

ENVIRONMENTAL POLICIES AND MEDIA REPORTING IN SRI LANKA

By
Irvin Weerackody

INTRODUCTION

Several recent developments relating to the field of environmental thought have had a considerable impact upon Sri Lanka's attitude towards ecological issues:

1. The Sixth SAARC (South Asian Association for Regional Co-operation) Summit, held in Colombo Sri Lanka, dramatized this region's concerned awareness of the need for right environmental approaches, to enable the adoption of individual and collective measures to set up adequate ecological safeguards. The joint communique issued by the Heads of SAARC States who met in Sri Lanka on the 21st. of December '91, articulated their environmental concern in the following words:

"The Heads of State or Government, recognised that the degradation of the environment has emerged as a major global concern. While the protection of the Environment is a common imperative for all humankind, the main responsibility in this region rests on developed countries since most of the emission of pollutants originates in those countries and since they also have greater capacity for taking or facilitating corrective measures".

The spirit of the Colombo Declaration is especially relevant to the present Seminar, since, it refers to the Regional study on the 'Greenhouse Effect and its impact on the Region'. Year 1992, has been declared the SAARC Year of the Environment.

Because of its crucial importance as a blue-print for Environmental policies and legislation for this region, I have included the full text of the SAARC Declaration on Environment as an Appendix to this paper.

2. A preeminently significant study that bears on, not only Environmental matters, but also the whole range of developmental challenges, has been brought out recently. This document, titled "The Challenge to the South", is the Report of the South Commission. The report devotes considerable space to identify environmental challenges to development. In a resume of Environmental issues that have direct relevance

to the developing world, the report has this to say among other things:

“Over the last two decades, concern has deepened about many adverse environmental consequences of world economic growth. Much apprehension has been expressed about such dangers as ‘Global Warming’ and damage to the Ozone Layer, that certain production and consumption patterns have created for the global environment. Increasingly, other types of environmental damage — such as the denudation of important water-sheds, desertification and the destruction of tropical forests — concerns usually specific to a nation or a region — have also received considerable international attention.”

Calls have been voiced for sustainable development and for establishing environmental standards in industry, and important international protocols have been drawn up to control the emission of dangerous gases.

What is true of the environmental situation in the countries of the South as a whole, applies with equal vehemence to the state of Environment in Sri Lanka as well. Therefore, this South Report, too could be characterized as influencing Sri Lanka’s attitude towards environmental policy and legislative concerns.

3. Many who are environmentally conscious in Sri Lanka, were deeply disturbed by the “State of the World 1992” the annual report of Worldwatch for the current year. The alarm it sounded about the grave deterioration of the global environment, has shaken most people out of their complacency. The global media coverage given to the findings of the “State of the World 1992” has had a significant impact on Environmentalists - and especially on Environmental policy makers.

4. A factor that exerts an influence on current environmental thinking in Sri Lanka - just as much on most other countries is the UNCED (United Nations Conference on Environment and Development) held in Brazil, in June 1992. The participation in this global Environmental parley has made it necessary for Sri Lanka to make a re-assessment of our Environmental policies.

UNCED 1992, is a watershed event for Environmental policy issues of Sri Lanka and the other six SAARC countries, since SAARC has recognized the need for all member countries to harmonize their views on environment, to enable a unified SAARC environmental policy to be presented at UNCED, “keeping in mind” of course “their respective national environmental priorities.

Sri Lanka’s environmental policy formulations and the enactment of relevant legislation, will take concerned note of these recent developments. While the above factors will determine, in a marked manner the potential policy formulations and future legislation, the present state of environmental imperatives will act as the backdrop to these envisioned changes. In consequence, a brief survey of the current status of environmental policy and legislation in Sri Lanka is essential at this stage.

Current Environmental Policy and Legislation

i. Historical Background

In their recorded history, spanning more than 25 centuries, the Sri Lankans adopted, so wholesome an attitude towards their environment, that it bordered upon a religious

dedication. If a community adopted a deference that verges on reverence towards natural phenomena, conservation invariably becomes their second nature. The right conservation responses begin to be a built-in way of life.

