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Sustainable Future for Planet Earth

Participants at the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development (UNCED) to be held in Rio de Janeiro on 1 to 12 June 1992 will attempt to address many issues fundamental to achieving sustainable development. What of substance will be achieved is not now clear. The meeting will bring together representatives (perhaps heads of state) of about 150 countries, many of them with differing resources, needs, aspirations, and priorities. However, in view of growing global concern about environmental matters, the occasion will certainly be a great media event with possible repercussions on a presidential election.

One of the reasons for questioning the likelihood of a substantive achievement at UNCED is the breadth of its projected agenda. A United Nations brochure lists topics that the conference will address, and these are paraphrased below:

- Protection of the (i) atmosphere (climate change, depletion of the ozone layer, and transboundary air pollution); (ii) land resources (combating deforestation, soil loss, desertification, and drought); (iii) fresh water resources; and (iv) oceans, seas, and coastal areas and the rational use and development of their living resources.

- Conservation of biological diversity.

- Environmentally sound management of biotechnology and hazardous wastes (including toxic chemicals).

- Prevention of illegal traffic in toxic products and wastes.

- Improvement in (i) the quality of life and human health and (ii) living and working conditions of the poor by eradicating poverty and stopping environmental degradation.

The U.N. agenda provided a stimulus for many disparate groups to hold meetings in advance of Rio. These included distinguished interfaith religious leaders, organized broadcast groups, and scientists and engineers. Examples follow:

On 20 June, the AAAS directorates for International Programs* and for Science and Policy Programs hosted a 1-day symposium on UNCED. Speakers from the United Nations, the State Department, the International Council of Scientific Unions, and other organizations discussed the UNCED agenda and the role of nongovernmental organizations in preparing for the Rio meeting.

A “1991 Forum on Global Change and the Human Prospect” is planned for 16 to 18 November 1991 and will be held near Washington, D.C. Sigma Xi is the primary sponsoring scientific society. Co-sponsors include AAAS and about 40 other scientific and engineering societies whose total membership is about 1 million. The three plenary sessions are titled, respectively, “What Kind of a World Do We Have?”; “What Kind of a World Do We Want?”; and “What Must We Do to Get There?”. Workshop sessions will facilitate participation by attendees. The banquet speaker will be Maurice Strong, who heads the influential Secretariat of UNCED.

On 2 and 3 June, a gathering of leaders of the religious community of the United States was briefed by some top scientists-environmentalists. The presentations were evidently very effective. At the conclusion of the meeting the religious participants issued a statement describing in detail “mounting evidence of environmental destruction and ever-increasing peril to life, whole species, whole ecosystems.” The statement also noted: “We believe a consensus now exists, at the highest level of leadership across a significant spectrum of religious traditions, that the cause of environmental integrity and justice must occupy a position of utmost priority for people of faith.” The religious leaders involved included members of the Catholic, Greek Orthodox, Jewish, and Protestant faiths. They “reach, teach, and counsel many millions of people.” The impact of UNCED will also be enhanced by television programs on development and environment. Twenty films will be broadcast during a period of 2 to 4 weeks in May 1992. Among them will be seven 50-minute films co-produced by BBC Television.

Perhaps the greatest impact of the media will occur at the time of the UNCED meeting in Rio and thereafter. Coverage of the event will be enormous. In addition to the official proceedings, a major secondary event involving 20,000 to 40,000 representatives of nongovernmental organizations will make news.—PHILIP H. ABLESON

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