

OFFICIAL OPENING OF THE 14TH COMMONWEALTH FORESTRY CONFERENCE
SHANGRI-LA HOTEL, KUALA LUMPUR, 13 September 1993

It is a pleasure to be here today on the occasion of the official opening of the 14th Commonwealth Forestry Conference. Let me, first of all, thank the organisers for inviting me to address and officiate the opening of this conference. Let me also extend a very warm welcome to all our guests and participants and wish them a fruitful conference and a pleasant stay.

2. We have all witnessed how forestry has today emerged as a dominant issue high on the list of both the domestic and international agenda. As a country with substantial tropical forests, Malaysia has consistently voiced her concern over any unrestrained exploitation. The issue has to be viewed in its right perspective and approached in a balanced and holistic manner, taking into account not only the inter-relationship between environment and development, but also between forest and non-forest issues as well as between tropical and non-tropical forests.

3. Environmental problems confronting the world today are a result of global pollution for which the developed countries are mainly responsible. Deforestation in the tropics occurs much later than the widespread destruction of non-tropical forests in developed countries due to the agricultural and industrial revolutions as well as the expansionist past of these countries. Problems of sustainability beset not only tropical forests but also all other types of forests which have suffered from past destruction and are in danger of continuous degradation and decline from acid rains, pollution and fires. More importantly, the underlying causes of tropical deforestation are not orderly logging but rather poverty, indebtedness as well as the needs for fuel and land for agriculture, food and shelter.

4. Our quest for a balanced and fair approach to these global issues on forestry has now been acknowledged. In fact, it was reflected in the Langkawi Declaration on the environment adopted by the Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting (CHOGM) in Kuala Lumpur in October 1989.

5. The momentum gained from the Langkawi Declaration was consolidated in the Paris Declaration passed by the 10th World Forestry Congress in 1991, which addressed all types of forests in the world in the desired holistic way. Among other things the declaration called on decision-makers to commit themselves to the greening of the world, limit emission of greenhouse gases and pollutants and increase financial provisions to offset losses incurred by developing countries.

6. More than a year has passed since the forest principles were adopted. Apart from the decision taken by the United Nations Commission on Sustainable Development (CSD) to review forestry related matters under its multi-year thematic work programme at its session in 1995, there has been no significant implementation of these principles and other UNCED decisions on forestry. The initiative for the establishment of an independent world commission on forests and sustainable development appears to have faltered for lack of support from many countries. Yet, the necessary preparations have to be put in place to ensure a substantive and fruitful review by the CSD in 1995. Given the heavy and wide-ranging work programme of the CSD and that forests have emerged as an issue which demands our urgent attention and action, it is imperative that an inter-governmental task force on forestry be established under the aegis of the CSD to undertake the necessary preparations and consultations for the CSD review in 1995. This is a more constructive way to push for the effective implementation of the entire post-UNCED agenda on global forestry.

7. Despite efforts to develop and adopt a more balanced and holistic framework for global forestry, general perceptions, attitudes and thinking of developed countries are still focused on tropical forests. Promises for new and additional resources and the transfer of technology remain basically unfulfilled. Tropical forests continue to face unfair scrutiny and conditionalities while tropical timber is subjected to mounting pressures and threats of labelling, bans and boycotts.

8. The only set of internationally agreed standards on sustainability in existence is the one adopted by the International Tropical Timber Organisation (ITTO) which applies exclusively to tropical forests. Tropical forest countries which are members of ITTO have also given their commitment to the attainment of the ITTO sustainability target by the year 2000. What bothers us most is that non-tropical forests and timbers which compete with tropical timber in the same international timber market are not being subjected at all to any internationally agreed standards and commitment to sustainability. Yet we know that the practice of clear felling of miles and miles of temperate forests causes more environmental damage than the controlled selective logging practised in tropical forests.

9. This is a glaring case of double standards and a clear contradiction to the decisions of UNCED. It requires immediate redress. In the on-going negotiations for a successor agreement to the International Tropical Timber Agreement (ITTA) 1983, producer members have proposed the expansion of

the scope of the agreement to cover all timbers, so that non-tropical timbers can be subjected to the same sustainability criteria and all problems of discrimination and double standards can be effectively eliminated. Not surprisingly, this proposal has been rejected by consumers of the North.

