New Zealand

Forestry Rules Tightened

Since the November 1999 general elections, environmental groups supporting the Labour-Alliance government to stop the logging of native forests have lobbied the Government.

In mid-May, the Cabinet bowed to the pressure and agreed that no further native trees are to be cut on Crown (government) land from March 2002 – seven years earlier than the main opponents, the finance minister and the deputy prime minister, had wished.

The decision was seen as a realistic compromise, which would minimise job losses among furniture makers, people employed as foresters and sawmill workers.

Northeast Asia

Regional Environment Fund

Policy-makers from Northeast Asian countries have agreed to set up a regional environmental co-operation fund and develop joint environmental research and action programmes in their growing effort to address common environmental concerns in the region.

A "Vision Statement for Environmental Co-operation in Northeast Asia," was adopted by senior officials from South Korea, Japan, China, Russia and Mongolia at the end of the Sixth Meeting of Senior Officials on Environmental Co-operation in Northeast Asia, held from 8-10 March in Seoul.

The Statement, also endorsed by representatives from the United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific, the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP), the UN Development Programme (UNDP) and the Asian Development Bank (ADB), will "provide a basic direction for regional forest co-operation in the 21st century."

Decline in Ecosystems

A new report, issued jointly in April by the United Nations Environment Programme, the United Nations Development Programme, the World Bank and the World Resources Institute reveals a widespread decline in the condition of the world's ecosystems due to increasing resource demands. The study warning that if the decline continues it could have devastating implications for human development and the welfare of all species.

Ecosystems are communities of interacting organisms and the physical environment in which they live; they are the biological engines of the planet. At the heart of the report is the first-of-its-kind Pilot Analysis of Global Ecosystems (PAGE). The report examines forest, freshwater and agricultural ecosystems, analysing their health on the basis of their ability to provide the goods and services that the world currently relies on. These include production of food, provision of pure and sufficient water, storage of atmospheric carbon, maintenance of biodiversity and provision of recreation and tourism opportunities.

The scorecards that accompany the report describe most of the ecosystems in fair, but declining, conditions. The statistics it contains are alarming. For example:

- Half of the world's wetlands were lost last century.
- Logging and conversion have shrunk the world's forests by as much as half.
- Fishing fleets are 40 per cent larger than the ocean can sustain.
- Nearly 70 per cent of the world's major marine fish stocks are overfished or are being fished to their biological limit.
- Soil degradation has affected two-thirds of the world's agricultural lands in the last 50 years.
- Dams, diversions or canals fragment almost 60 per cent of the world's largest rivers.

"For too long in both rich and poor nations, development priorities have focused on how much humanity can take from our ecosystems, with little attention to the impact of our actions," said Mark Malloch Brown, UNDP Administrator. "With this report, we reconfirm our commitment to making the viability of the world's ecosystems a critical development priority for the 21st century."

However, the report warns that halting the decline of the planet's life-support systems may be the most difficult challenge humanity has ever faced.

The report recommends that governments and people must view the sustainability of ecosystems as essential to human life. It calls for an ecosystems approach to managing the world's critical resources, which means evaluating decisions on land and resource use in light of how they affect the capacity of ecosystems to produce goods and services.

According to the report, one of the most important conclusions of PAGE is that there is a lack of much of the baseline knowledge that is needed to properly determine ecosystems conditions on a global, regional or even local scale.

The PAGE report has provided the impetus for the Millennium Ecosystems Assessment – a plan put forward by governments, UN agencies, and leading scientific organisations to allow the ongoing monitoring and evaluation of the health of the world's ecosystems.

European Union

Increase for LIFE

The European Parliament has voted to demand an increase from $600 million to $883 million in funding for the next phase of the EU's grant-making programme for the environment, known as LIFE.

A compromise text is likely to emerge from ongoing negotiations, which will then require simple votes of approval by the Parliament and the Council of Ministers.

The draft foresees the following major themes for the relaunched programme: nature conservation and environment protection, and technical assistance to third countries bordering the Mediterranean and the Baltic. The Parliament, in spite of opposition from the Environment Commissioner Margot Wallström, wants to allocate some of the environment protection funding to plans and demonstration projects to reduce greenhouse gas emissions. Deputies also want an explicit commitment to further renewing LIFE, by imposing an obligation on the Commission to produce new proposals in 2003.

Dolphin Deaths/Fishing Nets

The Commission is to examine the mysterious deaths of dozens of dolphins in the English Channel to see whether they are victims of a new system of trawling. Although a Commission spokesman cautioned against making a direct link between the dolphin deaths and the latest driftnet developments, he added that the Commission was already funding scientific studies into whether they were connected.

Meanwhile, the Commission is also looking into other new fishing nets, which their designers claim are more selective and ensure that the youngest fish in each stock are not plundered during trawls. Sea trials of the Scottish nets have shown that putting 90mm square mesh panels in trawls can reduce the dumping of undersized fish by around 40 per cent.

It is hoped that the new gear should be on board all British boats chasing white fish and prawns by the start of June 2000, and should safeguard vital North Sea haddock stocks, paving the way for future quota increases.

The plans to protect stocks were tabled by fishermen themselves, but a question mark has hung over them because Norway had not agreed to allow Scottish boats to use 90mm nets in its waters. However, Norway says it has backed the new design in principle.

Vietnam

Polluter Pays System

The Government has announced that it will institute a "polluter pays" system devised by its Ministry of Planning and Investment (MPI). The system would see both companies or organisations and individuals damaging the environment having to pay a

REFERENCES TO OTHER TOPICS


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1. Introduction

1. Agriculture as an economic sector is being considered by the Commission on Sustainable Development at its eighth session from the broad perspective of sustainable development, highlighting the linkages between economic, social and environmental objectives. As contained in Agenda 21, particularly chapter 14, and the Programme for the Further Implementation of Agenda 21, adopted by the General Assembly at its nineteenth special session, agriculture has to meet the fundamental challenge of satisfying the demands of a growing population for food and other agricultural commodities, especially in developing countries. The particular focus of the discussion has been promoting sustainable agriculture and rural development (SARD), in accordance with the principles of the Rio Declaration on Environment and Development and the internationally agreed objectives contained in chapter 14 of Agenda 21 as well as, inter alia, the Rome Declaration on World Food Security and the World Food Summit Plan of Action adopted by the World Food Summit (Rome, November 1996). The basis for achieving SARD in all countries is contained in these and other commitments; what is needed is their full implementation at all levels.

2. Agriculture has a special and important place in society because it ensures the production of food and fibre, is essential to food security and to social and economic development, employment, maintenance of the countryside, and conservation of land and natural resources, and helps sustain rural life and land. The major objectives of SARD is to increase food production and food security in an environmentally sound way so as to contribute to sustainable natural resource management. Food security – although a policy priority for all countries – remains an unfulfilled goal. About 790 million people living in developing countries and 34 million in industrialized countries and in countries with economies in transition are undernourished. While some improvement in the situation has recently been noted, the international community must be concerned that the average annual decrease of undernourished people is insufficient to achieve the target set at the 1996 World Food Summit to reduce by half the number of undernourished by 2015 (Plan of Action, para. 7).

3. Progress in poverty eradication is