beyond, in May of this year.

More than 1,200 official delegates from 110 states were accredited to the conference. The Soviet Union's absence was most significant. But this was discounted by some on the ground that the U.S.S.R. will have an opportunity to study the conference reports—as will the entire 132-member General Assembly of the United Nations—when the Draft Declaration on the Human Environment, the Action Plan and other papers are presented to the Assembly this fall for debate and, it is hoped, ratification.

Plenary sessions were held throughout the conference, and three committees concurrently studied a wide range of problems from managing human settlements for international quality and problems of resource management to the means of controlling pollution.

The chairman of the United States delegation, Russell E. Train, Chairman of the President's Council on Environmental Quality, stated at the outset that the conference would serve as a catalyst for action. He recognized that no answers might be forthcoming from
the meetings, but he nonetheless felt that the hard questions so necessary for international advancement in the environmental area would be raised.

William D. Ruckelshaus, Administrator of the Environmental Protection Agency, who was a member of the United States delegation and who has shown himself to be a tireless advocate for environmental preservation, maintained that the most significant item on the conference agenda was the Draft Declaration on the Human Environment, for within the declaration was to be found a recognition and acceptance of an environmental ethic that would, together with the Action Plan, serve as a needed guide to all subsequent national and international actions.

Shirley Temple Black, also a member of the delegation, expressed her belief that educating the world community about the problems of the environment was the central purpose of the conference. Education translates into public awareness, which in turn can be channeled by citizen action into legislative responsiveness.

Robert S. McNamara, President of the World Bank, pointed out that throughout the developing nations, or third world, countless millions are threatened by a pervasive poverty that not only degrades but also destroys through hunger and malnutrition, illiteracy, unemployment and uncontrolled disease. Development of these nations stands little chance for real success unless the present distorted distribution of income—both at the national and international levels—is brought into a more equitable and reasonable balance.

Regrettably, as Professor Richard Falk has written, both the rich, developed nations and the underdeveloped ones specify self-interest in such terms as more wealth, more growth, more power, even more people. The quality of world order but reflects the interactions between national governments—with threats (economic and otherwise) and warfare being the main instruments of maintaining this order. Professor Falk believes that maximum national self-assertion is contrary to the collective ecological good.

A “greater generosity” by the developed nations toward the underdeveloped countries and the recognition of economics as a moral science were put forward to the conference by Gunnar Myrdal as the way to strike an environmental balance and chart environmental progress. Others believe, however, that co-operative planning and assistance, not unabated generosity, are the key to maintaining economic growth and preserving the environment for the underdeveloped countries. Professor Falk has suggested that the concept of ecological trade-off should be explored more fully and refined. For example, industrial countries might establish preferential trade relations with poorer countries that agree to use DDT and other pesticides in a safe, restricted manner.

Rene Dubos told the conference that efforts to go beyond the development of mechanisms designed to prevent or to minimize environmental defects must be undertaken. As the various nations and regions continue to differentiate—both in economic activities and in basic life styles—they must elaborate on new ways of relating to one another so as to become progressively integrated into organic wholes. Differentiation must always be followed by integration.

Barbara Ward (Lady Jackson) declared that separate drives, ambitions and policies must be made compatible with the continuing common life of a single, shared planetary system. Margaret Mead said that in order to muster the human will power required for the economic, social and aesthetic changes that will come about more distinctly in the next few years, there must be a realization of environmental danger, a belief that the danger can be overcome, and a new level of human relationships between all peoples of the world.

To the nations of the third world, however, the realization of environmental danger is of but passing interest in the light of their present needs for economic development. The danger simply is not viewed as something to cope with or overcome since it is not as serious as the problems of economic development. An appreciation of spiritual and aesthetic values must be postponed for the time being. It remains for the major developed countries to work with the third world in reaching a basic level of economic growth and stability that has a built-in environment awareness factor.

One of the basic principles of the United Nations Charter is that the U.N. will not interfere in the internal affairs of any country. The economic development of a country is an internal affair. By extracting a “commitment” to the environment in the Declaration on the Human Environment, perhaps an accommodation can be reached if the declaration is ratified by the General Assembly and adhered to by the signatories.

While Barry Commoner criticized the conference for what he believed was its failure to come to grips with the economic problems associated with the environmental crisis by specifically neglecting to give sufficient priority to improving the access of needy human beings to the good available on the earth, others chose to stress the fact that the United States delegation was too inflexible and insensitive in its approach to the problem of pollution, did not commit adequate financial support helping to reduce global environmental problems and had deficient credentials —especially since its membership included only one representative of a nongovernment environmental organization and no environmental scientists.

