

OCEAN LIFE SYMPOSIUM 11:
OCEAN LIFE ON THE BRINK

THE UNIVERSE REQUIRES AN ETERNITY

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This Symposium is about ‘OCEAN LIFE ON THE BRINK’. In this Keynote Address, however, I want to set that predicament within the wider danger that faces all life on Planet Earth – indeed, within the context of endangered Earth itself. The threat that faces life in the Oceans – by far the largest part of our planet – is but one facet of the larger threat to all life which has become the inescapable challenge of our time: inescapable, because there may be no time if we falter now.

The United Nations General Assembly has declared 2010 as the International Year of Biodiversity. It did so with a view of engaging people all over the world (and therefore us in the Caribbean) in the fight to protect life on Earth. The goals are to raise awareness about the importance of biodiversity, to communicate the human costs of its ongoing loss, and to get people, particularly today’s young people - who will be tomorrow’s victims of our wrongs - involved in efforts to conserve and sustainably use our natural heritage. As the slogan of the International Year reminds us, “Biodiversity is life. Biodiversity is OUR life.”

Our lives are intertwined with nature. Most of the oxygen we breathe comes from plankton in the oceans of the world and the lush forests around the globe. We use plants and animals to produce our food, drink, clothing, building materials, fuel and medicines. Living systems provide the services we take for granted such as clean air, fresh water, fertile soil, breakdown of natural waste, plant pollination and regulation of climate. Biodiversity is all around us, it shapes and enriches our way of life. The natural world, diverse but indivisible, is our world.

However, biodiversity is being lost at an unprecedented rate, threatening the capacity of the planet to continue providing its goods and services. The current rate of extinction is estimated to be up to 1,000 times higher than the natural rate of extinction. We may be entering a new era of the sixth global mass extinction of species and the first to be generated by human beings.

If the current rate of loss continues, an area of 1.3 billion hectares worldwide – about 1.5 times the size of the United States – will completely lose its original biodiversity levels by 2050; a rate of loss now being compounded

by climate change. More than 30 per cent of all known species may disappear before the end of this century owing to climate change.. We need to act now to halt this current loss of biodiversity and to ensure a quality of life for future generations.

The Heads of State and Government attending the World Summit on Sustainable Development, held in Johannesburg in August/September 2002, agreed to substantially reduce the rate of loss of biodiversity by 2010 – by this year. This commitment was confirmed by the 154 Heads of State and Government at the 2005 World Review Summit – including heads of Government from the Caribbean. In all that follows hereafter in this Symposium, let us remember that our Governments, in our name, have solemnly committed themselves and us to changing course. This should not be a time for argument; but a time for action.

Those world leaders – our leaders - will meet again in September of this year in a special segment of the UN General Assembly when before them will be the Third Global Biodiversity Outlook produced just over a week ago [10 May 2010] under the Convention on Biological Diversity. The Outlook should both shame and energize them. Massive further loss of biodiversity is becoming increasingly likely, and with it, a severe reduction of many services essential to human societies as several ‘tipping points’ are approached in which ecosystems shift to alternative, less productive states from which it may be difficult or impossible to recover. The warning is clear: ‘Natural systems that support economies, lives and livelihoods across the planet are at risk of rapid degradation and collapse, unless there is swift, radical and creative action to conserve and sustainably use the variety of life on Earth.’

“As we enter the golden age of human evolution, it becomes obvious that each man has two countries, his own and Planet Earth.” Those were the concluding words of the introduction to *Only One Earth*, the book Barbara Ward wrote with Rene Dubos to set the scene for the United Nations Conference on the Human Environment in 1972 in Stockholm – the first global effort to come to grips with environmental problems.

The vision of one world was not new. It had helped to inspire the League of Nations earlier in the century. Even before that, social and political scientists, philosophers, religious leaders and others had advanced the idea

of the family of man. But the notion of my country, the planet, was different; it looked not only beyond countries, but beyond people. It looked in fact to our earthly habitation and the whole of creation, with new insights of a planetary order founded on the concept of a shared biosphere and secured by strategies for survival. The era of the environment was beginning.

More than a decade later, I was a member of the Independent Commission on Environment and Development, chaired by Norway's Gro Harlem Brundtland. The Commission's establishment reflected growing concern about environmental degradation worldwide. In our Report, issued in 1987, we put the case starkly:

Environmental trends ... threaten to radically change, to alter, the planet ... threatening the lives of many species upon it including the human species.

A central thrust of our Report, 'Our Common Future', was that we need to see the planet as we are accustomed to seeing our countries. Astronauts have seen, and so have we through their eyes, how meaningless our national borders are in cosmic terms – mere markings on turf that have nothing to do with the biosphere, frail partitions in our single planetary home. We allow these lines drawn on the planet for the organisation of human society to limit our perception of human society itself, and to dominate our view of the planet. The perception of the whole world as our country, as the integral planet whose fortunes and whose future are our own, is sublimated to our narrow national interests and concerns. But that larger view has become essential to survival in any of the planetary spaces we now call our own, and in the larger country of the planet to which we all belong.

The secret of Earth's success in sustaining life, or as some would say, of being a live planet, has been its ability to develop in slow stages mechanisms that protect it from the sun's destructive radiation and yet enable it to use the sun's life-giving energy. As *Only One Earth* reminded us: "progressively, over billions of years, defenses and mechanisms arose to permit the emergence on a lifeless planet of the covering of living things. We have come to call this protective covering of life – on land, in the oceans and in the air – the biosphere. "

What industrial man has been doing over recent centuries is to break down those planetary defenses. We have disrupted the process that changed earth from a lifeless planet to a life-sustaining one. At first, we were unwitting

agents of our own damnation. But we are no longer innocents. Against the charge of ecocide, the human species will soon have no defence.

