

## **THE LAUNCHING OF THE CRYSTAL RAINFOREST AWARENESS WEEK**

PUTRA WORLD TRADE CENTRE, 30 MARCH 1996

I wish to thank the Organisers for inviting me to officially launch the Crystal Rainforest Awareness Week here today.

2. Not since man's rape and plunder of nature worldwide have environmental issues become more a universal point of concern. In Malaysia, our concern for the environment is just as serious and caring especially on the need to ensure that the rich, resource-laden tropical rainforests that carpet our land with such evergreen abundance are preserved.

3. The tropical rainforest is by far the richest natural habitat on earth, home to an incredibly diverse array of flora and fauna. The rainforest is also an integral part of the planet's self-regulating support-system, controlling climatic and hydrological cycles, and of course acting as a carbon sink to replenish the atmosphere with life sustaining oxygen.

4. Yet, given its importance in the life of this planet and those who populate it, and the fact that it has taken millions of years to transform into the wondrous complexity we know today, the rainforest is unimaginably fragile.

5. Not merely because modern machinery can deforest vast tracts of land at an unprecedented pace, but because the environmental consequences of such devastations are potentially catastrophic; uncontrolled exploitation of rainforest resources is a precursor to the extinction of plant and animal species, the degradation of natural resources, desertification, ecosystem destruction and climatic chaos - in short, a biological holocaust of global proportions.

6. And, in the event of such a tragedy occurring, man would certainly be the loser.

7. Therefore wanton destruction of the rainforest signifies so much more than the disappearance of a few flora and fauna in some secluded corner of the world. Rather, it is a matter that concerns the very future of the planet earth, the only home we have in this universe.

8. It is for this reason that the more we understand the nature of nature's fragile interdependence, the greater the need to protect and preserve this natural heritage.

9. That is why we are here today. We are here to articulate this need. And we are here to ensure we do whatever is necessary to protect and preserve our natural heritage.

10. However do not be mistaken and misled into thinking that the need to safeguard the bounties with which we have been blessed can only be achieved through a halt in the progress towards development.

11. Far from it. Conservation of our environment does not mean we must retreat to the Dark Ages. Our destiny lies not only in the protection of our natural environment but also in ensuring continued development too. For without development we have no future either.

12. The question then arises as to how we should resolve this need for nature's renewable resources to contribute towards national advancement while at the same time preserving our natural heritage.

13. The solution is simplicity itself. It lies in an environmentally sound and sustainable development.

14. This translates into the intelligent implementation of thoughtfully conceived policies that reconcile the fulfilment of human needs with a responsible, caring attitude towards the natural world.

15. Indeed, sustainable socio-economic development has been the policy of the Malaysian Government. And consistent with this policy, some 20 million hectares or two-thirds of the nation's total land area, remains under natural forest and tree cover. The Government has emphatically undertaken the responsibility to ensure at least 50 percent of Malaysia's total land area remain under permanent forest cover.

16. The fragile complexity of the rainforest must be analysed and understood holistically before decisions about development are made. Only then can the necessary balance between the protection we aspire to and the skilful, sustainable use of the rainforest's resources be achieved. And only then can we harvest the seeds of our destiny.

17. We must study the trees and the forests so that we will be able to maximise the usage of everything that we extract. It is distressing to learn that only 20 percent of the trees cut down is utilised. Eighty percent is burnt, producing carbon-dioxide, soot and haze. But today we have the skills and the knowledge to utilise 80 percent of the trees while the balance can be disposed of with minimal pollution.

18. We must manage our forests from a biological perspective. We must learn the dynamics of forest regeneration and record the reservoir of knowledge contained within. From these we can

reduce waste and reduce the need to exploit the resources of the forests. We will find alternative sources of wealth.

19. Exceptionally rich and larger areas of the rainforest could then be preserved as national parks and reserves to ensure minimal disturbance of the ecosystem. To Taman Negara, Belum and the Endau- Rompin National Park which already illustrate our commitment to this principle, other parks can be added.

20. This is the true meaning and the benefit of sustainable management of the rainforest. We will not only be preserving the forests, but we will be adding to the body of knowledge which can contribute to a cleaner and healthier life while reaping the commercial value of the inherent wealth of nature's endowment.

21. There is a viable economic argument for saving rainforests not normally propounded by conservationists. For contrary to what certain shortsighted quarters would have us believe, forests can provide a continuous sustainable source of resources despite working within prescribed ecological limitations.

22. Timber accounts for only ten percent of renewable forest resources. Great economic potential lies in fibre, fruits, natural latex and medicinal plants which can also be harvested. In fact one in every four modern medicines contains compounds derived from rainforest species. And there should be more if we only scientifically investigate all the herbal cures prescribed by people who live in or near our forests.

23. Furthermore, science informs us that as our supply of fossil fuels dwindles, we will surely find ourselves looking towards the plant kingdom for alternative energy sources. The tree plantations which have enriched Malaysia, the rubber, oil palms, cocoa, spices and flowers, have all come from natural forests. It is for us to identify new plants or trees to cultivate to meet all our needs. This is a field which we have hardly explored despite the richness of the plant life in our tropical rain- forests.

24. This fact of nature's potential emphasises further the necessity to conserve our valuable forest and to manage carefully and even lovingly the species-rich sites.

25. To further maintain the integrity of our forests, all our management programmes should be monitored. We should work towards attaining a sustainable logging industry, improve ways in which tropical timbers are used, encourage and support active reforestation, devise less damaging methods of

harvesting, reduce waste production and develop more equitable and stable markets to meet domestic and international needs.

26. In sustaining the delicate ecosystem of our rainforest we will be helping to maintain its natural biodiversity whilst stabilising local climatic and hydrological conditions.

27. Furthermore, I see no reason why we should not actively promote training and education programmes which will equip our people not only with the skills of forest management but also the loving and caring attitude towards our forests. In the future only such trained and qualified people should be allowed to be involved in the extraction of our forest resources.

28. It is hoped that the launch of the Crystal Rainforest Awareness Week will provide a thought-provoking insight into the challenge that lies before us. We no longer have the luxury of time. Nor can we feign ignorance of the issues at hand.

29. We must rekindle our respect for the environment. And we must do it now. Effectively. Selectively. And Unilaterally if necessary.

30. There is so much to be done. But we can achieve so much more once we set our minds to the task at hand. After all, immediate action is ultimately superior to the counterproductivity of complex and emotive debates on the virtues of environmental conservation.

31. The earth is a precious place. Let us preserve it with all our strength, all our might and all our heart for ourselves, for our children and for the future.

32. And should we succeed, there will come again a day when we will enjoy a world where the warmth of the land, the freshness of the air, the sparkle of the water and the sweetness of the perfumes of the flowers and trees are still there.

33. On that note, I have great pleasure in launching the Crystal Rainforest Awareness Week.