The ancient Sri Lankan tradition is replete with rich instances of such dedication to conservation - the husbanding of natural resources. The classic example on record in Sri Lanka's ancient chronicle is the timeless admonition of King Parakramabahu of Polonnaruwa. He directed his people "not to let even a drop of rain flow into the ocean without first serving man for life-sustaining agriculture." These words could still serve as a rousing motto even for today's environmental activists.

The ancients pursued their agricultural tasks, with a healthy awareness of the need to utilize land and water to benefit not only the current generation but also the generations to come.

The ancient Environmental policy, which made Sri Lanka an ideal hydro-culture, was not embodied in any written document. The policy formed the essential tradition of the masses of this country. The tanks and the irrigation networks that fed agriculture, stand as perennial symbols upholding the environmental values cherished by the ancients.

The traditional attitude to environment suffered shocking and irreparable damage with the advent of foreigners to Sri Lanka. Avid for profits, they cleared the forests and cultivated cash-crops - coffee, tea, and rubber. The land - man harmony that existed over centuries was disturbed. Over and above this; urbanization spread apace, bringing in its wake a whole series of environmental disasters.

The alien rulers who took over the commercial utilization of land - strangely enough - were the first to lay down written and legally promulgated environmental legislation in Sri Lanka. These, in the first instance, were intended to safeguard their own commercial interest in land.

Imperial policy and legislation in relation to Environmental issues of colonial Sri Lanka, were determined, to a great extent by the urge of the Imperial rulers to exploit the resources of their colony, to their own benefit. Although the end-aim was to achieve certain narrow and unquestionably selfish purposes, their policies as embodied in well over 50 ordinances ensured at least a modicum of conservation of environmental resources.

ii. *Limitations of Environmental Laws under British Rule*

The British rulers laid much store by the forest - resource and enacted ordinances to safeguard it from wanton exploiters. The apex of the forestry administration was represented by the Forest - Conservator, who during the hey-day of Imperial rule was almost exclusively a British person and commanded high prestige.

During the British Imperial rule spanning hundred-and-thirty five (1815-1948) years a wide range of legislation relating to a variety of Environmental aspects entered the Statute Book. The legislating was ad hoc and the administration of Environmental laws was haphazard, as the punitive potentiality of the laws was woefully inadequate.

The British administrators seem to have looked at Environmental legislation, primarily as an instrument of deterrence. The existence of the law in the Statute Book, they seem to have felt, would daunt the would-be environmental offender.

The upshot of all this was that the British Environmental Policy in Sri Lanka, taking on a feckless piece-meal appearance. An overall view of environmental protection and

the husbanding of natural resources with succeeding generations in mind, do not seem to have entered into their scheme of things.

Modern Approach to Environmental Policy and Legislation

After the departure of the British, the newly gained Independence was thought of as an opportunity for the re-ordering of national values and for prioritisation of the proper issues of development. But, even in the post-Independence era, it took a considerable length of time for Sri Lankan rulers to adopt the right approaches towards an adequate National Environmental Policy.

The modernized approach to Environmental Policy on a national scale, came about as a result of the holistic vision of the Prime Minister of Sri Lanka in 1977. The then Prime Minister and present President of Sri Lanka Hon. Ranasinghe Premadasa, way back in 1977, saw that the political leaders before him who were responsible for the formulation of policies and the enactment of legislation to protect the Environment had taken a lop-sided view of Environment. The focus of their thinking such as it was, tended to be restricted to the urban environment.

The measures that had been proposed by the previous environmental legislators, were limited to surface attention. They did not reflect a panoptic view of the total range of issues, that have a bearing upon the whole of the National environment.

Hon. Ranasinghe Premadasa was inspired by the global environmental concerns, that were stirring, right round the earth - especially in the wake of the World Conference on Environment in Stockholm in 1972.

The Global Environmental urges were being institutionalized at regional and global levels. The United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) was set up in 1972. Eight-years later, in 1980, the South Asia Co-operative Environment Programme (SACEP) came into being - with Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, the Maldives, Nepal, Pakistan and Sri Lanka as member states.

The setting up of SACEP, concentrating on regional issues, enabled us to break away from the traditional habit of mind of taking environmental issues in isolation.

Almost simultaneously with the founding of SACEP, Sri Lanka enacted its first significant National Environment Act, Titled "National Environmental Act No. 47 of 1980", this piece of legislation was instrumental in the establishment of the Central environmental Authority, as the umbrella organization co-ordinating all issues relating to environment and supervising the functioning of all environmentally linked legal enactments.

