

THE INTERNATIONAL CONFERENCE ON WETLANDS AND DEVELOPMENT

HYATT REGENCY SAUJANA, SUBANG, 9 OCTOBER 1995

It is indeed an honour for me to be here today amongst experts on wetlands development. I am also honoured to be given the opportunity to officiate at the opening of this Conference. To all the foreign participants, I bid them a warm "Selamat Datang". I hope you can find the time to look around this city of Kuala Lumpur and also other parts of our green country.

2. It is acknowledged that wetlands and their resources play a critical role in supporting the lives of millions of people throughout the world. Wetlands not only provide a wide range of valuable products to society, including fish, fodder and timber, but also perform a number of natural biophysical functions such as flow regulation and groundwater recharge. They are therefore relevant for research and understanding to ensure that their contributions to the development of the ecosystems are maintained.

3. As we meet here today, these life-sustaining systems remain under threat. Many wetlands especially in the North have been destroyed or degraded through over-exploitation or environmentally unsound development. As usual people at large are the biggest destroyers and polluters. Accordingly only they are in a position to protect their environment, particularly the wetlands. They need to be committed to sustaining the environment, whether it is wetlands, drylands, marine land or the highlands. All too often, however, this responsibility is left to the government. But no government can fight against the continuous and massive pollution that people perpetrate, whether deliberately or through circumstances. Of course, when people are poor the pollution is more extensive. Unable to pay for waste disposal or to dispose of it with care for the environment, they just throw their waste around them. The result is pollution and destruction. Poverty is therefore the biggest cause of pollution and they who impoverish people are directly guilty of polluting.

4. Malaysia has more than three million hectares of wetlands covering nearly 10 percent of its land area. The main wetlands are lakes, swamp forests, mangroves, swamps, shallow coastal waters and coral reefs. Many of these areas are critical for production of fish, timber and other forest products, for water supply, flood mitigation and also recreation. Estimates have been made that Malaysian wetlands contribute over US\$2 billion to the economy every year directly and indirectly.

5. Many Malaysian wetlands support unique forests of valuable trees such as mangroves. The swamp forests of Selangor, Pahang

and Sarawak are some of the best and most important examples of these in the world. It may not be possible to preserve every square meter of these swamps but where it is preserved it can already generate wealth through the great interest in eco-tourism shown lately. The Matang mangrove forest in Perak State is internationally recognised as one of the best managed wetlands in the world, with a sustainable forest management system of nearly 100 years, which has maintained high yields of forest products. At the same time, it has supported one of Malaysia's largest inshore fisheries and remains rich with wildlife.

6. Scientists from around the world have come to study wetland habitats and species in Malaysia. Strategic research is an important prerequisite for sustainable resource management and it is encouraging that several Malaysian scientists have now become leading experts in these fields.

7. Three years ago, at the Rio de Janeiro Earth Summit, the international community adopted the Rio de Janeiro Declaration on Environment and Development as well as Agenda 21. The Declaration set out fundamental principles while Agenda 21 spelt out specific programmes of action. Collectively the Declaration and the programme of action underscored the common resolve of the global community to safeguard the environment while promoting an ecofriendly development process. It was agreed that environmental considerations would be factored into the development process, for the benefit of the present and future generations.

8. It was also agreed that developed countries would assist developing countries with adequate and additional resources to enable them to make the transition towards an eco-friendly development process, often referred to as sustainable development. While the vast majority of developing countries have abided by the Rio compact, regrettably the developed countries have not fulfilled their half of the bargain.

9. Although many developing countries including Malaysia are prepared, and in fact are committed to play our part for our collective good, we will not be held hostage by those bent on retarding the development process of developing countries. The onus of change towards sustainable development must be borne equitably by all. Developing countries made earnest commitments to participate in what was to be a new global effort to save the planet from environmental damage, encouraged by the expectation of assistance by way of additional and new financial resources and technology transfer. These have not been forthcoming. The Conventions have been caught up in wrangling over procedures and interpretations of agreed texts. And developed countries see

in the concern for environmental protection only opportunities to sell the technology that they have developed for profit.

10. The task of caring for our environment including the wetlands involves the entire spectrum of society. The public and private sectors as well as the rest of society can and must make their contributions. Given the increasingly important role which the private sector plays as the engine of growth, the private sector must strengthen its commitment to care for the environment. I am happy to note the involvement and support of several local members of the private sector to this Conference. It is a clear manifestation of their serious concern for the environment.

11. I believe that local NGOs can also play a proactive role in the conservation of the environment. For this to happen they need to become highly professional, to focus on real issues affecting society and to understand the balance that must be reached between development and environment. NGOs must accept the fact that nothing damages the environment more than poverty. Huge forests have been totally decimated because the only fuel the poor can afford is wood. To use other fuel they need wealth and wealth can only come through wealth-creating development. The small environmental sacrifice which has to be made in order to develop is far less than the damage due to unmitigated poverty.

12. Admittedly wealth, through mass consumption, will also contribute towards pollution. But there is much that the rich can do to reduce their polluting ways. Certainly they can reduce wasteful consumption, as, for example, the emission of carbon dioxide from heedless fuel burning. By being willing to pay more for their luxuries they can subsidise the installation of various pollution control measures. Indeed they can pay to preserve the wetlands and other natural heritage without, for example, forcing the poor countries to preserve their forest in order to absorb the noxious gases produced by the rich.

13. I understand that following your last two days of deliberations, you have agreed in principle to establish a new global organisation to sustain and restore wetlands and their resources world-wide.

14. As you create a new global organisation, I hope you will bear in mind the need of developing countries to develop, and that the preservation of the wetlands must be equitably shared between the rich and the poor.