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Ecological, Social and Political Introduction to South and Southeast Asia

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Keynote Address

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Mark Twain once said: "There are three kinds of lies: lies, damned lies and statistics." Thus, I shall neither bore you with numbers nor restrict myself to facts and figures from the Himalayan region. I am told to talk and talk I will. To quote an American senator "No Nation, no man and no woman is so poor that they cannot afford a free speech."

In this presentation I will touch upon three major issues in South and South East Asia. I will begin with a discussion of biological diversity with special reference to national parks and protected areas. I will follow this with a discussion of the socio-economic situation in the Himalayan region. I will then perhaps contradict myself by asking you if politics, pragmatism, or passion, should dictate our future course of action.

South and Southeast Asia occupy only 6% of the earth's land surface, yet this region supports a third of the human race and contains many of the world's most contrasting natural and cultural features. These features range from the deep seas, islands, and highlands of Indonesia to the top of the world in Nepal's Mt. Everest National Park. Sadly, in heavily touristed areas such as Mt. Everest National Park, one might face a traffic jam of western mountain climbers and step over the trash left by tourists, trekkers and their parties. Yet, the coral gardens of the Maldives, Malaysia and the Philippines, the mammals and birds of India, Laos and Vietnam, the tropical rain forests of Thailand, Brunei and Burma, and the dry and the humid jungles of Pakistan, Bangladesh and Sri Lanka have stimulated the establishment of more than three thousand protected areas. These protected areas cover nearly 90 million hectares of land and help to preserve some of the world's unique ecosystems.

South and Southeast Asia are home to a broad range of species from the crocodile of Cambodia, to a wide variety of birds that make the region a bird watchers' paradise. Mammals are represented by both oriental and paleartic species such as the Takin of Bhutan, the tiger, and the Asian rhinoceros. The number of species in the insect and the plant kingdom is unknown and your guess of the numbers in this group is as good as mine.

This region is also the home of the poorest people on earth. Population growth is among the highest in the world, with human numbers doubling in less than 30 years. Loss of habitat, soil erosion and floods are recurring events. In this region, wood hunger and food hunger recycle the seeds of self-destruction. Poorly conceived infra-structure and development projects add fuel to the fire, but, we still have hope. Our region is not yet, an oasis of disaster. The air is clean and water plentiful, except in cities, like Kathmandu, Calcutta and Karachi. Both, the man-made and God-made monuments are great assets in these days of eco-tourism. However, in some places, the success of eco-tourism could be its demise unless visitors behave properly.

Cynics in Sri Lanka and Nepal say that there are three religions— Hinduism, Buddhism and Tourism. Fortunately, the tourism sector is realizing that environmental protection is the only insurance against killing the goose that lays the golden egg. Tourism can be ecologically sustainable and economically profitable, as illustrated by some of Asia's protected areas.

I will now move from the topic of bio-diversity to the bio-politics of biological conservation. Our findings have led us to a sobering enlightenment. Asian animals may be exotic, exciting and entertaining to Western tourists, but to the local people they are pests that raid crops, thieves that steal cattle, and, at times, killers that slay loved ones. Legal measures and anti-poaching units to preserve wild species create conflicts between wildlife and people. Intellectual arguments on the values of biodiversity are meaningless to villagers struggling for survival. Thus, the conservation of biological diversity may not work unless local people find it beneficial to save species. We must devise innovative projects and programs to minimize conflicts between saving species and meeting human needs.

First of all, to accomplish this goal, efforts should be made to remove problem animals. Secondly, the formation of local user groups and community forums to discuss conservation issues is extremely important. These forums have a positive psychological impact in that they involve and consult local people. In Nepal, as a result of community forums, local villagers are able to harvest renewable natural resources from protected areas on a sustainable basis. In this case, villagers were quick to realize that schemes to save tigers also save tall grasses for their use. Above all, we must create jobs and provide income. An innovative program in Thailand that bans cars and compels visitors to employ local people has achieved this goal. Ecology and economics are two sides of the same coin, and sustainability is the rim that binds them together. However, some of us involved in global issues and global forums, have been warned. The debate of the decade surrounds the feasibility of sustainable development. Bureaucrats in the third world have been littered with literature on the subject with little time to digest it. While, some of this material has been useful, we must be cautious of projects disguised as sustainable development and ensure that construction of big dams be damned in all National Parks and Reserves.

During the Earth Summit in Rio, we were once again reminded that we should balance human needs with environmental conservation. Yet, in Rio, one of the clarion calls was the need for a clear definition of terms as we devise a master plan. In short, the question is: are we compromising on the ethics of nature conservation? An Englishman says, "Compromise used to mean that half a loaf of bread was better than no bread at all. Does it mean that half a loaf is better than a whole one?" Should we compromise the habitats of species which with great efforts were brought back from the brink of extinction just for a fist full of foreign currency?

One Asian historian says that the world has produced a vast number of people that can read, but are unable to distinguish what is best reading after being blasted by the media blitz of modern times. Our challenge is to educate the educated through simple, subtle, but effective media. This is often an expensive proposition, but ignorance can be a recipe for disaster.

Environmental problems breed from seeds of diverse nature: population growth, poverty, hunger, greed, apathy, corruption, and above all the emphasis on economic development at any cost. Thus, I also propose a debate on "change" and "family values". I ask this learned gathering: how can we set aside at least ten percent of our land to conserve our biological resources for our family, our children and their children? How do we demonstrate that good ecology is indeed good economics? How do we change attitudes? Do conservation programs only work among consenting adults? How do we go beyond converting the converted? How do we ensure that the relationship between ecology and economics is symbiotic and not antagonistic?

In Asia, we know issues are complex and solutions seldom obvious, but we must seek to face the challenges head-on with an agenda based upon reality rather than rhetoric. I will conclude by quoting some words of wisdom from a native American Indian: "Only when the last tree has died and the last river been poisoned and the last fish been caught will we realize that we cannot eat money."

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