Conference Declines To Debate Vietnam War

The dominant criticism of the conference and of the United States delegation was the joint failure to debate the issue of ecocide and for the conference’s failure to condemn “imperialist destruction and plunder” in Vietnam, China, as could be expected, was a front leader on both issues.

Ecocide may be defined quite simply as the deliberate destruction of a physical or cultural environment. The question was framed in this manner: Can war—and specifically the Vietnam conflict—be separated from the environment and a discussion of its survival? It was repeatedly asserted that there
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could be no separation of the two topics. In fact, it was suggested by the prime minister of Sweden in his welcoming address that the war was the environment's biggest problem.

The Chinese delegation insisted doggedly in daily debate—but finally to no avail—that the Indochinese conflict be included on the conference agenda. The United States was repeatedly accused of having committed “very serious crimes” in Vietnam and of having “destroyed both lives and the environment”.

The United States delegation maintained that these issues were purely political and served only to obfuscate the real work of the conference, since they were impossible of solution or rational debate in Stockholm. Interestingly, the earlier fears that massive demonstrations against the United States' policy in Indochina would be commonplace at the conference never materialized.

Draft Declaration Has Its Action Plan

The Draft Declaration on the Human Environment, adopted by the conference, consists of a preamble and twenty-five fundamental principles. The supporting Action Plan totals several hundred pages and comprises nearly 120 recommendations for international action. The framework into which those actions fit consists of three elements: global assessment (called “Earthwatch”), environmental management activities and supporting measures.

The genesis for this declaration is to be found in the early formulation of the United Nations and the efforts of the General Assembly to structure the recognition of an international standard of human rights. Although the finished product, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, has no binding legal character, it deals with a theme of transcendent importance. So too, now, the Declaration on the Human Environment is directed toward the enunciation of a noble principle. Its basic purpose is to develop public opinion and stimulate community participation in the environmental protection sphere and then to set objectives for international co-operation and formulate guiding principles for world governments in the formulation of policy.

Although the United States delegation considered the final draft versions of the declaration uneven, it recognized the preservation of a number of extremely important principles of conduct for states in dealing with environmental problems of significant international import. Chief among these is Principle 21, which declares that the states have “the responsibility to ensure that activities within their jurisdiction or control do not cause damage to the environment of other states or of areas beyond the limits of national jurisdiction”.

Of notable importance are such additional provisions as Principle 2, declaring that the earth’s living and nonliving resources, and representative sample of natural ecosystems, must be safeguarded for present and future generations; Principle 6, stating that excessive discharge of toxic substances and heat into the environment must be halted to prevent “serious or irreversible damage” to ecosystems; Principle 16, calling for application of appropriate demographic policies where growth rates or concentration of population are likely to have adverse effects on the environment; and Principle 25, declaring the obligation of states to “ensure that international organizations play a coordinated, efficient and dynamic role for the protection and improvement of the environment”.

The secretary-general of the conference, Maurice F. Strong, a Canadian, stated that the draft declaration must be seen for what it includes rather than for what it omits. He regards it as historic if only for the principle that states accept responsibility for the effect of their activities on the environment of other states.

“Earthwatch” Is Cornerstone of the Action Plan

The assessment program, “Earthwatch”, which forms the cornerstone of the Action Plan to make the draft declaration a meaningful document, would link established national and international programs and activities to permit co-operative international approaches to the identification and assessment of environmental problems of global importance.

Environmental management activities, or the second element in the plan, would be directed toward the development of measures for international co-operation designed to facilitate and support the management of man’s activities that could have an impact on the environment as well as the management of certain environmental resources. While many of the anticipated activities can only be undertaken at the national level, many can be assisted through international co-operation.

The supporting measures of the plan include education and training, public information and organization and financing arrangements. The Action Plan states that education at all levels—from preschool to the university level—should evolve to reflect an environmental dimension.

President Nixon’s direct efforts to advance the success of the Stockholm conference through the proposal of a fund for the environment were sus-
tain by the conference. In essence, the President proposed that a voluntary United Nations Fund for the Environment be established, with an initial funding goal of $100 million for the first five years, which would be used to increase the capabilities for environmental protection activities within the U.N. The United States pledged up to $40 million on a matching basis. Japan and Sweden made specific commitments, and several other nations have said they are prepared to contribute.

