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Recommended Citation
Available at: http://scholarship.law.berkeley.edu/elq/vol13/iss2/1

Link to publisher version (DOI)
http://dx.doi.org/https://doi.org/10.15779/Z38P81C

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The Environment on the Foreign Policy Agenda*

Richard Elliot Benedick**

Last week, at Georgetown University, I encountered an eminent statesman, Kenneth Rush, under whom I had served quite a few years ago, when I was a junior Foreign Service Officer and he was the United States Ambassador to Germany. He inevitably asked me what I was doing now, and when I told him, his face brightened with enthusiasm and interest. We both realized that when we were in Germany, my present position did not even exist in the State Department; the environment was simply not on the foreign policy agenda. And this distinguished diplomat, the architect of the famous accord that finally guaranteed the freedom of West Berlin, clearly recognized the contemporary importance of environmental issues for United States foreign policy—and he was delighted to learn that I was in the middle of them!

It is certainly true that international environmental diplomacy is not traditional diplomacy. Although, like Ambassador Rush, my bureau negotiates treaties with foreign countries, we are not redrawing frontiers, but rather are dealing with such subjects as exports of hazardous chemicals or protection of wetlands. We go to the United Nations to argue not about border conflicts, but about possible damage to the marine environment from ocean disposal of radioactive waste. And when the professional diplomats in this new field sit down at the negotiating table, we are flanked by a new breed of international lawyers, as well as by an imposing array of atmospheric physicists, zoologists, and molecular biologists. In the course of a week, my personal portfolio can range from the ocean depths to stratospheric ozone; from recombinant DNA to African rhi-
nos; from sewage treatment in Tijuana, Mexico, close to our border, to the impact of population resettlement on the tropical rainforests of the outer islands of Indonesia.

A NEW DIMENSION OF DIPLOMACY

Why is it that such esoteric themes are now on the foreign policy agenda? To answer that question, let me share with you an impression from last year's meeting of the Governing Council of the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) in Nairobi. The highlight of this meeting was the joint appearance of an American astronaut and a Soviet cosmonaut, to inaugurate a new UNEP program utilizing space technology to monitor global environmental trends. The audience, which comprised seasoned United Nations and government officials from all over the world, international press, and Kenyan schoolchildren, was universally transfixed by the simplicity and sincerity of the message of the space voyagers. Both the American scientist and the Soviet air force major made vivid for all of us in that hall what is possibly the most inspiring, and poignant, image of our century: Planet Earth as seen from outer space—this beautiful blue sphere, radiating life and light, alone and fragile in the still vastness of the cosmos. From this perspective, the maps of geopolitics and diplomacy vanish, and the underlying interconnectedness of all the components of this unique living system—animal, vegetable, mineral, water, air, climate—becomes evident.

It is this sense of interdependence that has fostered a growing realization in foreign ministries around the world that many international activities—trade, industrial investment, and development assistance—have profound implications for the environment. Nations share a responsibility to protect human health and to preserve the common natural heritage. In the State Department, we have come to recognize that United States national interests in promoting human freedom and economic growth can be undermined by instability in other countries related to environmental degradation, population pressures, and resource scarcity.

Thus, a new dimension has been added to our diplomacy. This is reflected in the growing number of international agreements concerning the environment: efforts to promote cooperation in scientific research and exchange of data, to develop internationally accepted guidelines or principles, and to harmonize regulatory measures. The negotiations on such accords are heavy in scientific and legal content; indeed, international environmental law is itself a rapidly growing field. Negotiations are monitored closely—and frequently attended—by representatives of Congress, industry, and citizens' groups. The issues are complex, sensitive, and often emotionally charged. Human health may be at stake, but
so, too, are jobs. Trade patterns can be affected. The quality of life, and
the esthetics of flora and fauna and landscape, are also involved.

Against this background, I would like to highlight for you today five
aspects of United States international environmental policy, illustrated
by examples from our current agenda. These are:

(1) Maintaining the tradition of United States leadership;
(2) Reconciling economic growth with environmental protection in the
Third World;
(3) Working to improve the international system;
(4) Promoting, and relying on, the best possible science; and
(5) Pursuing a balanced, nonconfrontational approach that engages the
private sector.

