

An aerial photograph of a winding river, likely the Colorado River, flowing through a vast, arid landscape. The river is a light blue-grey color, contrasting with the reddish-brown and tan hues of the dry, cracked earth. The river's path is sinuous, creating a series of loops and curves as it moves across the frame. The texture of the ground is highly detailed, showing deep, irregular cracks and ridges in the soil.

SAVING THE PLANET

**HOW TO SHAPE AN
ENVIRONMENTALLY
SUSTAINABLE
GLOBAL ECONOMY**

Lester R. Brown

Christopher Flavin

Sandra Postel

**The Worldwatch
Environmental
Alert Series**

Saving the Planet

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Linda Starke, Series Editor

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Lester R. Brown, Christopher Flavin, and Sandra Postel

Foreword

June 1992 will be a crucial month for the world. Representatives of nearly every country, including numerous heads of state and scores of ministers, will meet in Rio de Janeiro for the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development (UNCED). Also present will be environmental experts and activists of every stripe, and thousands of journalists from around the world. It is for this audience, as well as for our hundreds of thousands of regular readers, that we have written *Saving the Planet*.

The Brazil conference, known as the "Earth Summit," marks the twentieth anniversary of the United Nations Conference on the Human Environment held in Stockholm. It presents a unique opportunity to reverse the downward spiral that has characterized the health of

the natural environment and, to a disturbing degree, the human condition, during the past two decades.

On many fronts, from slowing population growth to stabilizing climate, the nineties is the turnaround decade. If we fail to change our ways in these next few years, environmental degradation will lead to economic decline and the two processes could begin feeding on each other.

Ending the appalling conditions of disease and malnutrition in which a fifth of the world's people live is now dependent on environmental reforms as well as economic and social ones. Following on the heels of the widely acclaimed report of the World Commission on Environment and Development, which argued forcefully that economic development and environmental health are linked, the Brazil conference could translate insight into action.

Leaders attending the Earth Summit can have little doubt that the problems confronting them are far greater in scale and scope than those dealt with by the delegates in Stockholm. Although local air pollution was a major issue in 1972, for example, conditions are now worse in most cities—in some, dramatically so. Meanwhile, it has been somewhat overshadowed by more intractable global atmospheric problems such as ozone depletion and global warming.

But the world is also in a better position to do something than it was in Stockholm. For one, the cold war is over, with East and West cooperating for the first time in decades. And the ideological debates between North and South have become less strident, as some rich nations accept responsibility for global environmental problems, and as poor countries understand that their well-being is threatened by environmental decline. In

Rio, they will meet on common ground: the need to forge a worldwide effort to save the planet.

At the center of the Brazil conference is a planned Earth Charter, a document that has been compared by the UNCED Secretary General, Maurice Strong, to a Magna Carta or bill of rights for the planet. In the Charter and parallel Agenda 21 plan of action, the world community has a chance to go beyond the piecemeal policymaking that has marked the first two decades of ecological awareness, and to address the crucial linkages between various issues.

Perhaps for the first time, world leaders can move from responding to disasters to shaping environmentally healthy societies. The environment can then move to the center of economic decision making, where it belongs.

If the existing economic system is not sustainable, what would an environmentally sustainable one look like? This is the question we have addressed in the first half of the book. And while the outline is by necessity rough, some characteristics are clear. Such an economy has a population that is stable and in balance with its natural support systems, an energy system that does not raise the level of greenhouse gases and disrupt the earth's climate, and a level of material demand that neither exceeds the sustainable yield of forests, grasslands, or fisheries nor systematically destroys the other species with which we share the planet.

The extraordinary challenge confronting us is far clearer than it was in Stockholm in 1972. For example, scientists estimate that with a business-as-usual approach, one fifth of all plant and animal species will disappear over the next 20 years. Merely cutting this rate in half will not suffice. It would only postpone the time

when collapsing ecosystems lead to a collapse of civilization itself.

The next step is for the world community to articulate a vision of a sustainable society, and for each individual country to develop its own plans for a national economy that can endure. The Earth Summit provides such an opportunity, particularly in the national reports being prepared. Finally, a series of concrete policies are needed, such as those discussed in the second half of the book: carbon taxes on fossil fuels, extensive family planning programs, incentives for reforestation, and the establishment of global environmental restoration funds.

The term sustainable development is widely used throughout the world today, but few understand what it means. What is lacking in the corridors of power is an ecologically defined vision at the United Nations headquarters in New York, at the World Bank in Washington, or in national capitals such as Mexico City or Tokyo. National governments and international development agencies still focus on the environmental assessment of projects rather than the formulation of development strategies that will lead to environmentally sustainable economies.

The focus of the Rio conference, as mandated by the U.N. General Assembly, is admirably comprehensive, but this may also be a limitation. With dozens of substantive issues on the table for discussion, the big picture may be lost. And with parallel efforts under way to prepare major treaties on climate and biodiversity for consideration in Brazil, efforts could become fragmented.

It is unclear at this point whether the Earth Summit will be successful in articulating a bold, pathbreaking vision, or if it will be able to ignite the kind of international institutional reforms and financial transfers to de-

veloping countries that are so badly needed. Certainly, it will be an unprecedented test of the world's capacity for collective action on a set of issues that will confront us for decades to come.

The real challenge is to go beyond viewing environmental issues as discrete problems, and begin moving to the basic economic and social reforms that are needed if we are to save the planet. And, indeed, to save ourselves.

This is the first in a new series of books, the Environmental Alert Series, to be produced by the Worldwatch Institute. We see it as an important addition to the stable of Institute publications—the Worldwatch Paper series, started in 1975; the annual *State of the World*, begun in 1984; and *World Watch* magazine, produced since 1988.

The series aims to provide readers with relatively short but incisive and lively books that will assess pressing problems and issues of the day. They will be written by the Institute's experienced research staff. Independent writer/editor Linda Starke will edit each book in the series.

Like *State of the World*, the Environmental Alert Series will be produced in the United States by W.W. Norton, which has published Worldwatch books since the Institute's inception in 1974. We hope the books will be published in all the world's major languages and many others as well, eventually matching the 23 versions in which *State of the World 1991* appeared.

Although this first book takes an exceptionally broad view of the many issues of concern to Worldwatch, future titles will focus on more specific topics. The next two, for example, will consider limits on material consumption and the growing scarcity of water. We hope to provide comprehensive, up-to-date information and

fresh insights on a range of pressing topics, with room for a more comprehensive treatment than is possible in our other publications.

Environmental awareness has reached new heights in most countries in the nineties, but the world has a long way to go in raising environmental literacy to the point where the process of reform becomes self-sustaining. We hope that this book will play a small part in that endeavor.

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