This culpability drew from Greenpeace some twenty years ago the following sweeping indictment:

Modern Man has made a rubbish tip of Paradise. He has multiplied his numbers to plague proportions, caused the extinction of 500 species of animals, ransacked the planet for fuels and now stands like a brutish infant gloating over this meteoric rise to ascendancy, on the brink of the final extinction and of effectively destroying this oasis of life in the solar system

Crusading hyperbole, perhaps, but it makes a valid point about our excesses and their calamitous consequences, and about the arrogance of refusing to admit responsibility.

We will not shed that arrogance or irresponsibility while we fail to understand human origins in the natural order; the place of our species in the vista of time. The Greenpeace image of a ‘brutish infant’ is not inexact. Humanity is the baby of the biosphere; the newcomer in garden of Earth. If we scale down geologic time proportionately using a year for every fifty million years, Earth is ninety-two years. For a third of that time it was a barren wasteland spinning endlessly in space. Then came the first stirring of life in Earth’s oceans when cells began to replicate. It took another fifty years for the first animals and plants to emerge - seven years ago. It is only in the last eight hours of our scaled down geologic calendar that modern man, *homo sapiens*, spread over the planet. Put it another way: Earth’s garden has been rolled and watered by the elements for ninety-two years; we have been in it for less than a day.

By the time we came, the garden was a bounteous place; flora and fauna had emerged in wondrous, bewildering and exquisitely interlocking variety. Humanity is the newcomer; but already in that geologic day we have done more than any other species to change the ancient garden for good but also for ill. We developed agricultural skills within the last few hours and greatly enlarged the garden’s capacity to sustain life. And within the last five minutes we began our industrial revolution – at once both wonderfully creative and incredibly destructive.

The crisis of survival we now face arises from this propensity for destruction, including self-destruction. We have become our own scourge, threatening the capacity to survive not only of ourselves but of the very garden and all its bio-diversity that gave us life..

The truth is that we have been wanton guests, believing ourselves superior to every other species; but how utterly brief has been our presence on the planet in the scale of time, and perhaps how transient it will be. These truths should alert us to the humility we lack as newcomers and remind us of our duty to the long process of evolution that preceded, produced and nurtured us. In his *Historia de la Eternidad* Latin Amrica's George Luis Borges captured all this poignantly when he wrote:

The Universe requires an eternity.... Thus they say that the conservation of this world is a perpetual creation and that the verbs 'conserve' and 'create' so much at odds here, are synonymous in Heaven.

To make them synonymous on Earth as well is a central challenge to us – and to you in this Symposium; for all I have said is basic to the ambition you must have for your work here as you look at 'Ocean Life on the Brink'.

With 75 percent of earth's water in the Oceans, one would expect that human impact in this area would be sensitive to sustainability, acknowledging, as we must, how much the Oceans contribute to sustaining life on the Planet. In truth, for most of human history, the matter of the sustainability of the Ocean's resources has hardly entered our minds. When Thomas Gray wrote in the 18th century of "the dark unfathom'd caves of ocean" he reflected our basic assumption about the limitless resources of the sea. Certainly, we have behaved as if the ocean's bounty is limitless – its capacity to absorb maltreatment infinite. In his relationship with the oceans, as in so many relationships with nature, *Homo sapiens* has been neither *sapiens* nor *sentiens*, neither wise nor caring.

Throughout his history, man has used the Oceans as he pleased. It has been both highway and harvest ground. Some of his early accomplishments entailed voyaging across the oceans – even though, more often than not he was an unworthy visitor at journey's end. But he was not just a traveler; he was a hunter-gatherer as well. The 'fishes of the sea' were his abundant prey; but at first his taking of them was but part of a natural order of depletion and replacement. We have, however become excessively

voracious in our hunting of the bounty of the Oceans – and we have ravaged them in other ways as well. Now, as we intensify our greed and aggression we are at a threshold that we cross at our peril: the extinction of noble species like whales, a despoliation that diminishes the Oceans’ capacity to be life sustaining. Again, it is the scale and pace of our exploitation that makes the difference. We are moving rapidly to the limits of sustainability of the Oceans’ fish resources on which we have relied.

The appetite of the rich for animals, sometimes to the point where the survival of entire species is threatened, is well illustrated by the sordid example of whales, highly intelligent mammals with an ability to communicate with each other over large distances by means of a complex language. They are a special jewel in the crown of life. While they have long been hunted by some non-technological peoples like the Inuit of North America, the numbers these people want or need are too small to imperil the species. But whales are endangered by industrialized whale hunting, which is still carried out by countries and people who should know better – particularly by Japan.

Japan has persisted in chasing down whales long after most of the world decided that it was both morally repugnant and utterly unnecessary for the food it yielded. But they are not moved by the moral argument and consider whale meat to be exotic food. It is a blot on our global governance that human society in its overwhelming numbers cannot ban this perversity outright and cleanse our civilization of this stain. I am disturbed that some of our smallest Caribbean countries join Japan in resisting global prohibitions in the International Whaling Commission – and not for traditions like those of the Inuit, but for reasons less defensible. Our Region would better serve the cause of global conservation, as well as our own economic interests, by distancing ourselves from this lingering defilement of the Oceans.

But I must allow your Symposium to begin. With climate change now galvanizing human action – although Copenhagen did not inspire confidence in our will to act – it may be there is a better chance that the larger challenge to human survival will be met. It would be a tragic irony, however, if in the end, going the way we have sent so many other species, humanity settled for oblivion masquerading as eternity.