UNITED STATES LEADERSHIP

The United States has been the leader among the world's nations in
recognizing, and acting upon, environmental problems. Following pas-
sage of the Clean Air Act, for example, emissions of sulfur dioxide de-
clined by twenty-eight percent from 1973 to 1983. Over the past fifteen
years, approximately $70 billion have been spent on stringent motor ve-
hicle emission controls, which have substantially improved the air qual-
ity of our cities, whereas Europe is just beginning this process. United
States laws that regulate pesticides, industrial chemicals, and toxic
wastes, originating in the 1970's or even earlier, and continually amended
to reflect newer science, have served as models to other countries.

This leadership is also reflected in our participation in some twenty
international treaties, ranging from the Convention on International
Trade in Endangered Species to the Cartagena Convention for the Pro-
tection and Development of the Marine Environment of the Wider Car-
ribbean Region. The United States cooperates with over seventy countries
through 275 bilateral agreements which either are wholly environmental
in scope or which have significant environmental components—for ex-
ample, one with China on acid rain research, another with Nigeria on
water quality. The United States also contributes funds or support in
kind to seventy specialized environmental or natural resource programs,
carried out in forty international or regional organizations, such as the
International Register of Potentially Toxic Chemicals and the Interna-
tional Union for Conservation of Nature.

Leadership also implies involvement in environmental issues at the
top. This was exemplified in the headlines last week describing President
Reagan's full endorsement of the report and recommendations on acid
rain produced by Special Envoy Drew Lewis and his Canadian counter-
part. The President also joined with other leaders of the major industrial
countries at the Bonn Economic Summit last year in a formal declaration
which began, "New approaches and strengthened international coopera-
tion are essential to anticipate and prevent damage to the environment, which knows no national frontiers,” and concluded, “We shall work with developing countries for the avoidance of environmental damage and disasters worldwide.”

THE ENVIRONMENT AND DEVELOPMENT

Thus, my second theme, the environment and development—the subject of this Symposium—is clearly on the agenda of world leaders. This was also a dominant issue at the 1972 United Nations Conference on the Human Environment, in Stockholm, which was an international landmark in drawing attention to the need for reconciling economic growth with protection of the environment.

Unfortunately, it is all too easy to find discrepancies between the well-intentioned rhetoric of Stockholm and the environmental reality in many developing countries today: deforestation in Thailand and Honduras, massive soil erosion in Haiti and Nepal, hazardous air quality in Mexico City and Ankara, the advance of the deserts in Sahelian Africa, destruction of wildlife habitat in the Amazon rainforests, industrial pollution of the Nile—these are only a sampling.

On the other hand, there is incontestably an evolution in attitudes toward environment in the Third World. The South was initially suspicious that warnings from the North about the environment were a disguised attempt to limit economic growth—and hence the industrial competitiveness—of the poorer countries. Now, there is a new appreciation among Third World governments of the enormous human and financial costs when environmental considerations are ignored in the headlong rush for industrialization.

Since Stockholm, many developing countries have established new ministries to look after the environment; some of these have achieved reasonable prominence and effectiveness within their governments. Environmental education and training have much improved, better data have been compiled and disseminated, some legislation is in place. There is even growing awareness among the public in the Third World: citizens in Egypt are protesting against pollution, and a few weeks ago a local conservation group in Bolivia denounced—and was able to reverse—a government decision to sell monkeys of a threatened species to the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) for malaria research! Lest this last mentioned anomaly leave a false impression of USAID, let me hasten to add that this development agency contributes significantly to environmental protection in the Third World, with programs involving biological diversity, guidelines for pesticides, environmental training, national conservation strategies, and support for nongovernmental organizations.
A particularly important development since Stockholm is the special attention being focused on the world's tropical forests. The Administrator of USAID, Peter McPherson, sent a personal message to all overseas missions in November, 1984, warning that "destruction of humid tropical forests is one of the most important environmental issues for the remainder of this century." The cable provided strong policy guidance for efforts to help other countries in preserving and properly managing their forests.

