

When the United Nations started up in 1945, people usually saw environmental questions as local concerns. The few international agreements with environmental implications tended to be about wildlife preservation or specific cross-border issues. That has all changed.

People around the world have come to understand that environmental issues are global. Pollutants travel on the winds and in ocean currents and arrive far from where they started. People also understand the importance of a healthy environment to peace, prosperity and security. The relationship between environmental degradation and poverty has created incentives for action. All these factors have helped bring countries together to find solutions through the United Nations. Canada has strongly supported this approach because it believes that the international nature of environmental issues demands global action.

### **The Stockholm Conference**

The first major UN initiative on the environment came in 1972. The United Nations Conference on the Human Environment took place in Stockholm, Sweden. It was chaired by a Canadian, Maurice Strong, first executive director of the UN Environment Program (UNEP) and a former president of the Canadian International Development Agency (CIDA). The major impact of the conference was to place the environment firmly on the political agenda. Just prior to the conference, many countries, including Canada, created environment ministries to provide a focus for domestic action. Likewise, at the international level, the United Nations formed UNEP to fulfil the same role.

All these actions helped lead to broader environmental treaties and improved scientific and technical co-operation in this field. In the years that have followed, the world community has addressed a wider range of environmental issues. Canada has been at the centre of progress on topics as diverse as climate change, forests and fisheries.

### **The Brundtland Commission**

Concern for environmental issues took a large step forward with the United Nations World Commission on Environment and Development. This group, also known as the Brundtland Commission, completed its work with a major report in 1987. It established the notion of sustainable development — "development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs." That implies attention to both the amount of growth and the quality of that growth. Growth that comes at the expense of the environment is not sustainable. Sustainable prosperity comes from innovation, the intelligent use of resources and broad participation by all members of society.

Since the Brundtland Commission report was issued, more people have come to understand how tightly linked environmental and economic issues are. For example, many countries have found that pressures to expand farming have led to the too-rapid cutting of forests. This, in turn, has caused soil erosion, which in some cases has prompted desertification.



*Environment*