

Keynote Address
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“The Role of Environment Protection
in National Development
Environmental Protection and
Rural Development in Thailand
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Tonight, by the time that we go to sleep, the earth will have changed. It will be a little warmer, the rains a little more acidic, the area of forest reduced, a few more species pushed closer to extinction and less fish swimming in the seas. In short, the fabric that supports life on this planet will be a little more threadbare and we will have an additional 250,000 people to feed.

The title of this *Roundtable “Environmental Protection and rural Development in Thailand”* is hence not just of national concern, but great international significance, focussing on one of the greatest challenges facing society as we draw to the end of the millennium.

Canada and Thailand, although ostensible very different, have some critical aspects in common with regard to the main theme of this Roundtable.

Both countries are major repositories of biodiversity with globally significant species and populations of wildlife. Charismatic “flagship” species, such as the tiger and elephant in Thailand and polar and grizzly bear in Canada, give both countries a high profile on the international biodiversity stage.

Second, both countries have established protected area systems, such as national parks, that play a major role in biodiversity protection. This is in contrast to much of Europe, for example, where parks are mainly of recreational significance.

Third, the protected area systems in both countries are of high public concern and often featured in the news. Both countries are currently expanding the size of the protected area systems, and giving increasing attention to management for biodiversity. However, both countries also have significant tourism industries, and the national parks attract a lot of visitors. A major challenge therefore for both countries is how to manage the national parks to protect biodiversity but also allow for appropriate use.

Fourth, both countries have significant populations of ethnic minorities, including indigenous peoples, who still have close tie to the land and must be included as active participants in land-use decision-making. Canada, for example, has developed several different models for including participation by native peoples into decision-making in national parks. Thailand is also seeking greater input

from hill-tribe peoples on certain issues relating to natural resource management decision-making.

Fifth, both countries are committed to greater public participation in resource management and developing appropriate means to include them. The New Constitution in Thailand is quite specific in this regard.

Sixth, both countries recognise the importance of implementing sustainable approaches to rural development throughout the landscape. Vast areas of Canada are rural, with people dependent upon resource development. In Thailand, a large proportion of the population is engaged in agricultural activities. Environmental protection must take these important rural populations into account.

It is perhaps due to these similarities, most of which contrast markedly to the European context, that Thailand and Canada have established joint programs at many different levels including government sponsored aid projects, academic exchanges, student training and research projects to explore some of the challenges being faced in the field of environmental management.

Need for Environmental Protection

Every day brings greater scientific confirmation of the role that humanity is playing in changing global environmental systems. Now, however, it is not only scientists who are aware but also the general public, as the news is full of stories regarding the latest cyclone, flood and drought that not only seem, but actually are, occurring much more frequently and with greater intensity than in the past.

In the U.S., scientists have found that precipitation has increased by more than 10% this century, and a greater proportion is coming in storms. Insurance payments for Canadian weather disasters have been doubling every five to ten years, and payouts reached \$1.5 billion last year. There are now suggestions by the insurance industry, who are taking global climatic change very seriously, that the Canadian government establish a national disaster reduction fund of between \$100 to \$150 million. The insurance industry has also established its own research institute looking into weather-related issues, with over \$9 million in funding.

The bottom line here is that climatic change is very expensive to fix.

With these changes has come the realisation of the values that natural systems provide for society that we often don't take into account. They create our atmosphere, so that we can breath, influence the weather and regulate the hydrological cycle for our agriculture, and provide many raw materials from bamboo shoots and hardwood timbers to medicines to support our livelihoods and well-being.

The total value of these services is difficult to measure. One team of scientists from Cornell University calculated total values as over \$2.9 trillion per year, or 4

times the total value of the British economy. A more recent estimate from the University of Maryland put the value as 10 times greater than the earlier estimate and larger than the total global economy.

What is obvious from this is that although we can measure the distance between the earth and the moon down to the nearest half centimetre, but we are only just starting to approximate the value of the biosphere that keeps us all alive.

It is only as we pass the 6 billion mark for global population on our way towards the end of this millennium that we are becoming aware of the value of these ecosystem services, and the need to make sure that they are protected as a fundamental contribution to sustainable development for this and future generations. Protected area systems occupy a small percentage of our landscapes, but in these small areas we protect ecosystem values from the market values that predominate on the majority of the landscape. Not developing these areas is a fundamental plank for sustainable development in the landscape as a whole.

