

The concept that our economic needs can only be met by ensuring the protection of natural systems, which has come to prominence since the Brundtland Commission embraced the term "sustainable development", evolved in the early 1980s. Its roots are much older: Thomas Malthus, the English political economist, warned in 1798 that population growth could not continue forever without outstripping available natural resources. In 1972, the year of the UN Conference on the Human Environment in Stockholm, the Club of Rome issued a report entitled *The Limits to Growth*, its message being that fresh water, arable land, forests, minerals and the oceans are "the ultimate determinants of the limits to growth on this earth".⁴

The *World Conservation Strategy*, prepared in 1980 by the International Union for the Conservation of Nature along with the UNEP and the World Wildlife Fund, warned that negative consequences for humankind would result from the destruction of natural resources. The *Strategy* advocates the conservation of living resources for sustainable development. The *World Charter for Nature*, which was passed by the UN General Assembly in 1982, elaborated upon the idea, and although it did not use the words "sustainable development", the concept as we now understand it is clearly reflected throughout. For example, the Charter reaffirms that we must use natural resources "in a manner which ensures the preservation of the species and ecosystems for the benefit of present and future generations".⁵

The theme of sustainable development became a cornerstone of the work of the Brundtland Commission, which began in 1983. Inherent in the use of this new term was the merging of environment and development issues. Richard Sandbrook, of the International Institute for Environment and Development, told the Commission in June 1985:

It has not been too difficult to push the environment lobby of the North and the development lobby of the South together. And there is now in fact a blurring of the distinction between the two, so they are coming to have a common consensus around the theme of sustainable development. . . In effect, there is a political community of interest, North and South, in the concept of sustainable development that you can build upon.⁶

The report of the Brundtland Commission, *Our Common Future*, was influential, and its importance gave new emphasis to the term. The Commission's definition of sustainable development is widely used: "development which meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs".⁷

The Brundtland Report called for an international conference to be convened by the UN General Assembly. This suggestion was considered and adopted by the UN General Assembly at the close of its 44th session in December 1989. The resolution, which established the conference, states that the purpose of the conference was to:

⁴ Club of Rome, *The Limits to Growth*, cited in Michael Keating, *Toward a Common Future*, Ottawa, Environment Canada, 1989, p. 24.

⁵ United Nations, *World Charter for Nature*, United Nations General Assembly Resolution 37/7, 28 October 1982.

⁶ World Commission on Environment and Development, *Our Common Future*, ("the Brundtland Report"), April 1987, Oxford University Press, p. 2-20.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. ES-7.