



Statements and Speeches

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ACID RAIN AN ISSUE OF CRITICAL IMPORTANCE

Address by Allan Gotlieb, Canadian Ambassador to the United States, to the Joint Session of the Houses of the Minnesota Legislature in the State Capitol Building, St. Paul, Minnesota, USA, May 3, 1983.

Using modern techniques of paleo-ecological research, archaeologists have recently put forward some novel ideas about one of the centres of Mayan civilization. This extraordinary community began at about the time of Homer's Greece, in what is today Guatemala. It grew during the following 17 centuries at a rate such that population approximately doubled every four centuries. Then, about 1 000 years ago, when it had reached its peak culturally, architecturally and agriculturally, the civilization suddenly collapsed. There is emerging evidence that the Mayans put such pressure on the accessible ecosystem that they robbed themselves of their natural endowment.

The principal ingredients of this tragedy seemed to be deforestation, and erosion and impoverishment of topsoil. The land could no longer support the people.

Similarly, North Africa, so much of which is now desert, was once the granary of the Roman Empire.

What has all this got to do with the Canadian Ambassador to the United States visiting the state of Minnesota in 1983 and having the pleasure and great honour of addressing a joint session of the state legislature? It is not to suggest we are latter day Mayans. I do not hold with predictions of imminent doom. We have learned from history — if not from that of the Mayans, then from our own. We know better, though we don't always do it as well as we might. As a distinguished member of your federal legislature once said, "pollution resembles what is euphemistically called a social disease — it is generally caused by human beings doing something they really enjoy without thinking through all the consequences".

My purpose in referring to the Mayans is to provide a backdrop to a basically optimistic position. It is my perception that the people of Canada and the people of Minnesota share a very similar view of our relationship with the natural environment.

We live close to the land and understand its importance, not just in environmental terms but in social and economic terms as well. Here in the north country with our thin soils, our slow growing forests, and our fragile aquatic ecosystems, we know and understand that our economic well-being rests ultimately on the health and fertility of the biosphere. We know and understand that we must act in ways that often go far beyond the arithmetic of cost benefit analysis so as to husband and nurture our endowment of natural resources. We must do this to ensure that the earth will continue to provide us with the products — nutritional, economic and aesthetic — that sustain our lifestyle.

We have learned a lot since the Mayan civilization collapsed. We know what we have to do to avoid similar mistakes. Traditional economic approaches simply aren't good enough when it comes to ensuring that our resource base does not weaken and shrivel under the pressure of overuse and misuse.
