



**Hon. G. Tissakuttiarachchi**  
*State Minister for Parliamentary Affairs*

## **Poverty, Environment and Janasaviya**

Due to various activities the environment in which man lives is becoming unsuitable for his existence. Improper utilization and control of natural resources which provide man's basic requirements are fast dwindling. Elements of environment like air, water etc. are becoming unsuitable for human consumption due to pollution. This is experienced not only in developing countries like Sri Lanka but also in developed countries.

Among the environmental problems are those arisen on account of development. Some problems are the cause of poverty. The destruction to nature, forest and wildlife caused by large scale development projects, water and air pollution due to industrial development super-urbanisation and the rapid exhaustion of natural resources are environment problems which are the results of development. Soil erosion, forest destruction caused by shift cultivation, increase of coastal sea erosion due to quarrying of coral reefs, water and air pollution due to non availability of toilet facilities and the spread of contagious diseases are the results of poverty, under-development, illiteracy, fast increasing population, are factors of the environment problem.

Both these aspects of the environment problem need solution. When development projects are undertaken they should be planned with the consideration for the environment, conservation of environment as far as possible. On the other hand every possible step should be taken to eradicate poverty. The environment problems in Sri Lanka's rural sector where the majority of people live are caused by poverty.

This is where President R. Premadasa's Janasaviya Programme becomes significant in the eradication of poverty. It is of benefit not only to the Janasaviya recipients but to all others as it will be a definite solution to environment problems that are a threat to all in the long run. When Janasaviya conquers poverty the environment problems will be solved.

# **Sri Lanka National Conservation Strategy – A Plan of Action for the Rational Utilization and Management of Natural Resources for Sustainable Growth**

**K. H. J. Wijayadasa**  
*Secretary to the President of Sri Lanka*

Environmental degradation of the type and magnitude in which it is experienced today is of comparatively recent origin in relation to our recorded history of over 2500 years. Our forefathers utilised and managed the country's natural resources in a rational and judicious manner. In Sri Lanka the destruction of the environment in response to short term economic interests began about a 150 years ago with the opening up of large areas of the hill country for plantation agriculture. Since then, environmental issues revolved round the use of the most valuable natural resource which is land. Deforestation and soil erosion have resulted in the depletion of the soil which has led to the removal of organic matter, a reduction of the water retention capacity, the receding of the water table and the periodic drying up of springs and water courses which were once perennial.

Not more than 50 years ago with the advent of industrialisation another dimension was added to environmental degradation. As a result of the unplanned and haphazard location and growth of polluting industries our water bodies, rivers and estuaries, coastal areas and even the atmosphere and the soil have been adversely affected. In fact, as recently as 25 years ago there weren't many who thought that our environment might be in jeopardy or that our natural resources could ever be exhausted.

In Sri Lanka today the degradation of the natural resource base on which we depend for our physical, spiritual and economic well-being continues unabated as witnessed by the following examples:

- (a) Unrestricted and uncontrolled coral mining has removed the first line of defence against the onslaught of the angry sea on land resulting in accelerated sea erosion, vanishing beaches, loss of species and habitat and of course the loss of income by way of depleted coastal fisheries and the loss of foreign exchange from tourism.
- (b) Very little of the mangroves are now left. They have been cut down for firewood, building materials and reclaimed for hotels and housing. With the destruction of the mangroves a valuable second line of defence against cyclonic fury, storm surge and tidal waves has been permanently removed. The linkages that existed between mangrove eco-systems and the coastal fisheries, the shore line and estuary protection have been disrupted.
- (c) High intensity chena cultivation has not only deforested well over 50% of the land area in the Dry Zone but has also pushed such lands to the brink of desertification. The unauthorised clearing of steep slopes and stream reservations in the hill country for high value cash crops, such as tobacco, potatoes and vegetables, have resulted in heavy erosion, earth slips and land slides.
- (d) In our quest for development we have not paid sufficient attention to the maintenance of essential ecological processes and life support systems. Nor have we paid sufficient attention to the preservation of genetic diversity and the sustainable utilisation of species and eco-systems.

It has been said that the most dramatic environmental degradation that is taking place around us is the result of a vicious circle of poverty, rapid population growth and the over exploitation and the shrinking of natural resources. Therefore, the utilisation and management of natural resources for sustainable growth assumes serious and complex proportions. Obviously, there is no simple solution nor is there a single solution. These are not problems that can be solved by legislation alone. Let us now examine some of the measures that can be adopted:

- (a) Poverty alleviation is one of the basic solutions to the problem of environmental degradation that has been set in motion by those living below the poverty line for the sake of survival. But poverty alleviation is intricately interwoven with economic development and the utilisation of natural resources both renewable and non-renewable. Therefore all programmes of poverty alleviation and economic development should be modelled on a National Conservation Strategy.
- (b) Another essential prerequisite to achieving sustainable growth is the adoption of a population policy in relation to carrying capacity of the country's resource base. In Sri Lanka the land-man ratio is very high compared to many a developing country.
- (c) The application of conventional economic theory in the economic planning process has also contributed to the continued degradation of the environment. Environment is being over exploited, degraded and polluted because environmental functions are seen as free goods and services. Therefore, it is high time that environmental parameters were incorporated into the totality of the national planning process. A functional eco-system evaluation must precede economic analysis.
- (d) Another important technique of resource management for sustainable growth is the application of environmental impact assessment, on all development programmes and projects. Sri Lanka has been one of the first few of the developing countries to have made environmental impact assessment mandatory for all development projects, both in the public and private sectors. This is not enough. We must also accept the principle that the polluter must pay for any adverse impacts on the environment until such time those adverse impacts are mitigated or eliminated.
- (e) Sooner or later we will have to think in terms of an integrated approach to national planning. The decision making process should take into account environmental as well as socio-economic factors.

