

THE OPENING OF THE INTERNATIONAL CONFERENCE ON BIODIVERSITY
HOLIDAY VILLA HOTEL, SUBANG, 12 JUNE 1990

Distinguished guests;

Ladies and gentlemen.

I would like to thank the Council Members of the Malayan Nature Society for inviting me to officiate the opening of this International Conference on Biodiversity. The conservation of biodiversity is of global concern and I am glad that the Malayan Nature Society has given emphasis to this topic.

Ladies and gentlemen,

2. Malaysia is endowed with a great diversity of species in its forests and other natural habitats such as rivers, lakes and surrounding seas. Over 10,000 species of flowering plants, about 2,000 species of vertebrates and about 80,000 invertebrate species have been documented in this country. Only a small proportion of these resources has been utilized for our needs. As a medical man, I am aware of the many plants that are used in traditional medicine. I have no doubt that scientific investigation will reveal that many of these can replace some of the synthetic drugs and can provide new medicinal compounds.

3. What is of significance is that there is a high degree of endemism of these species in the country. Botanical studies in Peninsular Malaysia have shown that up to 30% of all tree species and 50% of the orchids are not found anywhere else. Biological diversity needs to be conserved to ensure that there remain genetic resources in this world for the further propagation and domestication of potential crops and animals as our forefathers had done with those which we are familiar with today. Many drugs and pharmaceutical products have been obtained from the chemical blueprints provided by plants and animals from the tropical rainforests. Many life-sustaining ecological processes particularly photosynthesis, the water cycle and the nutrient cycle are the result of the fine interaction of plants and animal species particularly in their natural environment. The question of carbon dioxide level and greenhouse effect is of great concern to all nations in the world. Maintenance of a critical level of biodiversity is therefore compulsory for the sustainability of natural ecosystems.

4. Maintenance of global biodiversity is the common responsibility of everyone, as its benefits are universal and not limited to any one country or region. Developed countries with their advanced technological and scientific capability are in a better position to reap the benefits from the conservation of biodiversity. Thus this effort must be well supported by the wealthy developed countries without imposing restrictive burdens on the developing ones even though the habitat of the diverse species are now usually in the developing countries. It must be remembered that the developed countries were once also the habitat of numerous species until indiscriminate development eliminated them. While we would not wish to destroy biodiversity, it must be remembered that preserving it imposes a massive cost on the already poor. A way must be found to preserve

without bringing development in poor countries to a standstill.

5. A number of existing international agreements have been formulated for the protection of biological diversity. In the general area of conservation of wild fauna and flora, Malaysia has demonstrated its commitment to conservation by signing such international agreements including the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Flora and Fauna. At this juncture we are also looking at the Ramsar Convention for the protection of Wetlands, the Bonn Convention for the protection of migratory species and the World Heritage sites convention.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

6. I must once again stress that all these conventions are designed to benefit not just Malaysia but also the whole world. The Malaysian Government has also promulgated policies towards this end, including the passing of laws and enactments. A primary law is the Forestry Act of 1984 which provides for the establishment of a permanent forest estate comprising productive, protected and amenity forests. The permanent forest estate of Malaysia today totalled 12.74 million hectares of which about 29% is protected or maintained as amenity forests. 12.74 million hectares make up about 38% of the total land area of Malaysia. If tree plantations are included about 74% of Malaysia is covered by trees.

7. It may be argued that tree plantations are not forests. But even if they do not have the same range of biodiversity as the natural forests, they do contribute to the photosynthetic process, the water cycle and other natural functions of greenery.

8. The measures taken to preserve Malaysian forests carry a considerable cost not only in terms of maintenance but also in depriving the people and the nation much land for living, working and cultivating. The price of land naturally increases as less land becomes available for agriculture and industry. Since what we are doing contribute to the better environment of the rest of the world, some thought should be given to the sacrifices by Malaysia and other developing countries.

9. Still we have dedicated ourselves to preserving the forests. To reduce forest exploitation we have established forest plantations of species that have short harvest periods.