The World Resources Institute, a private, United States-based organization, released several months ago a meticulously documented study entitled "Tropical Forests: A Call for Action." This study, prepared in collaboration with the World Bank and the United Nations Development Program, stimulated the United Nations Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) to produce a "Tropical Forestry Action Plan," which the United States strongly supports. The State Department has also encouraged UNEP and FAO to further improve data on the state of the world's forests, and we are giving tropical forest research highest priority within the United States Man and the Biosphere Program. I would also note that the State Department, together with the United States Forest Service, reconstituted this year an interagency task force to update United States strategy for this sector. Finally, we are working much more closely with the World Bank and regional development banks to ensure that their lending is consistent with sound environmental management of forests.

Having mentioned the development banks in the forestry context, I should note that there is a growing recognition that their loan programs generally must take much greater account of the environment than has been customary in the past. Currently, the State Department, together with the United States Treasury Department and USAID, uses an early warning system involving our overseas missions to uncover potential environmental problems in proposed loans. Meetings are being held with World Bank staff on such lending sectors as irrigation and forestry. And, evidencing the high level of attention to this issue, Secretary of State George Shultz sent a cable last October to all United States Ambassadors requesting their personal involvement in efforts by American embassies to monitor the environmental implications of proposed development bank projects.

Let me conclude this consideration of environment and development linkages by stressing the ultimate responsibility of the Third World governments themselves for securing an environmentally sound future for their people. We have seen from international efforts to prevent desertification in Africa that external assistance, technology, plans, and rhetoric are not enough. The governments of the affected countries must
themselves pursue environmentally sound national economic, agricultural, and development policies.

INTERNATIONAL ORGANIZATIONS

A third aspect of our agenda is active United States participation in key multilateral organizations which deal with environmental issues. UNEP, mentioned earlier, is our principal forum for programs involving developing countries. In the Organisation for Economic Co-Operation and Development (OECD), we consult with the major Western industrialized countries. The United Nations Economic Commission for Europe (ECE) is our forum for East-West dealings on transboundary environmental issues. In addition, we work on environmental problems in such other international organizations as the United Nations Food and Agriculture Organization, International Maritime Organization, World Health Organization, World Meteorological Organization, and many others.

Our basic goal in working with these organizations is to improve their effectiveness in solving environmental problems. We encourage sometimes overeager international secretariats to focus on a limited number of high priority areas and to avoid duplication of effort with other organizations. We seek to prevent proliferation of new agencies. We try to upgrade program quality and administration and to place qualified Americans on the staffs of these organizations.

There have been notable successes. Within the last twelve months alone, negotiations have been concluded under UNEP auspices on two important and complex subjects: a Convention for Protection of the Ozone Layer and a South Pacific Convention on the Marine Environment. The Ozone Convention represents the first time that the international community has acted in concert on an environmental problem before there are actual and costly damages. The OECD is about to release a report on safety considerations in biotechnology, over two years in the making, which has been lauded by scientists and policymakers as a major contribution to assessing and managing risks in this dynamic new industry. The ECE is bringing East and West together to reduce transboundary air pollution by sulfur dioxide and nitrogen oxides. The World Meteorological Organization (WMO) is leading an expanded international research effort on the "greenhouse effect"—the possibility of global climate change caused by growing concentration in the atmosphere of carbon dioxide and various trace gases, much of it resulting from industrial processes.

THE SCIENTIFIC BASIS

All of these activities underscore the crucial nature of my fourth
theme: the necessity for our international negotiating positions to have the best possible scientific basis—especially if regulations are involved. To achieve broad consensus for rational policies to protect the environment, it is essential, in my view, to eschew emotional appeals and to establish the scientific rationale for addressing any potential threats to environment or health.

Unfortunately, this is often easier said than done: there are gaps in the data, and there are varying interpretations. What are the causes of tree damage in the Black Forest? (Even the Germans are less certain of the answer than they were a few years ago.) How safe is incineration of highly toxic wastes in special ships on the high seas, as opposed to land disposal? Why have many lakes in New York and New England become heavily acidified, while others have actually declined in acidity? How can experiments with genetically engineered organisms, which have such enormous potential for medicine, agriculture, and industry, be kept safe in ways which do not stifle innovative research? What are the sources of increasing methane in the atmosphere, and how will it interact with other gases?

