

# TRANSLATING ENVIRONMENTAL AWARENESS INTO ACTION

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## **Introduction**

I would like to thank Hitachi for this opportunity to talk about the environment with the cream of today's youth in the Asia Pacific region. Looking at all the young faces here today brings back memories of the sixties when I was active in campus journalism and politics. I remember writing about every hot issue then, but surprisingly never about the environment! Perhaps it is reflective of my generation's failure to heed early the call for balancing our planet's natural ecosystems.

It was not until graduation that I witnessed societal action for the environment. I had the opportunity to go on a study tour of Sweden for six months after graduation. There I saw for the first time communities cleaning up their lakes and preventing households and industries from further throwing their wastes into the water systems. This was the beginning of the World Environmental Movement, culminating in the first international conference on Human Environment in Stockholm in 1972. That event started our yearly observance of Environment Day every June 5.

What moved these environmental pioneers to take the lead in cleaning up their lakes? First, it was their sense of decency and self-respect as a people. They looked at waste in their surroundings as an affront on their wellbeing and values. Second, I believe it was their strong sense of history. They did not want to repeat the mistakes of the past.

## **Lessons of history**

Indeed, history is replete with stories of civilizations that achieved great heights only to be wiped out from the face of the Earth. They were vanquished not by military conquests but by their reckless abuse of the environment.

The great Mayan Empire, which is now Mexico, Guatemala, Belize and Honduras, is a prime example. It was the most advanced society in the pre-Columbian New World. The anchor of their economy was a very advanced agricultural system that would rival even today's modern farming methods. They developed elevated plots that would be fed with nutrients through osmotic pressure from the marsh water around or from wells as deep as 75 meters. Thus, even in the deep forests, they could sustain a population in the millions. But they failed to see the natural symbiosis between the forests and their farming systems. The decline started around 650 to 850 A.D., when they drastically over-cut their forests. They needed the wood to burn and make bricks and glazed plasters for their temples. The deforestation caused floods and soil erosion. Thus, they lost their upland farms and their capacity to produce their own food. What was amazing was that they could not see the signs on the wall. For another two centuries, as millions starved and died of malnutrition and disease, they still continued to cut their forests to build their temples using wood-burned bricks.

The lessons of history from the Mayan Empire are relevant today in our region because the problems that brought about their demise are the same problems that define our environmental situation today: population outstripping resources, deforestation, soil erosion, and decreased areas of useable farmlands; competition for fewer resources and the failure of leaders to act on the real problems. They could not translate awareness of the problems into action.

## **Current regional situation**

What is the environmental situation in the region today?

On the plus side, the region has a strong economic growth led by the economic “tigers” – Japan, Singapore, Malaysia and Thailand. This means a stronger capacity to implement policies for the environment. Another positive effect of this growth is a steady improvement in social equity, as reflected in the UN's Human Development Index for the region.

On the plus and minus side, we continue to lose our natural forests but at a lower rate. While the natural forests are being reduced, we have increased the area of tree plantations. This means that while we insure our future supply of wood, the conversion of the natural forests translates to reduced habitat for endangered flora and fauna. Indonesia, the biggest timber producer, is losing as much as 600,000 to 1.3 million hectares of its natural forests a year due to logging and land conversions.

Also on the plus and minus side, we have moved from our rural haunts to the cities. This is causing congestion and sanitation problems in slums that aggravate health problems. However, recent tests showed reduction in certain air pollutants over some cities. Industrialization, which attracts workers to the cities, continues to cause significant air and water pollution. On the plus side, there is a reduction in the industrial use of ozone-depleting substances that cause global warming.

On the purely negative side, we continue to ravage our lands due to pressures from population growth and increased use of chemical fertilizers and pesticides in agriculture, unabated extraction of natural resources and the impact of natural calamities like earthquakes, floods, typhoons and the December 2004 tsunami in the region.

Another item on the negative side is the sorry state of our coral reefs. They are the richest in the world and yet the most threatened. Indonesia and the Philippines represent more than 80% of the region's coral reef areas. And yet 98% in the Philippines and 86% in Indonesia are under medium and heavy threats. The heaviest threats are caused by unsustainable fishing. Other threats are conversions of mangroves and wetlands for agriculture and aquaculture.

## **Key issues that can sustain action for the environment**

How can we achieve the region's goal of sustainable development? I believe there are two complicated sets of issues that need to be addressed. The first, especially for the developing economies, is to break the vicious cycle of poverty, environmental degradation and poor economic growth. These three inter-related forces are mutually reinforcing. And the second is to build a framework of good ecological governance. This means having the right environmental policies, capable institutions to implement them and governance standards that encourage devolution, participation, transparency and accountability in managing natural resources. Unless these issues are properly addressed, no amount of awareness, culture, action plans and individual initiatives can be sustained. An example was Thailand during the sixties and seventies. Even with its Buddhist culture, it lost more than two thirds of its forests due to the country's policy of encouraging logging and trade of timber. But when the policy was reversed during the eighties, they recovered more quickly than the others.

### Economic growth, population and poverty

It is possible for a nation with a solid culture of conservation to preserve its environment without being rich. Sri Lanka has depended on the strength of its Buddhist culture to conserve its natural resources even as it labours to achieve economic growth. But countries with robust

economies like Japan, Singapore, Malaysia and Thailand are in a better position to sustain anti-poverty and environmental programs.