10. National parks and wildlife are catered for through various Federal Acts and state enactments. A total of 1.485 million hectares have been set aside as parks, wildlife reserves and sanctuaries. The six percent of Peninsular Malaysia so reserved, most of it in pristine condition, represents one of the highest of such percentages in this part of the world. This figure compares well with or even exceeds that of some developed countries of the western world, many of which are quite vocal on the subject of conservation.

11. We in Malaysia have a long and mature history of managing conservation

areas. Taman Negara, for example, created in 1939 was the first National Park in South-East Asia to meet today's international criteria for a national park. This park remains essentially the same as when it was first established.

12. The Environmental Quality Act sets standards for water and air quality and provides for mandatory environmental impact statements. We have not only sought to implement a high standard of environmental quality but are also determined to be a leader in this endeavour in the region.

Ladies and gentlemen,

13. In October last year at the Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting or CHOGM, I had the pleasure and privilege of presenting a document on the environment for the consideration of that important body. This document was adopted and came to be known as the Langkawi Declaration on the Environment.

14. This declaration marked a new level of understanding and awareness of the importance of the environment in today's world. It also was the fruit of our own environmental awareness which had been nurtured and developed over the years by many different organisations and institutions in this country. Today we are celebrating the 50th anniversary of one of the organisations in Malaysia that has helped nurture this consideration of nature, its conservation and of the environment.

15. The Langkawi Declaration recognises that environmental problems transcend national boundaries. Therefore there is a need for all nations to cooperate if these environmental problems are to be solved. The declaration promotes afforestation in developing countries to arrest the deterioration of land and water resources. It also calls on countries to upgrade efforts in sustainable forestry. It calls for the support of activities related to the conservation of biological diversity and genetic resources including the conservation of significant areas of virgin forests and other habitats. The unanimity with which this document was supported demonstrates the oneness and the will of the Commonwealth nations to carry out and implement the terms of the Declaration.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

16. It is to the Malayan Nature Society and other responsible conservation bodies that we in the government look to for feedback on how these national and international policies are actually working out in practice.

17. There must be a sharing of efforts and responsibility for maintaining biodiversity. The numerous species that are being preserved are not all harmless. Some are dangerous to health. To ask only the developing countries to preserve them is to expose the peoples of these countries to unacceptable threats to their well-being. It is difficult to convince a man who is about to be eaten by a tiger or trampled by an elephant or dying of typhus or malaria that he is helping to preserve biodiversity. It is imperative that the developed

countries do their bit for biodiversity.

18. The developed countries are not only rich and advanced in technology but they have vast unpopulated and unused land. The deserts of the western United States can in part at least be grown with trees using the vast resources of underground water. Some of the flora and fauna can be transferred to these new forests.

19. Lest there be protest over this idea, let me remind you that quite a substantial area of these deserts together with their abundant aquifers have been developed as resort cities complete with vast golf courses and artificial lakes on which stand luxury hotels. Additionally it must be remembered that tropical plants and flowers have been and are being cultivated in the developed countries under artificial climatic conditions because they have commercial value. In suggesting that some of the deserts be converted to forests, I am not being facetious. Indeed if developed countries want to they can easily reforest vast areas of the Sahel, the sub-Saharan areas where the poorest people in the world are dying by the thousands every day from lack of food. Let us not trot out the spurious argument that deserts are essential for biodiversity and must remain untouched by the hands of man. They have been touched. If they can be forested, then a part of them should be forested. Reclaiming some of the deserts will not change the environment. Indeed a large part of these deserts are of recent origin, having been created by misuse by man and animals like the elephants.

Ladies and gentlemen,

20. We have today a gathering of eminent scientists, experts in different specialised fields related to conservation of nature and natural resources as well as the environment. It is your duty to assess the situation in this country accurately and fairly and to make constructive suggestions for the improvement of our present policies and efforts to conserve our rich resources, maintain our biodiversity while at the same time keeping a reasonable momentum of economic development. I assure you that the Government of Malaysia will examine all your suggestions for possible incorporation into our future plans.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

21. I wish you all a most successful Conference and pleasant stay in Malaysia. It is now my privilege and pleasure to declare open this International Conference on Biodiversity.