The Global Environmental Crisis

Edmund S. Muskie
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... the whole world is now a community and we have to find ways in which the ideas of a truly human society can be realized on a planetary scale.

Adlai E. Stevenson
January 22, 1963

The technological revolution which has split the atom, put men on the moon and performed heart transplants has also created an unprecedented danger of environmental self-destruction. For many years environmental policies were limited to conservation practices that emphasized the wise development and use of natural resources. In the past, words such as pollution and eutrophication were not commonly used and the concept of ecology was esoteric. Today, however, environmental policies extend beyond traditional conservation practices. Ecology is now recognized as a well-defined scientific discipline, one which examines the relationship of living things with their environment. As part of the environment, human beings are interdependent with other living organisms as well as with the air, water, and soil. Our activities cannot be separated from our surroundings.

The law of interdependence is well illustrated by the interlocking environmental problems of population, depletion of natural resources, and pollution. We are told that by the year 2000 the population of the United States is expected to increase from the present 200 million people to between 290 and 340 million. The global population is expected to increase from 3.5 to between 6 and 7 billion. Recent studies suggest that by the year 2075 the global population

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could grow to 30 billion. Even with the most far reaching of population planning efforts, substantial growth in population is predicted. Because of these increases greater demand will be made on food resources and on other natural resources such as fuels, metals, and chemicals. We know that these latter resources, especially, will become more difficult to extract, more limited in supplies, and require more sophistication to use. In many cases the demand for resources is likely to be greater than the supply. For example, although fossil fuels are the dominant source of industrial energy for the United States and the world, the deposits of the earth’s fossil fuels are finite. Given the present rate of consumption, according to a study by the National Academy of Sciences, the world’s petroleum supplies may last for only seventy to eighty years and coal supplies for two or three centuries.

Beyond the problems of population growth and resource availability are the related problems of environmental deterioration. Resource use and depletion obviously cause modification of the environment. All too familiar are the scarred landscapes which frequently are left by land developers, strip miners, and highway builders who proceed with little or no regard for erosion or siltation control.

The processing of resources and the final products themselves impose pollutants upon the environment. For instance, for years pulp and paper mills contaminated rivers and streams by discharging mercury as a part of wastewaters. Burning of unconsumed paper products still pollutes the air. If such wastes are collected and dumped in harbors or estuaries, or even buried on land, waters may be polluted. Today, fortunately, mercury either is not a part of paper making processes or is removed before wastewater is discharged. And, more and more (though not enough) unconsumed paper is recycled, not burned or buried.

The effects of environmental deterioration reverberate across national boundaries. Discharges of sulfur oxides, carbon dioxide, particulate matter, and other contaminants from factories and power plants threaten the health of individuals and climatic change the world over. Oil discharged into the seas as a result of oil spills and oil transport and production activities jeopardizes the living resources of the world ocean system. Pesticide residues which are deposited into the world ocean system, from the atmosphere and from runoff from the land, menace ocean life.

Often consideration of the quality of the global environment is limited to the most visible problems of air pollution, water pollution, and solid waste. But environmental quality is much more. Today
environmental quality must consider the very quality of life itself. It must encompass more than blue skies and clear streams. It must embrace all elements of the human environment: community, homes, schools, work, transportation, and relations with our fellow men and women. Here the contrasts are stark.

The United States possesses an abundance of natural resources and scientific knowledge. This abundance has made possible the development of a standard of living and a rate of material growth unknown to the previous generations of mankind. Yet there are those in this country who are ill-fed, ill-clothed, and ill-housed. This nation has a responsibility to extend a basic level of prosperity to all Americans. But more, we must be concerned for the condition of all men and women across the earth. More than half the world suffers from a lack of the most basic of human needs. And available projections indicate that famine can be expected in the poorer nations in the next decade. The ability to meet our responsibilities at home and abroad will require confrontation of questions of environmental cleanup and control. Scientific knowledge will have to be channeled into ways which will assure an improved quality of life for every human being. Physical and social technological assessments of public policies will need to be made.

A healthy, well-managed environment is essential to the process of economic activity. But there has been a lack of attention by all governments to the global consequences of environmental degradation. For the most part corrective and preventive responses to air and water quality problems have been limited to problems of national concern. Presently there are no real institutions to deal with global threats to air and water. International arrangements to assess dangers, agree on the seriousness of threats, decide on the measures required for environmental improvement, and enforce responsible behavior do not exist. Awareness of the necessity to take concrete action at the international level is growing, as is concern for the urgency of certain problems. Governments are beginning to realize that many measures taken at the national and local levels will be of little value if not considered in a global context. We are all neighbors in the international community, and each member of the community has a responsibility for dealing with matters of environmental quality that are not confined to national boundaries—and few environmental problems are.

The position of strength occupied by America in the international community carries an obligation of leadership. In order to fulfill the leadership role we must ask ourselves how best to participate in and
encourage global endeavors to achieve a healthy world environment. Clearly there is a need for a global environmental program in which all sovereign states are made responsible to the international community for actions which produce international environmental effects. But the development of a global environmental program will require a firm commitment to global cooperative action by every nation of the world. For the United States, such a commitment must involve, at a minimum, a tripartite of activities.

I.

This nation must demonstrate its concern for the quality of the global environment by formulating and implementing policies that are responsive to domestic environmental needs. As an industrialized nation that pollutes disproportionately, we cannot, in good faith, encourage or expect others to give priority attention to environmental matters unless we are willing to do so ourselves. The United States began to focus on environmental quality in the 1960's, when it examined man's relationship to the environment, his effects thereon, and the need to control those effects. As a result, this nation has pursued the development of coordinated federal, state, and local programs of enhancement. Over the past decade, there has been increasing federal support for policies to control and abate environmental degradation. Federal legislation such as the Federal Water Pollution Control Act, the Clean Air Act, and the Resource Recovery Act, attempt to respond to the most urgent of environmental concerns. It is through these laws that emphasis has been placed on the problems of oil, sewage, and industrial pollution of water, the contamination of the atmosphere by noxious emissions from industries and motor vehicles, and the problems of urban wastes.

