

It is estimated that the world's tropical rainforest will last another 30 years at the current rate of destruction.



We are looking at a time frame that expands far beyond the span of our individual lives. The reflection and especially the action for which we are to lay the political foundation here will not be undertaken for ourselves, or even for our contemporaries. For we can still waste the planet's resources, at our current pace, for a few decades more. We can still live, for a few years or a few decades more, with the acid rain that is only gradually destroying our forests, lakes, works of architecture and even ourselves; we can stand it if the climate heats up by a few degrees, if the biological diversity of our planet diminishes, if the pollution of our water continues, if the desertification of the planet accelerates — we will always have enough forests, enough water, enough natural resources. But we must realize that one day, when we as individuals have ceased to exist, it will no longer be possible to let things go on, or let things go, and that, ultimately, the storm will break on the heads of future generations. For them, it will be too late."

Secretary-General Boutros Boutros-Ghali,
Rio de Janeiro, 1992

Rio Earth Summit

With the aim of reconciling environmental and economic priorities as well as addressing the social aspects of sustainable development, the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development (UNCED) was held in June 1992. UNCED took place in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil. Its Secretary-General was Maurice Strong. It was the largest gathering of world leaders in the history of the UN and in addition was the most wide-ranging conference, dealing with more than 40 issues. Once again, Canada played a central role in making it a success. Representatives from government, the private sector and the non-governmental community took an active part in the meeting, and helped develop concrete proposals and initiatives.

Winning a place for non-governmental organizations in the work of the conference was an important achievement. Traditionally, these groups had operated on the fringes of UN negotiations, if they were allowed to participate at all. Canada believed that action on the results of UNCED would demand the participation of all sectors of society in every country. To earn that partnership, the conference had to be as open as possible to the contributions of environmentalists, development advocates, labour, business, women, Aboriginal people, youth and other interested segments of society. That breakthrough happened, and the conference results showed the value of their contribution.

UNCED also brought leaders from more than 100 countries together to agree to the Rio Declaration. This is a broad statement of 27 principles on the environment and development. The leaders also agreed to Agenda 21, an 800-page global action plan covering virtually every aspect of sustainable development. As well, they signed international conventions that commit countries to controlling harmful climate change and preserving the biological diversity of our planet.

Canada's Priorities

At international conferences, such as UNCED, countries often have specific issues they hope to resolve or make progress on. For Canada, the growing awareness of sustainable development and participation in conferences such as UNCED have helped bring two important issues to the forefront.

The first is better management of the world's fisheries. Canada's experience with the impacts of uncontrolled fishing outside its 200-mile exclusive economic zone led it to seize the opportunity provided by UNCED to bring the issue to the world's attention. The result was the call, supported by dozens of countries, for the establishment of a new legal regime that would govern high seas fishing so as to preserve fish stocks and the economies of the people who depend on them.

The second issue is the sustainable management of forests. Concerns over the rapid destruction of forests around the world led Canada to push for consistent forest use standards. UNCED provided a forum for countries to move closer to principles for