10. The truth is consumers in the North have been dragging their feet on the issue of the sustainability of their non-tropical forests and timbers and have not shown any serious and sincere intention to make a concrete commitment to the sustainability of their forests even outside the ITTA. A recent effort by the ministerial conference on the protection of forest in Europe at Helsinki has been criticised as being too little too late and seriously lacking in clarity, substantiveness and time-frame. Forests are renewable natural resources and developed countries can redeem themselves by raising their forest cover to a respectable level through, perhaps, the conversion to forests of their heavily subsidised farms which are causing grievous harm to unsubsidised commodity export of developing countries.

11. The 14th Commonwealth Forestry Conference is the first being held after the historic Earth Summit which took place in Rio last year. In view of this and considering its pioneer effort in promoting a balanced approach to the global issues of forest and environment through the Langkawi Declaration, the Commonwealth is well placed to once again lead by example in the implementation of the UNCED decisions. Uncertainties clouding some of the existing international efforts on forestry, including the Tropical Forestry Action Programme (TFAP), give further credence to this emerging opportunity.

12. On the basis of this need, I would like to suggest that the initiative be launched to streamline the implementation of the UNCED forest principles within the Commonwealth with emphasis on the following:

(a) Acceptance by all that states have the sovereign right to exploit and manage their forest resources on a sustainable basis taking into account the need for social and economic development as well as the protection of the forests and the environment;

(b) Sustainable forest management and the sustainability criteria should be made applicable to all types of forests and timbers;

(c) Efforts towards the greening of the world should be the main responsibility of those countries with low forest cover and should be pursued in the context of increasing the world's forest cover to 30 percent of its land area by the year 2000;

(d) Developing countries should be provided with new and additional resources and be given access to environmentally-sound technologies on favourable terms in order to enhance their capacity to sustainably manage, conserve and develop their forests;

(e) The promotion of a supportive international economic climate and trade in forest products based on non-discriminatory and multilateral agreed rules and procedures, as well as the removal of tariff and non-tariff barriers and impediments to trade in forest products; and

(f) The conservation and sustainable use of biological diversity as provided for in the convention of biological diversity should take cognisance of the importance of forests, particularly tropical forests, as the main repository of terrestrial diversity.

13. Malaysia has been known for her outspokenness on global issues concerning forests and the environment. Following our active participation in the negotiations at UNCED, we have stepped up our national efforts towards implementing the decisions of UNCED. These include conducting a national seminar on the follow-up to the Rio Earth Summit, signing of the framework convention on climate change, incorporating sustainable development into the governmental and administrative framework, formulating a national action plan on biological diversity and assuming the first chairmanship of the CSD.

14. On forestry, our forest and tree cover remain at almost 60 percent and more than 70 percent respectively and we are fully committed to our pledge of retaining a minimum 50 percent level of forest and tree cover in perpetuity. In this connection, our Permanent Forest Estate (PFE) has been expanded from 12.7 million to 14.1 million hectares. A total of 4.7 million hectares of forests outside the PFE representing 14.3 percent of the total land area, has been dedicated for the protection of biodiversity and environment. The National Forestry Policy has been updated in 1992 and we have recently amended the National Forestry Act to strengthen its provisions and to introduce stiffer penalties for forest offences. The state of Sarawak is adjusting its log production in accordance with the recommendations of the Cranbrook Report by 1994 and has undertaken specific programmes to cater for the needs and welfare of the indigenous people who are directly dependent on the forests. At the international level, Malaysia as a member of ITTO, has given her full commitment to the attainment of the ITTO sustainability target by the year 2000, and is involved in collaborative work in forestry on a bilateral basis with a number of countries including Japan,

United Kingdom, Germany, New Zealand, Canada, the United States and Sweden.

15. I believe that on the basis of these measures, Malaysia is in a good position to fulfill her commitment towards the sustainable management, conservation and development of her forests. This should give us the courage and confidence to meet the challenges and developments in global forestry in the years to come.

16. With these remarks, ladies and gentlemen, I have great pleasure in declaring open the 14th Commonwealth Forestry Conference.