While the provisions of these laws begin to respond to this nation's environmental needs, much remains to be done. The sewage treatment facilities in most communities are still inadequate. The flow of nitrates and pesticides from agricultural activity continues unabated. In addition, environmental quality cannot be assured unless the intent of existing legislative measures is fulfilled. National policies that set forth goals and standards for environmental control must be accompanied by specific regulations if there are to be tangible positive results. Increased attention will have to be given to policies that support research efforts and enforcement activities at all levels of government.
II.

The United States must take the initiative in international policymaking activities. There is consensus among nations that the emissions of toxic substances into the atmosphere and the discharge of pollutants into the sea must be controlled. But there is little consensus about the ways in which this is to be accomplished. I suggest that the efforts being made by the United States, with respect to systems and policies for national environmental management, provide a model for environmental proposals that may be offered to members of the world community. As a nation, we have sought to control the release of toxic and other pollutants into the air and water, and we have placed a high priority on regulating emissions and discharges from new sources, wherever they are constructed. Extension of our conceptual approaches to environmental problems in the form of global environmental action proposals will be useful at the international level. Further, our experience and knowledge in funding, researching, and enforcing environmental management programs would be useful in the development of comprehensive arrangements for environmental protection at the international level.

Several opportunities exist for advancing global proposals for environmental action. Among the most promising is the United Nations Conference on the Human Environment, to be held in Stockholm this June. The Conference will include representatives of most nations of the world. The exchange and study of information gathered by these representatives, international organizations, and other nongovernmental institutions has generated an intense interest in the international aspects of environmental problems. As a result, there has been a visible change in the orientation of the Conference structure. In order to clarify the importance and urgency of environmental questions, the Conference has been expanded to encompass the identification of environmental problems for which international cooperation and action will be needed, including proposals and recommendations for action. The expansion of the scope of the conference is a positive sign. It is a sign that nations are indeed concerned about environmental problems and are thus willing to meet in order to discuss them. We should not miss the opportunity to participate to the maximum extent possible in this, as well as in other, international forums.

Our initiatives with respect to the international environment should extend beyond participation in activities of international organizations or ad hoc multilateral deliberations. Other kinds of ini-
tiatives are necessary, including the assessment of the effect of our own policies on other members of the international community. Among other things, we need to review the performance of corporations in the United States who have not taken the responsibility for the adverse environmental effects of their own subsidiaries. More specifically, since the United States is a major market for the world's oil, it is in a position to have wide control over oil production and trade. Tankers and refineries everywhere in the world are tied to United States interests, yet we have not been aggressive in controlling the global environmental abuses of our own oil companies.

We should work with other nations to assure that no individual nation is harmed in trade because of its own strict environmental standards. As part of this effort we must be willing to adjust trade policies so that they respond to any advantages that foreign nations might have because of less stringent standards, regulations, or controls. At the same time, we may need to extend trade and tariff preferences to those less developed nations of the world which institute strict environmental control measures.

Most of the developing nations have expressed a concern for the quality of the environment. Yet, they have not regarded pollution control measures as essential to the improvement of the quality of human life. The immediate threats of poverty and starvation are much more real to these nations than the threats of pollution. As a practical matter, without technical and financial assistance, the expansion budgets of the developing nations are not adequate to achieve both long term goals of economic development and minimum environmental control.

The United States should take the initiative in urging the creation of an international technical assistance program, to be staffed with top scientists, technologists, and engineers experienced in environmental control. Such a group would be available to the developing nations. America should urge consideration of the establishment of an international financial authority which would offer low-interest and no-interest loans to less developed countries. In the interim, existing financial institutions, such as the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank, should be utilized for this purpose. Until technical and financial assistance is made available, the developing nations should not be penalized for a lack of environmental controls. Meanwhile, environmental consciousness among the developing nations could be greatly encouraged through the granting of trade preferences and special tariff reductions.
III.

The United States must bring all multilateral environmental agreements to which it is party before our legislatures for enactment into domestic legislation. There is little doubt that an international scheme to assure the protection of the global environment is necessary. Although many nations would agree that they have a vested interest in the development of such a scheme, the world has not yet reached a point in history when nations believe that it is in their best interest to sacrifice their sovereign rights to a global environmental authority.

It is likely that preliminary environmental protection measures will have to be made within the present international framework through existing multilateral institutions and traditional mechanisms of control. We can expect that the foundation for a comprehensive global program will be set through the negotiation of multilateral treaties and other agreements for the most pressing of global problems. These treaties and agreements might initially be directed to development of international research and monitoring programs as well as to systems for the application of global standards and regulations for pervasive pollutants.

However, unless global arrangements are incorporated within the national programs of individual countries they will be ineffective. Our own national programs may need to be altered in order to conform with globally agreed-upon policies. In some instances our programs will need to be strengthened, but in no case should they be weakened. This will require the attention of our national and state legislatures. In the absence of international enforcement machinery, the task of enforcing the provisions of international treaties and other multilateral agreements will rest with the signatory governments. The United States must be able to assure other nations that we will enforce agreed-upon regulations and standards. Swift and direct compliance procedures accompanied by sanctions are necessary and require the attention of our national and state legislatures.

I am convinced that each nation of the world must respond to the global environmental crisis not only by national programs but also by commitments to global cooperative action. The United States, moreover, must take the lead in this regard, in the hope that our own initiatives, assistance, and demonstrated good-will will impel others to undertake vigorous affirmative action.