

ENVIRONMENTAL LAW

There were several significant developments in the field of environmental law, both at the multilateral and bilateral level, during 1977. At the urging of Canada, the Governing Council of the United Nations Environmental Programme established a working group of experts on environmental law. The group has been given a broad mandate to review the work undertaken in this field by UNEP to date and to develop a programme of work in the environmental law field by concentrating on areas, such as liability and compensation for environmental damage, which are in need of study and subsequent action. By establishing this committee, UNEP has taken a positive step in institutionalizing environmental law at the multilateral level, in accordance with Principles 21 and 22 of the Stockholm Declaration on the Human Environment, directly related to the development of international law of the environment.

The working group on environmental law can be viewed as a recognition by UNEP of its responsibilities in this field. At the first meeting of the working group in Geneva in September, the Canadian delegate was elected to serve as its chairman for the first two-year period. The group decided to select as its first topic for study the field of liability and compensation for damage from marine pollution caused by offshore mining on the continental shelf. In carrying out its mandate the group will take fully into account the relevant work of the U.N. Law of the Sea Conference.

An environmental disaster, late in 1976, focused public and governmental opinion during 1977 on the need for stricter international anti-pollution standards. In December 1976, the Liberian tanker, the "Argo Merchant", spilled 7.5 million gallons of oil off Nanucket Island and this spill was followed by a rash of further spills in United States' coastal waters. Newly-elected President Carter responded a short time later with a call for stricter anti-pollution standards to abate the threat of marine pollution from ships. The Carter Administration presented to Congress a package proposal on marine pollution, which concentrated on six areas: