

The world environment — it's not too late

by David Spurgeon

This spring, the United Nations Environment Program in Nairobi, Kenya, published one of its most ambitious reports: the first comprehensive scientific study of the changes that have taken place in the global environment since the Stockholm Conference a decade ago.

The World Environment, 1972-1982, A Report by the United Nations Environment Programme, also marks the 10th anniversary of UNEP itself. Founded as a result of the Stockholm Conference, which was chaired by Canadian Maurice Strong, who also became the agency's first Executive Director, UNEP is the only headquarters of a United Nations agency located in a developing country.

Because of its anniversary nature, the study is being presented as a major document to a special session of UNEP's Governing Council in Nairobi in May. The culmination of three years' work by scores of scientists from around the world, and with input from UN member governments and from scientific institutions, it represents the state of environmental knowledge as of mid-1981.

As Moustafa Tolba, the Egyptian Executive Director of UNEP put it when proposing the study in 1976, it is meant to "evaluate the first 10 years in which mankind has consciously and cooperatively attempted the rational management of a small planet." A similar exercise will be repeated every five years, to form a set of quinquennial state-of-the-environment reports.

Much as UNEP might wish it, this is not the kind of document likely to prompt the volume of headlines produced by reports like *The Limits to Growth* (1972), or *The Global 2000 Report to the President, Entering the Twenty-First Century* (1981). For it is not predictive (it examines what has happened, not what may happen in the future), and although what it reports is often sombre, it does not cry doom. It is balanced, meticulous and scholarly.

The Report's primary audience includes research workers in the environmental field and policy-makers in government and international agencies. It was edited with the idea that scientifically literate laymen might read it too, but a more popular book was to have been written in parallel by Barbara Ward, the well-known British economist-journalist. When her death early in 1981 prevented this, the work was taken up by the American writer, Erik P.

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Eckholm. His book is being published by W.W. Norton and Co. Inc., New York.

UNEP's study is important not only because it is the first one of its kind ever attempted, but also because the scientific caution with which it was assembled serves to dampen down some of the wilder peaks of environmental hysteria that have been reached in recent years.

All is not lost

The book tells us, for example, that "despite serious local disruption, the world environment is not in imminent danger of collapse." That reassurance may seem to some almost comic, but to others, particularly headline skimmers, it will come as welcome news. Even UN Secretary-General U Thant, it may be recalled, warned in 1969 that there might be only 10 years left to improve the human environment.

The Report declares that today, at least for the developed countries, most of the technologies or organizational means for that improvement are known — as is their cost. What is needed now is to implement them. In its final chapter, "Conclusions", the report says:

Looking back to the Stockholm Conference, it is clear that humanity's perception of the natural world has changed. In 1972 problems tended to be seen individually, simplistically, and overwhelmingly from a developed western country's standpoint. In 1980 much has been learned about the subtle complexity of environmental systems. The inevitability of variation, the need to expect the unexpected (and allow room for it) and the interlocking of phenomena are widely accepted. It is now appreciated that all environmental systems are subject to natural change, that human action commonly modifies its rate and direction, and that few changes are irreversible — although the time scales and efforts required to achieve reversal vary widely. So is the fact that while some great global problems exist or may come to exist, pollution control, adequate food production and environmental resource conservation do not pose insuperable problems for developed countries — irrespective of whether they have market or centrally-planned economies. Here, the means for environmentally sound development exist and the question is whether they are being applied. But problems basic to life — affecting food, fuel, soil and water — are central to many developing countries and often force them into courses of action