The Sri Lanka National Conservation Strategy spells out the essential ingredients of a Plan of Action for the Rational Utilisation and Management of Natural Resources for Sustainable Growth. They are —

**(a) Land Use Planning**

Proper land utilization is the key to successful resource conservation and development. Because of the diminishing per-capita land availability, the land must be put to the best human benefit.

Land should be allocated to a sector only on a carefully evaluated priority basis. Land suitability and the sector's capability of contributing to socio-economic improvement being the criteria.

**(b) Soil Conservation**

It is necessary to replace the present Soil Conservation Act by a comprehensive "Land Use, Soil and Water Conservation Act" with wider scope and authority;

formulate a national land use plan based on an ecological understanding; and  
accord high priority to soil conservation in all land use activities.

**(c) Water Resources**

Review of existing legislation on stream and river bank reservations. Settlement should not be permitted in reservations;

afforestation of degraded watersheds and denuded catchments.

**(d) Forest Resources**

Identification of areas for protective forests and making them inviolate by statute;

scientific management of production of forestry units; and

giving protection status for all Man and Biosphere reserves.

**(e) Wildlife**

Wildlife conservation should be strengthened; including formulation of a comprehensive national policy; amendments to the Fauna and Flora Protection Ordinance; and establishment of inviolate protected areas in all agro-climatic zones.

**(f) Agriculture**

Agriculture should receive priority in national planning. A balanced approach is called for when expanding agricultural activities to prevent development at the expense of other resources such as natural forests, soil and water.

**(g) Population**

A balance has to struck between the population and the carrying capacity of the resource base.

**(h) Human Settlements**

Human settlements demand common amenities and facilities such as health, agriculture, irrigation, energy and industry. Among them

Provision of safe drinking water;

vector-borne disease control;

sustainable and improved farming systems;

water management;

woodlots for energy, agro forestry and conservation farming are important aspects.

**(i) Energy**

No land in the wet lowland and montane zones should be cleared for any development. At the same time attention should be drawn to the protection of stream reservations and prohibition on development of land over 1500 m (5,000 feet);

provide adequate finance in order to improve stream flow for irrigation and hydropower needs;

improvement of forest management for sustained yield and environmental protection;

better road maintenance in order to save fuel;

incentives for rail transport of goods;

extend rural electrification; and

develop and popularize fuel-efficient stoves.

**(j) Mineral Resources**

While stemming environmental hazards in mining, mineral deposits should be rationally utilized. It is necessary —

to bring about effective interaction between the mining and related sectors;

and formulate an effective environmental impact assessment system;

**(k) Coastal and Marine Resource Systems**

Six habitats influence the productivity of these systems. These are, coral reefs, beach systems, estuaries, lagoons, mangroves and seagrass beds.

Implementation of the coastal zone management plan;

identification of habitats requiring special attention; and

assessment of conservation and protection needs; are some of the priority areas.

**(l) Natural Hazards**

Floods, cyclones, landslides and droughts cause much damage to life and property at intervals and the frequency causes anxiety. Disaster preparedness and management therefore, require serious attention.

**(m) Genetic Resources**

Although Sri Lanka boasts of a rich species diversity, the rapidly diminishing natural areas also diminish the gene pools. Therefore priority attention is required to preserve genetic materials of all cultivars;

and formulate a national plan to conserve genetic material.

**(n) Industry**

Industrial growth requires increasing quantities of both renewable and non-renewable resources as raw material. Release of waste is inevitable. Therefore priority should be accorded to —

Develop capability for the assessment of environmental impacts of technological and product development;

utilize cleaner, low-waste technologies;

establish a technology transfer centre;

make compulsory incorporation of pollution control measures;

grant incentives for pollution control;

promote recycling; and

establish an industrial counselling service.

**(o) Living Aquatic Resources**

Seventy per cent of the animal protein required by the population is provided by the inland and marine fisheries. Adequate attention should be paid for —

comprehensive surveys of the available resources;

sustainable exploitation of resources;

utilization of less popular varieties of fish;

pollution control in fresh and marine waters; and

minimize adverse impacts.

**(p) Environmental Education**

Conservation programme will be successful only in so far as Educational programmes are geared to meet this end.

Sustainable development does not imply a fixed state. It is a process of change in which economic and fiscal policies, trade and foreign policies, energy, agricultural and industrial policies all aim to induce development paths that are economically, socially and ecologically sustainable. For example, we have to look for environmentally sustainable agricultural practices, cropping systems and farming systems. The extensive farming practices with intensive use of fertilizers and agro chemicals over exploit farmlands and contaminate food, soil and water. I am not advocating that we should go back to the 18th century. We must develop an appropriate technology based on indigenous systems and practices some of which have been ingenious.