To face such questions, the State Department, not a scientific institution itself, maintains close working relationships with such bodies as the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA), National Academy of Sciences, Smithsonian Institution, National Aeronautics and Space Administration (NASA), Rand Corporation, National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, and many other scientific agencies. We administer the United States Man and the Biosphere program and encourage its multidisciplinary research on a range of natural ecosystems. To support our ongoing international negotiations on protecting the ozone layer, we helped promote the most up-to-date and comprehensive assessment ever made of the state and prospects of stratospheric ozone, a study cosponsored by NASA, WMO, UNEP, and others, and completed just four months ago. We participate in the National Acid Precipitation Assessment Program, a multi-year interagency research effort on the causes and effects of acid rain, with a budget this year alone of $85 million. We met with microbiologists and chemists from several countries to aid us in our successful OECD negotiations on the biotechnology report referred to earlier. And, we are leading a United States Government interagency committee to develop policies for addressing the growing international concern over global climate change.

But, as mentioned earlier, the scientific basis for our work is frequently ambiguous. We are not dealing with black-and-white choices; we must realistically assess risks, probabilities, and costs, in an imprecise world.
This leads me to my final theme: the need for a balanced approach to environmental protection. By this I mean that, in considering these many-faceted issues, we must avoid exaggerating either the risks of not regulating or the costs of regulating. We must neither act over-hastily nor refuse to consider acting. And we must engage in reasoned debate, rather than confrontation.

What this means in practice at the State Department is that we seek counsel from both environmental and industrial groups. It was, for example, the concern of such organizations as the Sierra Club and the Natural Resources Defense Council that helped alert both Congress and the Executive Branch to environmentally poor projects of the multilateral banks.

We recognize, moreover, that private industry can make significant contributions to environmental protection; many industrial leaders are also dedicated environmentalists. Such environmental organizations as the Conservation Foundation and the World Resources Institute have reached out to establish linkages with private industry, and have found an encouraging response. The industry-financed World Environment Center, for example, in cooperation with USAID, is sending American experts to Third World factories to help improve environmental performance. When I testified last week before the Senate Foreign Relations Committee to urge ratification of the Convention for the Protection of the Ozone Layer, representatives of both environmental groups and the chlorofluorocarbon manufacturers supported this treaty. And, when a United States scientific agency announced last month that, for budgetary reasons, it was grounding a satellite which monitored the upper atmosphere, there were immediate appeals both from EPA and the Chemical Manufacturers’ Association—even though data from this satellite could be used to justify future controls over certain chemical products.

UNEP deserves particular recognition for its initiatives to involve industrial leaders more closely in Third World problems. I represented the United States last January at a follow-up meeting to UNEP’s successful 1984 World Industry Conference on Environmental Management. This small, high-level meeting was sponsored jointly by the Executive Director of UNEP and the President of the International Chamber of Commerce, and included environment ministers from such places as Indonesia, the Ivory Coast, and China, as well as chief executives of multinational companies. The result of the meeting will be the establishment this year of a special bureau, financed by private industry, to provide assistance to developing countries on environmental management.
CONCLUSION

To conclude, the environment is now very much on the United States foreign policy agenda. And while our constituents on one side or the other of a given environmental issue may not always entirely agree with our ultimate position, we hope that at least they will acknowledge that they had a fair hearing, and that we acted in good faith. On the international scene, we need constantly to balance environmental concerns with economic and political realities. To some, it may seem that we act slowly, but I maintain that a measured, patient strategy is more effective in the long run than a hasty overreaction. In dealing with these issues, we must try not to let the perfect be the enemy of the good.

It seems hardly necessary to emphasize before this assembly that the challenges of protecting the global environment are formidable. Yet, there is no place for either complacency or despair. Governments cannot do it alone, especially in the current era of budget-tightening. The Global Tomorrow Coalition, with headquarters in Washington, D.C., is a good example of a new movement to forge coalitions involving citizens’ groups, academic and research institutions, legislators, multilateral organizations, and private industry.

And, I am just optimistic enough to believe that, with the support of individuals and institutions such as those participating here today, we will work together ever more effectively to promote both the betterment of the human condition and our stewardship of this planet for the generations to come.

I thank you for the opportunity to open this Symposium and wish you wise counsel in your deliberations here today.