Next to having a healthy economy, uncontrolled population growth puts too much pressure on the land, reducing the carrying capacity of its ecosystems. This is starkly seen in the Philippines and Indonesia, where forests are giving way to burgeoning upland communities. Before the 1990s, Thailand and the Philippines were like twins in Southeast Asia. They had similar population and economic figures. But Thailand succeeded, where the Philippines continued to fail, in maintaining a population growth that is in line with its resources. This made all the difference in Thailand's economic upsurge. Meanwhile, Malaysia has perhaps the ideal situation. There is no other country in the world with a better balance between its population and its natural resources than Malaysia.

After the economy and population issues, poverty is the driving force causing the uncontrolled loss of natural resources. Because of poverty, fishermen often look for an easy catch to meet their day to day needs and resort to dynamite fishing that destroys coral reefs. Similarly, upland farmers clear the forests for slash and burn agriculture. These unsustainable practices are prevalent in Thailand, Indonesia and the Philippines.

#### Good governance standards

Even as the large issues like the economy, population and poverty are addressed, the goal of sustainable development cannot be achieved without good governance. Key players in the region admit that this is the area where we have advanced well. Good environmental governance involves three areas. First, proper environmental policies must be in place. Second, the institutions to implement them are established. And third, the standards of governance must uphold participation, accountability, transparency, and the principle of subsidiarity. Simply, subsidiarity means that the most important decisions must be made on the lowest level possible. For instance, the Philippines has all the necessary laws to conserve its forests. But poor governance on the local level has allowed the proliferation of illegal logging, destruction of fishing grounds due to dynamite fishing, and conversion of mangrove areas into fishponds to serve the demands of the local elite.

In sum, translating awareness to action for the environment can be sustained only under a framework that balances all the above key factors.

#### **Case of good governance**

Having been an observer of environmental governance in the region for the past two decades, I must say that we have reasons to hope. The region has achieved successes on major challenges. Japan had shown in its early history how to restore its forests after it has completely lost it. Singapore has shown successes in the use of market instruments to mainstream environmentalism in its economy. Thailand surged ahead economically after controlling its population and putting stop to cutting its natural forests. Indonesia has pioneered in community organizing on the urban level, allowing them with the lead of BAPEDAL to monitor and thus effectively pressure nearby factories to reduce their pollution. Even the Philippines, with larger problems than the others, has its own successes.

A case in point is the province of Nueva Vizcaya located in northern Philippines about 250 kilometers from Manila. It has a population of 367,000 (2000 census), 52% of which are living below the poverty line (1992). This was much higher than the national average at that time of 36%. Most of the poor belonged to indigenous tribes. The province has a total area of 437,880 hectares, 79% of which are forestlands. It is therefore an important watershed. In fact, it supports six major dams and hydroelectric facilities located in nearby provinces. But in 1995, 75% of the forest zone was completely denuded and the rivers were beginning to run dry. Not only was the forest heavily denuded, it was being squatted on by more than a 100,000 migrants from the nearby provinces.

This was the dire situation in 1995 that confronted Rodolfo Agbayani, the newly elected governor of the province. In my visits to the provinces as Secretary of Environment and Natural Resources, I would normally meet with governors and I usually ask them: "What is your vision for your province?" While most would grope for answers, Governor Agbayani was different. He had a ready reply. I remember clearly what he said: "Within nine years the province will be the largest producer of fruits in the region."

In fact, he was able to deliver on this vision. Not only did Nueva Vizcaya become the biggest fruit producer in northern Philippines, he caused the replanting of the previously denuded forestlands by working closely with the 146 upland communities. In the process, poverty incidence was reduced from 52% to just 11% -- the most dramatic social transformation of any province in the country. What was the secret of this performance and why could not this be done by similarly denuded provinces?

The first reason is leadership. He had a vision for his province while others just go about their official functions. He worked on long-term goals rather than stop-gap measures. As a leader, he interpreted national policies into workable modalities on the ground. For instance, he offered the upland squatters a stewardship contract which allowed them to harvest the fruits of the trees that they planted.

The second is good governance. He knew the limitations of local governments. He managed to remedy the basic lack of technical know-how of his staff by getting a grant from the USAID to provide technical advice. The livelihood system of tree planting and fruit growing matched the cultural traits and preferences of the upland people. He used a participatory approach, involving the communities from beginning to end. He gave priority assistance to organized communities that have demonstrated initiative and interests in the project. Due to his goal of empowering every community, leadership was developed on the lowest levels.

Like nature, the translation of awareness to strategy and action plan must be a well balanced management of a good governance process. This was the secret of the Nueva Vizcaya success story.

## **Closing**

In conclusion, we can say that the region has made some gains in environmental performance and great strides in good governance. But sustainability or the optimum efficiency in the use of environmental resources has yet to be achieved. For this reason, it is important to develop instruments to monitor a country's level of achievement on the run up toward sustainability. This has been done with the Human Development Index for social equity. A similar one, like the emergent Environmental Sustainability Index, would fill up the missing element. A sustainability index ranks every country in how well it manages its environmental resources. From experience, countries perform better when they know where they stand in comparison to their neighbors.

Based on our success stories, the most critical element in the attainment of sustainable development is the impact of personal leadership. We need leaders in all levels and in every sector to translate into action what we feel most deeply in our hearts. That is why I am elated to be part of a worthy initiative like this – to be with the young leaders of our region. It is my hope that as you choose your careers either in government, the business sector or in civil society, you will take up the challenge of environmental leadership in your own sector. I am confident that you will do better than we did in our own generation. ###