For the first time in the history of Sri Lanka, a piece of written legislation that took a holistic vision of the totality of the country's environment, came into being with the promulgation of this National Environmental Act No. 47 of 1980.

This legislation enabled the policy-makers to unify environmental issues, instead of taking each issue in isolation, as if these matters were not inter-related.

When the Central Environmental Authority began to function as the core-institution supervising all the environmental issues at national level, a series of 25 District Environmental Agencies (DEA) was created so that each district-area could be sharply focussed upon.

The hierarchical arrangement of these sub-Agencies with the Central Environmental Authority at the apex enables the perception of the dove-tailing and merging of one

set of environmental issues into others, until the total picture of the whole country's environmental status could be readily perceived.

In passing, it must be stated here that the Sri Lankan administrative net-work in the field of environment has now begun to reflect the spirit of the motto "Think Globally-Act Locally".

Each of the District Environmental Agencies, focusses upon micro-level Environmental problems. These, in-turn, merge in the larger organisation — the Central Environmental Authority which has an island-wide jurisdiction. The Central Environmental Authority, becomes the local focal point in the regional Environmental Organisation SACEP, which is within the global reach of the United Nations Environment Programme, — the highest macro-level Environmental Institution of the world.

To my mind, closer scrutiny of environmental problems with a view to solving them regionally, could be more efficiently effected if there is an Asia-Pacific Environmental set-up encompassing this whole sector.

Sri Lanka's Central Environmental Authority

The apex Environmental body in Sri Lanka, established by the National Environmental Act No. 47 of 1980, did not possess any punitive 'teeth' in its early days.

In consequence, its functions were mainly advisory and catalytic - the CEA was hamstrung by the fact that it was impotent to curb environmental crimes even when they were detected.

- To overcome these limitations, the original National Environmental Act of 1980, was amended in 1988.

The amended Act empowers the state to adopt a whole series of punitive measures along a broad spectrum of environmental offences.

The most innovative aspect of the Amended Act is making Environmental Impact Assessment mandatory for all undertakings that are likely to have an impact on the environment.

This constitutes a firm recognition of the urgent need to incorporate environmental planning process as well as the need to evolve strategies and approaches towards the achievement of this objective.

Environmental Impact Assessment implies the comprehensive evaluation of effects of human development activities on the various components of environment. The main activities of EIA include:

1. Impact identification
2. Impact prediction and measurement.
3. Impact interpretation and/or evaluation and
4. Identification of monitoring requirements and mitigating measures.

The amended Act empowers the state, acting through the CEA, either to refuse the issuing of permits to environmentally offensive industrial undertakings or the cancellation of permits that have already been issued.

To date, the Amended National Environmental Act No. 56 of 1988 is the most progressive piece of Environmental legislation in Sri Lanka.

Specific Issues

Sri Lanka's Environmental organisations, both in the state sector and in the Non-Governmental Sector have addressed a variety of issues bearing on the protection and nurturing of the Environment. The key concern of most of these organizations has always been the need to ensure sustainable development, so that future generations may not be condemned to inherit a resource-depleted environment where life cannot be led on a worthwhile human scale.

With this in mind, substantial studies have been undertaken to assess the environmental impact of such major Development Projects as the Mahaweli Scheme. Mahaweli Project, is among the first major Asian Developmental Schemes, that benefited from a comprehensive and sustained Impact Assessment Exercise.

i. Forest Resources

Over the years, the Forest Resource has received considerable attention from Sri Lankan Environmentalists. The Forest cover that has presently denuded to 23 per cent, poses severe threats to the environment. Droughts, flash floods, landslips are among the adverse results of the depletion of forest cover. It has a whole series of repercussions on the life of the land and is a series threat to Sri Lanka's economy.

The drought that has been brought about largely through the denudation of forests, has hampered hydro-electricity generation, forcing the country to resort to thermal power. The fuel consumption that thermal power implies is a heavy drain on the country's foreign exchange. Forest depletion has already proved a blow to varieties of endemic plant species and other life species. Sinharaja rain forest, one of the world's still preserved Sanctuaries for rare plants and animal and insect life, has suffered considerable damage.