Need for Enhanced Knowledge

The so-called “Green Revolution” has enabled food production to keep up with burgeoning populations for the last forty years, until very recently. Besides hybridisation of crop plants, a major tool in the Green Revolution was the addition of fertilisers. Without fertilisers, starvation would be a reality in many more parts of the global than it is now.

However, there were costs to these innovations that we didn’t realise at the time. Nitrogen fertilisers, for example, denitrify back into gaseous state as nitrous oxides. Nitrous oxides are a main agent involved in the catalytic destruction of the ozone layer in the atmosphere. Destruction of the ozone later lets in more ultra-violet radiation from the sun, which in turn reduces crop growth, which reduces agricultural productivity.

The point of the foregoing is to emphasize that the impacts that we are having on global systems are not only very large scale, but that they are also very complicated. In order to work towards sustainable development it is necessary to have greater scientific understanding of how environmental systems work and how to implement optimal management activities. Such understanding calls for the investment of considerable societal resources in education and capacity building. We can no longer blunder along under the auspices of a benign and all accommodating environment. The environment is no longer able to absorb the costs of our mistakes without major retribution. Global climatic change, declining biodiversity, fisheries collapse, pollution are all telling us this.

In the future we will have much less room for mistakes, much less environmental elasticity. We will need our best brains, to be well trained and well-equipped in order to advise society on the right moves to stay on the tightrope on which we now find ourselves. Universities must play key role in

meeting this challenge and our graduates and faculty must rank amongst the best in the region, if not the world.

Need for Better Implementation

It is not enough to merely know the right road down which we need to move, we must also have the right vehicles in which to travel. This task, the implementation of programmes that best serve societal needs over the long run is a fundamental role of government agencies. The new knowledge and the new road require dynamic agencies constantly reacting to the challenges of the future and not mired in the old ways of doing things.

We need to try new programmes, listen to new voices, accept and plan for uncertainty. We need, in short, to invest in agency renewal that will look at different ways of doing things. This is not to suggest that all is static within government offices, but rather to suggest that the scale and pace of change will need to be far greater than anything that has ever been considered before.

Do not Forget the People

For too long society has been split into two groups, the “**planners**” and the “**planned for**”. The planners were usually government agencies charged with delivering state services throughout the country. The “**planned for**”, were the rest. Unfortunately there was often little contact between these two groups that, in theory at least, were closely related. The planners forgot who they were ultimately planning for; the “planned for” were never told what was being planned for them.

Inevitably conflicts started to arise between these two groups and between other groups in society regarding delivery of many state programs. Demonstrations, and even mass unrest became common over many government projects, dam building, pipelines, national park establishment, power stations and many others. Part of this conflict arises from a misunderstanding of the need for the development. Conflict also arises from disagreement about how the costs and benefits of the projects are calculated and fundamental differences in opinion about such issues as the rights of the state versus the rights of individuals and visions of the future for Thailand.

These kinds of concerns can no longer be swept under the rug. They must be brought out and discussed freely in public sessions. The new constitution makes it quite clear that increased public involvement in decision-making is a right for all Thai people. The challenge now is to find appropriate ways of re-weaving the people back into the fabric of societal decision-making.

A New Kind of Development

Thailand experienced world-leading economic growth rates through the 1980's and into the 90s. Then came the financial crash. Although this has been a very difficult period of transition for many, the experience has not all

been negative. It has turned attention, prompted by the wise words of **His Majesty**, towards a more self-reliant kind of development that focuses on values rather than economics. This is exactly the kind of development that the world needs going into the second millennium. So out of the crisis has risen opportunity, and that opportunity is for Thailand to refocus its development goals with a greater understanding of the need for environmental values and protection to go hand in hand with social values towards a more fulfilling future.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the tittle of my talk was the role of environmental protection in national development. It should be clear that I think that environmental protection is a prerequisite for national development in the future. We should not look at protected areas as being locked away, wasted to human use. Instead we should see them as an investment in our children and in the future.

Over the next 50 years it is likely that global populations may double again. Even with the stable and predictable Earth of the past, the difficulties with providing livelihoods for this number of people would be chilling. However, on the new, unpredictable Earth with increasing uncertainty regarding weather patterns, floods, droughts and cyclones, it is going to be a very challenging world for our children to inherit.

Two things we can bequeath them are, first, to implement policies to minimise the human-caused changes to the environmental fabric of the planet, and second, to protect small areas of our landscape as national parks and other protected areas that will help absorb these changes and restore ecosystem processes in the future.

This much we owe to our children, and our children's children.