

(reprinted with permission from the Guardian, 27 May 1982)

A beanfeast that bore fruit

Ten years ago this month the world was heading for Stockholm. For the first time in its history the United Nations was about to stage a major international conference on a topic of global importance. It was to be called the UN Conference on the Human Environment; it had been in preparation for two years. There was no precedent for such a jamboree: organisers, participants, and camp followers were making up the rules as they went along. The UN had appointed a maverick Canadian, named Maurice Strong, as Conference Secretary General; his unorthodox approach made the UN's stodgier bureaucrats blanch. The Conference Secretariat adopted a logo and a slogan: Only One Earth. They commissioned a popular book with this title, under the joint authorship of Barbara Ward and Rene Dubos. Preparatory committees laid out an agenda and drafted a thick sheaf of working documents, among them a "Declaration on the Human Environment" to be debated and, if possible, endorsed by all the participating governments of the UN.

Even before the conference opened, however, controversies were already a-boil. The People's Republic of China had agreed to attend the conference as a member of the UN, emerging at last from its long isolation. But the Soviet Union insisted that East Germany, although not a UN member, should be admitted as a full participant at the conference. When the East Germans were excluded the Soviets pulled out, and took the rest of the Eastern bloc countries with them, leaving the conference "only three-quarters of an earth" as one wag noted.

While the diplomats were jockeying for position, so were many other interested parties. National governments were invited to prepare and submit reports on the state of the environment in their countries; the national reports rolled in, each government vying to outdo all the others in lauding its own environmental sensibilities. To be sure, there were environmental problems; but each government had them well under control, with even better things to follow.

Environmental activists look a less sanguine view of affairs. When the UN conference was announced, the initial reaction of activist organizations was one of deep scepticism: just what the environment needs, a beanfeast for well-fed diplomats. But Strong and his aides soon let it be known that - no matter how national governments might feel about it - the conference secretariat would welcome involvement by everyone interested in the issues, including accredited UN non-governmental organizations, other organisations, and even private individuals.

Furthermore the secretariat, with the help of the Swedish Government, would make official provision for such involvement - not of course in the official intergovernmental conference itself, but in an Environment Forum organized and financed from within the conference proper.

Swedish activists, unsatisfied with the "official" unofficial environment forum, in turn organized a People's Forum. While the thousands of diplomats descending on Stockholm moved into the Grand Hotel and other posh hostleries, further thousands of be-jeaned and sandalled environmentalists thronged into a tent city, set aside by the authorities, to keep the kempt and the unkempt out of each other's hair.

One group of environmentalists nevertheless decided to meet the official conference on its own terms. Friends of the Earth, then newly fledged in the US, the UK, France, Sweden and elsewhere, teamed up with the *Ecologist* magazine to publish a daily tabloid newspaper reporting the conference doings. They called the paper the *Stockholm Conference Eco*. The conference secretariat gave the independent *Eco* its blessing and agreed that copies could be distributed free to all delegates at hotels. The *Eco* proved to be an excellent vantage point from which to observe the machinations and manoeuvrings of the conference proper and indeed of the tumult of other activities also in progress.

Amid much pomp and ceremony the conference was duly opened, on June 5, 1972. But it was not long before all the grandiose affirmations of devotion to the environment ran head-on into conflicts of interest of every kind. Certain central themes quickly surfaced. The industrial countries in which "The environment" had first become an issue had come to Stockholm to talk about air and water pollution, wildlife conservation, and other environmental problems of industrial society.

But the Third World countries lost no time in underlining their disagreement with this narrow interpretation of the issue. For the Third World, problems of "the environment" were bound up inextricably with problems of development. Third World countries declared again and again that for them the worst pollution was "the pollution of poverty." They would not accept "environmental" constraints on industrial development which their countries needed for advancement. Third world and industrial countries alike laid great stress on the preservation of their "national sovereignty": their right to do whatever they saw fit in pursuit of national interests, which they reserved the right to identify and determine.

The focus of these disagreements was the draft Declaration on the Human Environment. Almost as soon as the conference opened, it was made clear that the draft would not long survive. A working party was set up, to meet in secret sessions in parallel with the rest of the conference, to prepare a new Declaration.