To counter this, a massive tree-planting campaign has been organised on a national scale, with a target of 100 million trees, by the turn of the century.

Global Warming and Climatic Changes

In June 1989 a special Seminar titled "Global Warming - Global Warning" was held under the sponsorship of the Central Environment Authority. The reason for the Seminar was articulated in these words:

"I believe this is the first time in Sri Lanka that a Seminar is being held on this subject. This Seminar is not only timely, it is urgently necessary. It is urgent in our own self-interest and in our national interest. Global Warming if it continues unabated can cause serious problems - climatic changes, rise in the sea-level, droughts, flash-floods etc."

The outcome of this Seminar was the formation of guidelines on Policy and Planning. It was proposed to set up three Task Forces:

- i. Climate and Climatic issues
- ii. Agriculture and Forestry

iii. Sea Level and Coastal Erosion

A process of continuous monitoring was advocated. One of the significant outcomes of the Seminar was the recognition that constant information - education - communication support was essential for an enlightened attitude towards environmental issues and the formulation of policies and the enactment by legislation.

Information - Education - Communication

Support for Environmental Issues

A. Preliminary

The last five years have been the escalation of media support for Environment information on an unprecedented scale at a global level. The globally celebrated Earth Day in 1990 was one of the special Environmental events that generated a plethora of environmental support media activity all the world over. But, regrettably, this global media concern for environmental development, was not significantly felt in Sri Lanka. In the Agenda of the state and in the programmes of media Institutions, there seems to prevail a lethargic indifference in the matter of dissemination of environmentally related information.

The fact that Environment is the Number One issue of mankind today, seems to have escaped the attention of those whose responsibility is the communication of knowledge and information related to Environment.

In February 1988, a Seminar on Environmental Education was held in Sri Lanka, under the joint sponsorship for UNESCO and the Central Environmental Authority of Sri Lanka. The participants represented:

1. Pre-School, Primary and Secondary Education
2. University and Tertiary Education
3. Specialized Education and
4. Non-Formal Education.

The Seminar made four (04) sets of Recommendations to improve the level of Environmental Education.

Follow-up activity of this Seminar, has been slow in coming, to judge from the current status of media support for Environmental issues.

The proposal was made to establish an Environmental Centre as the core-mechanism for Environmental Education.

The Need for Information

Any strategy planned with the intention of disseminating knowledge to the specialized sectors and the non-specialized sectors alike must have two distinct aspects.

Firstly a comprehensive mechanism should be evolved to gather data relating to various aspects of Environment. The data so collected could be systematically classified for ready dissemination in terms of the needs of the users.

Secondly there should be a substantial awareness of groups, organizations, Institutions and Individuals who require environmental information.

Delivery Mechanisms

Attention must be adequately paid to mechanisms of information-delivery. The delivery system could utilize formal media as the vehicle. The print-media, Cinema, Television and Sound Broadcasting come within the formal media. An effective strategy has to be evolved to make use of these in terms of the audiences that have to be reached.

Such informal media as inter-personnel communication, folk events (Processions, Fairs etc) should be explored as means of communicating the Environmental message.

Religious Sermons and discourses are a highly efficient means of communicating the Environmental message.

Communication To Bring About Attitudinal Change

The central purpose of Environmental Education, whether it is formal or informal, is to bring about attitudinal changes conducive to the protection of the Environment and the pursuit of developmental policies beneficial to ecological health. If information, Education, communication and media are to be made use of for such a crucial task as changing entrenched attitudes of the masses, a high degree of professionalism is of the essence. This can be ensured by training personnel in environment related communication. Such training facilities could be provided as back up support of the Environmental Institutions both in the public and the private sector.

All information communicated to the users must be calculated to bring about changes in the life style of people, so that their behavioral patterns will not be offensive to the environment.

Environmental Education, is essential not only to the masses but also to the decision-makers, since without the political will not substantial changes beneficial to the environment can be envisaged.

An education in the various eco-systems close to the lives of specific groups, is the kind of practical knowledge that will upgrade, the quality of the environment inhabited by different communities.

The end-result of all this is the creation of a community of people who will be efficient in the matter of interpreting properly the spirit of the motto - "Think Globally - Act Locally".