

TREES OF LIFE...

By Gamini Dissanayake
(Minister of Lands and Mahaveli Development)

Excerpts from a speech by Gamini Dissanayake, Minister of Lands and Mahaveli Development at the first Governing Council meeting of the South Asian Co-operative Environment Programme (SACEP) at the B.M.I.C.H.

I want to focus attention on one particular activity which is fundamental to providing for the basic needs of our people. I refer to our trees and forests. Indeed, trees have a bearing on a number of our economic needs and growth capacities.

This is so precisely because of the wide ranging purposes served by trees and forests to all living beings. They are capital assets always and have contributed from time immemorial to economic and social activities of the community in various ways. An individual tree is a family asset and trees in a local community are a source of food, fuel, fodder, fertilizer, and building material.

Our great natural and exotic forests play a fundamental role in our agrarian economy by protecting water-sheds, lessening the run-off rate of rivers, ensuring soil fertility and providing the habitat for both wild life and the fast depleting genetic plant resources. Man-made plantations especially rubber often covering hundreds of thousand acres in this part of the world also play the function of forests, and perform a vital role in the eco-system.

For reasons well known to you, the forests and trees have been exploited without any consideration to the ill-effects that such exploitation would cause to the environment and to our resource base.

All developing countries in South Asia are well aware of the chaos and calamities caused by the rape of our forests, for whatever reasons, be it the greed of the rich or the need of the poor. Developing countries are now allocating considerable sums of money, though too little, for the resurrection, maintenance and judicious expansion of forest cover in keeping with the needs of ecological and economic requirements of the nations concerned.

In this, we have a coincidence of a common interest from the developed countries, from whom therefore it would be possible to expect the strongest financial support. Most temperate climate countries have depleted their forests already and developed countries are extremely keen

supporters of global efforts in the maintenance and consolidation of forest cover.

There is concern as to maintaining the levels of carbon dioxide and in conserving the ozone layer, in both of which trees play a vital balancing role. This interest of the developed countries is one of these rare symbiotic relationships in which giver and taker are both beneficiaries.

In view of the high priority allocated to this subject both by the developed and developing world, I wish to place before this council a proposal. I wish to propose that the Year 1988 be designated The Year of Trees For South Asia, so that from now on we can resolve to develop in each of our countries programmes of needed scale and practical value, which could be implemented with assistance from developed countries and international agency sources, in order that this lost capital asset is restored to the required status.

I have no doubt that if we resolve to undertake this programme with determination and professionalism, the world community too may adopt this model for replication elsewhere.

Examples of rehabilitation of forests are many in South Asia and elsewhere. Outside South Asia, perhaps I may point to a remarkable exercise that China has completed under a family programme of planting 2,000 million trees last year. Even allowing for lapses in maintaining them it does constitute a phenomenal achievement. This apart, during the 70's, China completed under state and official auspices, what must have been one of the most spectacular tree and forest planting programmes undertaken. The village and social forestry programmes in some states in India are in a different way a spectacular example of what can be achieved.

At the same time, in many places in our region the ravages of mountain slopes, as in Nepal and erosion from the coastal areas, and the denuding of the forests go on. We need in South Asia the launching of a great redemptive programme, as an urgent and vital initiative to save the depleting forest asset and to launch out on rapid re-forestation programmes.

The programme for us in SACEP will involve national level thinking and planning. As I mentioned, it is not simply environmental, economic and developmental. It will also give opportunities for an involved sharing of our common knowledge and experience in the environmental, economic and social aspects of forestry. It should involve exchanging research data, seed material and various other aspects of a successful national, regional and possibly, global project.

I am making this proposal, especially in view of the fact that a co-operative effort will enhance and accelerate this vital activity. It may also perhaps become an outstanding symbol of our collaborative will and spirit in SACEP. I commend this to you in all earnestness and hope that, after your deliberations and appropriate refinements and formulation, you will consider the declaration of the year 1988 as The Year of Trees For South Asia and set out its targets and the incumbent responsibilities for SACEP members.