Similar controversies engulfed the other two major proposals put before the conference, the Environment Fund and the Plan of Action. The Third World participants wanted more money for the fund, but wanted also to have a determining voice in how it was to be spent. The industrial countries, who were to be invited to put up the money, did not take kindly to the Third World's interpretation of the proposal. Other UN agencies were discreetly but assiduously hostile to the idea of establishing yet another UN agency, which might infringe their various prerogatives, and even, heaven forbid, cut into their funding.

While these issues of principle hung in the air, two specific issues in particular caught the imagination of official and unofficial participants alike: whaling and nuclear weapons testing. In the absence of the Soviet Union, Japan, the other major whaling nation, found itself before the bar of world opinion.

The whales became a sort of cetacean mascot for the conference. The environmental activists staged a massive rally in support of the whales; the world media were delighted to be able to picture Maurice Strong, the conference Secretary General, in the torchlight parade led by a bus masquerading as a lifesize black whale. After heated debate in committee, the conference passed overwhelmingly a resolution decrying the slaughter of the great whales and calling for a ten-year moratorium on whaling.

The question of nuclear testing likewise focused on one malefactor country: France, still exploding nuclear bombs in the atmosphere above Moruroa in French Polynesia. Whereas the unofficial environmentalists made the running in the battle for the whales, the battle against atmospheric testing was led by the circum-Pacific governments, notably New Zealand, Australia, and Peru, with Japan this time on the side of the angels.

China, the only other country still testing weapons in the atmosphere, made one of many quixotic interventions, to declare that there was a crucial difference between nuclear weapons in the hands of "imperialist, colonialist and neo-colonialist" countries and those in the hands of peace-loving people's democracies - China in particular. The US and the UK, who had put their nuclear tests under the Nevada carpet, kept their heads down and let the other countries fight it out. Once again the conference passed by a large majority a resolution condemning nuclear testing in the atmosphere. What with the endless wrangling almost everywhere else, in both official and unofficial forums, the near-unanimity on whales and nuclear tests was welcome indication that there were still possibilities for near-global agreement on at least some environmental issues.

Meanwhile what of the Declaration on the Human Environment? The Declaration was not, of course, intended to be binding on UN member countries, merely a statement of principles like the UN Charter itself. Nevertheless, behind the closed doors of the secret sessions, the debate was savage. On the first Saturday of the conference, the *Eco* newspaper ran an exclusive: it revealed that China had submitted its own draft Declaration to the secret session, and it published almost the whole of the text. The Chinese Declaration revealed a very different approach to the environment from that of the original draft, emphasizing the political and indeed the ideological nature of the underlying assumptions hitherto taken for granted and unchallenged by most Western governmental participants.

Not one of the hundreds of correspondents from the world media who were haunting the corridors of the Old Parliament Building and the other conference venues picked up the *Eco* story. But within 48 hours the Chinese delegation confirmed that the *Eco* story and the draft text were essentially correct. From the following Monday morning onwards, the *Eco* table in the delegates' lounge was besieged by reporters wanting to know where the action would be during the days to come. The success of the *Eco* was one of many Stockholm innovations subsequently adopted by the UN and institutionalized at the series of UN conferences which followed.

The ferocity of the infighting over the Declaration made it doubtful right up to the last day of the conference whether any text at all would be agreed. The Plan of Action was being successively emasculated on behalf of "national sovereignty"; and the proposed Environmental Agency, referred to sardonically as "Strong's organ", was under relentless attack by other agencies and assorted vested interests. The environmental activists themselves were deeply divided about policies and strategies; the Forum, for instance, had seen ugly confrontations between adherents of Dr Barry Commoner and Dr Paul Ehrlich about the significance of population as an environmental issue. Anyone who had come to Stockholm expecting that "environmental conservation" was a Good Thing and politically anodyne had received a fortnight's intensive course in environmental *realpolitik*. To those who were at Stockholm the environment would never look the same again.

And yet, and yet - on the final day of the conference, the delegates did agree a text for the Declaration on the Human Environment. They did agree on a Plan of Action, albeit riddled with loopholes; and they did agree to establish the United Nations Environment Programme. Have these legacies of Stockholm accomplished, in the ensuing ten years, all they ought? Of

course not; but within those ten years the global environment has been recognised as a key policy issue for all the inhabitants of this embattled planet. That sweltering fortnight in Stockholm a decade ago put the environment on the map.

(Walter C Patterson's work on the Stockholm Conference Eco led to six years as a full-time staff member of Friends of the Earth.)

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