

The Daily Star

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Bitter Truth

Environment in distress

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For the last three decades scientists and world leaders have been trying to cope with the consequences of exponential growth in human numbers and the increasingly frantic demands for the resources that only nature can provide. They have been working to save threatened species from extinction and to give the natural process of our world the chance to maintain a healthy global biosphere. That means some sacrifices and restraints. Evidently, we can no longer pursue short term prosperity without a thought for long term survival. People in some industrialised countries have missed the fact that efforts to achieve conservation of nature threaten human economic welfare. But nations realise that a good quality of life can only be made up of both material well-being as well as a healthy, productive and natural environment. For millions of people living in the less prosperous parts of the world, like Bangladesh, care and conservation of natural resources, restraint, and cautious disposal of toxic wastes, hazardous effluents and sludge from the industries are the only ways to improve conditions.

There are several factors, like build-up of green house gases, toxic landfills, and ozone depletion that are causing degradation of the natural environment and the extinction of wild species of plants and animals. Humans are in conflict with the forces of nature. But the world's biosphere is all that keeps the human species from extinction. That calls for preserving the web of life, and any action to exploit it beyond its natural capacity is a threat to the quality of life of those who will come after us.

We need to take some urgent and concrete steps like cutting down the release of carbon dioxide; solving the problem posed by CFCs; cutting pollution and waste — which means toughening fuel efficiency standards for autos — launching tree plantation programmes; banning dumping of wastes; making birth control information and devices available to everybody; developing educational programmes to impress upon people the value of nature's genetic diversity; prompting waste recycling and encouraging debt for nature swaps.

Nature is like business. Business sense dictates that we guard our capital and live on the interest. Nature's capital is the enormous diversity of living things. Without it we can't feed ourselves, cure ourselves or provide industry with the raw materials of wealth creation. Prof. Edward Wilson of Harvard University rightly says: "The folly our descendants are least likely to forgive us is the ongoing loss of genetic and species diversity."

The principal cause of both extinction and the slowing of evolution is the degrading and destruction of habitats by humans. While covering only 6% of the Earth's land surface, the rain forests are losing an area of 26,000 sq miles each year. Damage to intact forests threatens biodiversity still more. Under assault on coral reefs (two-thirds degraded), salt marshes and mangrove swamps (half eliminated or radically altered) the extinction rate of species and races is rising. Only 150 plant species have ever been widely cultivated. Yet over 75,000 edible plants are known in the wild. In a hungry world with growing population, this extinction of plants is tragic. Medicines from the wild, scientists estimate, are worth \$40 billion a year. Scientists estimate that the total number of species is between 10 and 30 million — with only around 1.4 million identified. But these are being degraded. The places that support most diversity are tropical rain forests, mangrove swamps and coastal wetlands. Our Sundarbans might come up as a vast trove of medicinal plants that are still unidentified.

Shockingly, the forest wealth of the country is being pillaged without taking into consideration the environmental catastrophe it will bring. Environmentalists apprehend that the power plant proposed to be constructed close to the Sundarbans will have serious ecological impact on the

plant and animal species there.

Hazardous wastes are still being generated in industrialised countries. Our country has to bear the brunt of the progress achieved by others. It is high time that we entered into an agreement detailing legislation that would stop trans-boundary movement of hazardous wastes. Unless an understanding of the cross-sectoral linkages among biodiversity, land and water use, sustainable growth, forest management and desertification control is reached on regional basis, our development effort would be set at naught. The country's rivers, lakes and wetlands have become lifeless receptacles of human wastes, pesticides residues and toxic effluents from the industries. The poison has seeped so deep that water in the rivers and lakes come in hues of green and black. These poisoned waters now symbolise not life but death. Over 300 tanneries discharge chromium-rich effluents that ultimately find their way into the rivers Buriganga and Shitalakhya. Treatment plants to handle heavy toxic metals have not been set up. The poisoned river water is used for different purposes, when the metals are absorbed in the food chain that in the long run causes severe health complications.

In Dhaka city alone much of the 10,000 tons of daily garbage production including solid waste find their way into landfills and open sewers. Dumped garbage and industrial waste can turn lethal when corrosive acids, long-lived organic materials and discarded metals leach out of landfills into ground water supplies, contaminating drinking water and polluting farm lands. On the other hand when garbage is burned, it spews toxic gases into the air.

All these are tell-tale indications of long and dangerous neglect of our environment. The fundamental causes of the country's land and water degradation are need, greed and ignorance. That calls for educating the people that some of our earth and water has been scorched or drained beyond repair, and a sustainable development effort is a must now.

The question that looms in the public mind is how to prevent our environment wallowing in waste and poisonous materials that we ourselves are producing. Some manufacturing companies in the West have cut waste generation in half by using fewer toxic materials, separating out wastes that can be reused and substituting alternative materials for hazardous substances. To cite an instance, in the Netherlands, Duphar, a large chemical concern, adopted a new manufacturing process that decreased the amount of waste created in making pesticide by 95%.

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