To administer the fund, the United States delegation recommended the creation of the post of Administrator of United Nations Environmental Programs, together with an intergovernmental policy body (Commission for the Environment) to guide the administrator. A further effort to improve co-ordination at the administrative level would be an environmental co-ordinating board composed of senior executive officers in charge of environmental programs of the U.N.'s specialized agencies.

In addition to the declaration, Action Plan and the idea of an environmental fund, the conference: (1) urged completion in 1972 of a global convention to restrict ocean dumping; (2) recommended steps to minimize release of dangerous pollutants such as heavy metals and organochlorines into the environment; (3) called for early completion of conservation conventions, including the World Heritage Trust for natural and cultural treasures and a convention restricting international trade in endangered species; (4) called for world programs to collect and safeguard the world's immense variety of plant and animal genetic resources on which stability of ecosystems and future breeding stocks depend; (5) urged strengthening of the International Whaling Convention and a ten-year moratorium on commercial whaling; (6) recommended creation of an environmental referral service to speed exchange of environmental know-how among all countries; (7) urged steps to prevent national environmental actions from creating trade barriers against exports of developing countries; (8) recommended higher priority for environmental values in international development assistance, for example, more emphasis on conservation, land use planning and the quality of human settlements; and (9) urged greater emphasis on population policy and accelerated aid to family planning in countries where population growth threatens environmental and development goals.

**How About a Global Impact Statement?**

Requiring any nation before undertaking a project to file a global impact statement—similar to that required domestically in the United States by the National Environmental Policy Act (42 U.S.C. § 4321 et seq.)—would have a significant impact on the world environment and is believed by Mr. Ruckelshaus to have “fascinating possibilities”. The acceptance of the principle implicit in this proposal is thought likely in the near future, but its present feasibility is quite another matter. The international community, Mr. Ruckelshaus suggested, is not ready to give any one organization the right to comment on every international project.

The third world would be especially reluctant to subscribe to any act that would impede their continued economic development. What might be more practical would be to structure criteria or “tolerance levels” and then proceed to allow the involved countries to adopt an individual standard according to a risk-benefit theory.

**Conference Attracts a Variety of Characters**

If one pierces the heavy rhetorical veil of Shirley Temple Black's and Margaret Mead's separate calls to the women of the world to rally around the flag of environmental preservation (and thereby liberate themselves from “something” or “someone”) under the formation of a group called "Earth's Better Half", the post-Woodstockian flavors of Wavy Gravy and Hog Farm, the Dai Dong Conference, the seaman of NOAH, the Folks or People's Forum, Pow Wow, Alternative Stad, the Black Mesa Defense, the Environmental Forum, the International Institute for Environmental Affairs and—of course—the United Nations conference itself, the real achievement of all of these becomes more manifest. Stated very simply, these groups brought to bear a new appreciation or realization of **élan vital** and a concomitant understanding that the preservation of the life systems of the earth is correctly viewed as a spiritual commitment.

In a way, then, as suggested by Eugene Carson Blake, General Secretary of the World Council of Churches, the United Nations conference was an important theological meeting because it provoked a debate on the environment and thereby prompted a reconsideration of the most fundamental question of human existence: What is man's chief aim on earth? What is his true relationship to nature or to the material environment that sustains his life? Later generations, Kurt Waldheim, Secretary-General of the U. N. said, may well look back upon this conference as a turning point—or that moment in history when a major correction was introduced in the process of the industrial revolution. For it was there that man first understood that his almost limitless capacity to innovate must always take place within nature—not outside of it.

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1. Wavy Gravy was the leader of a “family” of fifty or more Americans who lived in and around two battered buses on an abandoned runway. The Dai Dong Conference, a transnational peace effort sponsored by the International Fellowship of Reconciliation, derives its name from an ancient Chinese concept. The seamen of NOAH is a group of Danish men and women who live on a boat and work on ways to improve the human environment. Folks or People's Forum was composed of several Scandinavian environmental and political groups who joined together when they thought the U. N. conference would not deal with the issues that concerned them. Pow Wow was a group formed in Stockholm a year before the conference to discuss, evaluate and develop parallel activities. Alternative Stad is a Stockholm-based group dedicated to the idea that human beings have the right to live in pleasant surroundings designed for people rather than cars and office buildings. The Black Mesa Defense is a group of Hopi and Navajo Indians dedicated to preserving Black Mesa, a sacred mountain, from strip mining to furnish coal for power plants. The Environmental Forum was conceived within the U.S. secretariat to provide a platform for accredited nongovernmental organizations. The International Institute for Environmental Affairs sponsored six lectures during the conference.