

African President Looks at Nature Conservation

The opening session of the 13th General Assembly of IUCN in Kinshasa, in September 1975, was honoured by the presence of the President of Zaïre, General Mobutu Sese Seko. In his remarkable inaugural address the President warmly welcomed the choice of the Assembly's theme: Conservation for Decision Makers. It was vital and urgent, he said, for conservationists to pose their problems at the highest levels – to heads of state and governments. 'Nature conservation is above all a political problem. Only political leaders have the powers to make major decisions.' The President went on to describe the attitude of Zaïre to nature conservation problems, and spoke of Zaïre's achievements and plans for the future. The following are extracts from his speech:

In the past, man feared Nature. He deified the sun, lightning, the river, giant trees, and powerful animals. But as science progressed with giant strides, as man better understood natural phenomena, and as he mastered the elements, he has wanted to take his revenge; he wants now to overcome, to dominate, and to conquer nature. Thus he, who should have been the harmoniser of nature, has now become its scourge. There should not be any conflict or confrontation between man and nature, but rather total communion. Today, new terms are becoming familiar: Environment, Nature Conservation, Ecology, Ecosystem. But how many of the people who use these words understand their real meaning? And what is more, how many of them are aware of their importance?

Dialogue of the Deaf

The problems we have to solve are the most important and the most crucial that mankind has ever had to face. For it is not only the welfare of mankind that is at stake, but its very survival. We have to convince the leaders that they have to assume their responsibilities. But what do we see in place of this? All too often, a dialogue of the deaf. Industrialised countries blame those who have not yet reached that stage for not controlling the growth of their populations, and emphasise the dangers of this, especially in terms of food shortage. They forget that their populations, representing one-third of mankind, consume 90 percent of the planet's resources. Their planes and their cars use up twice as much oxygen as does the entire population of the world. And it is because of them that the seas today are polluted.

But our concern is not only to establish responsibilities, but to find together the right solutions. Two problems face us: first, to protect that part of nature which is still undisturbed, and second, to purify that which has been polluted.

We, who have been colonised, were taught that the civilisation of our former masters was the best one, and, unfortunately, many industrialising countries take it as a model. In these countries man behaves, not as an ally of Nature, but as her opponent. He has confused development and proliferation; he has put himself in the position of conquerer or coloniser of his own country. In Zaïre, we reject borrowed ideologies, whether of the left, or of the

right, because they are founded on sheer materialism. We have chosen a philosophy of humanist action: Authenticity.

To be authentic is to be one's self, to be natural, to be close to nature. One cannot stay one's self if one is not in contact with nature. For us, there is no culture without nature; and the man who denatures nature, loses his culture. It is nature which inspires poets, painters, writers. Were it to lose its naturalness, inspiration would vanish. Very soon, wealth will not be measured in a few factories pouring out black fumes, but in an unspoiled environment. We are not against industry, but against the process of industrialising. It is possible to set up useful, clean, and cheap industries, and this is what we are doing. We do not want to poison a man and then build a hospital to cure him.

In the field of nature conservation, we in Zaïre have achieved concrete results. We have established the appropriate institutes with the task of defending nature against all despoilers. In our national university we have set up a special diploma in Environment and Conservation of Natural Resources. In ten years, we have established more national parks and nature reserves than our colonisers did in eighty years, and our present objective is to protect 15 per cent of our national territory – this is considerable if one remembers that Zaïre covers an area greater than the two Germanies combined.

One immediate result of sound nature conservation is the promotion of tourism. Today, the inhabitants of industrialised countries leave them in large numbers to visit our parks, but our tourism policy is a cautious one. The people who have devastated their own natural environment could well do the same in our country, and the foreign exchange we might receive in the short term could prove expensive in the long term. This is why the visitor to our parks has to comply with strict regulations: he must not leave the established trails and he must always be accompanied by a Zaïrian guide. It is also why we have brought together, in the same Department, conservation of nature, environment and tourism – so that tourism will be developed with the strictest respect for nature protection.

Zaïre is no less aware of its responsibilities for its important tropical forests. It is not mere chance that the largest rivers of the world, in terms of their flow, are the Amazon in Brazil and the Zaïre. It is the forests of the Amazon and Zaïre basins that produce and regulate those impressive quantities of water; they are among the last of the world's reserves for oxygen production.

In Zaïre we are establishing three approaches to the natural environment: first, wild nature which we shall leave undisturbed; second, adapted nature, with rural land use integrated with the natural environment; and third, nature worked on and improved in the urban centres. In other words, we want to plant two, three, four times more trees than stones. Man is not happy when he is enclosed in concrete. But he enjoys life in the sun, in the snow, in the woods, on the water, that is to say in intimate contact with Nature. Our land does not belong to individuals, but to the Nation. The soil and the sub-soil are State property, exclusive and inalienable. But we are aware that we cannot do anything we like with our forests, because their influence goes beyond the limits of the national territory. The seas, the oceans, the upper atmosphere belong to the human community, and one cannot claim that they belong to someone in particular, who may do with them whatever he may wish. Equally, one cannot use nor freely overuse the international resources.

This Earth of ours is precious because it is not infinite, but limited. We must love it, cherish it, and protect it, for our own good, for the good of our children, for the good of our grandchildren.