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## United Nations Organisations : Shouldering a Pivotal Responsibility to Protect the Environment

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Received: 01 Jan 2018, Accepted: 15 Jan 2018 ; Published on line: 31 Jan 2018

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### **Abstract**

Science has revolutionized human life drastically and the development of advance technology has facilitated us to lead longer, more pleasant, more comfortable lives. People are touring in the space frequently and causing threat to environment. We have paid a heavy price for the improvement in the quality of our life. The rapid growths of technological inventions have empowered some of the countries, with the deadliest of atomic and nuclear weapons which have the potential of exterminating all life from our planet. Rapid industrialization has left with us polluted rivers, contaminated soil, depleted wildlife and exhausted natural resources. The greedy conducts of human beings are responsible for pollution of environment and a serious ecological imbalance, which can be disastrous for mankind. The scientists have estimated that if the extraction of metal resources from the bowels of the Earth continues at the present rate, aluminum, iron, zinc, copper, lead are likely to last for limited periods. We can see long queues of people for a bucket of drinking water in every small, big or metropolitan city because rivers and others sources of potable water are the soft places to drain solid and other kinds of human wastes. In dense populated areas, poses a great danger to the environment which is not only harmful to the human health but also to the animal life.

The activities of modern man are deeply affecting the chemical composition of the atmosphere in the form of Ozone depletion, implicating the health of the present and forthcoming generations. Environmentalists have been warning the people to reduce the use of chlorofluoro-carbons (CFCs) to control the depletion of Ozone layer. The whole world is showing concern for Global warming due to Green House Effects. Maldives and Nepal have convened their cabinet meetings inside the sea and on the Everest respectively to highlight the issue before the world. United Nations Organisations, being an international body is focusing on protection of environment through its various programmes such as UNEP, IPCC, UNFCCC etc, From 1972 Stockholm conference to Copenhagen Conference (2009), UNO has sensitized the nations and masses to come forward in saving our Earth and its environment.

This paper highlights the major issues of world environment and role of UNO and its modus operandi in combating the global concern for Environment and natural resources.

**Key words :** Environment, Global Warming, UNEP, Natural Resources.

## **Introduction**

The term 'Environment' which means surrounding, is considered as a composite term for the conditions in which organisms live and thus consists of air, water and sunlight, which are the basic needs of all living beings and plants to carry out their life functions. The environment also encompasses other non-living things like temperature, wind, soil etc. In general words; environment consists of both biotic and abiotic factors. We can simply define it as "Environment is the representative of physical components of the earth wherein man is the important factor influencing his environment." (Verma, et al. 2005). Man has no existence sans environment. The ancient history of the world proves that all the religions and ideologies have been recognizing the importance of neat and clean atmosphere for inclusive development of a specific locality. We have a rich tradition of paying proper respects to God and other natural elements before starting any important business in day to day life. Earth and its priceless resources provide us all the amenities for our survival but with the advent of new tools and techniques of exploration of natural wealth, we are deteriorating our environment in the modern times indiscriminately.

### **Environmental Crises :**

Crises exist both in the physical and social environment. Man has to avert them and improve his environment for the survival and welfare of his species. One crisis which man has created for himself through his own actions is that caused by land dereliction. Everybody wishes to have palatial houses and for this they are destroying forests, digging earth, manufacturing steel and producing concrete and cement. The reckless destruction of forests and despoliation of pastures have disturbed some food chains found in nature and have caused extinction of some species of animals, thereby creating an ecological problem.

By the thoughtless disposal of industrial and other wastes man has created problems of water pollution for himself. Similarly the disposal of sewage of big cities into the rivers reduces the level of oxygen in the water which kills aquatic plants and animals such as fishes and crabs. The contaminated water is the main reason of epidemics such as typhoid, cholera and hepatitis etc. (Sharma 1981).

The pollution of rivers is not a problem peculiar to India. The major rivers of developed and more industrialized countries like USA, UK and Russia have also been polluted. It is a tragic irony that air, the very breath of our life, is being progressively polluted by factories and mechanized means of transport. Radiation is another threat to environment and depleting the Ozone layer. Related to ozone depletion and partially of the same is the Green House Effect to which the Earth is being increasingly subjected. Mahatma Gandhi had rightly opined that “The earth has everything man needs; only it cannot satisfy his greed”. But man’s overpowering greed has urged him to exploit natural resources that have further worsened the situation of environment.

### **Role of United Nations in Protection of World Environment :**

United Nations has come in a big way to protect the environment. UN has been successful in Nuclear Weapons Test Ban Treaty in 1968. It was followed by another treaty on Oil Pollution in Seas in 1969 and treat on Outer Space of 1971. UN has been organizing Conference and Summits world wide to aware the international society to reduce the deterioration of environment. Some notable conference are the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development (UNCED), commonly known as Earth Summit, was held at Rio de Janeiro (Brazil) in June 1992. More than 100 Head of the States participated there and accepted a comprehensive work plan ‘Agenda 21’ for sustainable development.

Another sound effort of UN is the Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD) known informally as the Biodiversity Convention, which is an international legally binding treaty. The Convention was opened for signature at the Earth Summit in Rio de Janeiro on 5 June 1992, 168 nations have signed and it was enacted on 29 December 1993. The CBD has 193 members at present including India. It has three main goals :

1. Conservation of biological diversity (or biodiversity)
2. Sustainable use of its components
3. Fair and equitable sharing of benefits arising from genetic resources. (Gorae 2010)

An international body called United Nations Environment Program (UNEP) was constituted to promote world-wide cooperation in dealing with environmental protection issues in 1972. Its headquarters are situated at Nairobi in Kenya. It is monitoring its program called as ‘Earthwatch’ It has been venturing projects on several aspects like climate, ozone layer, water sanitation, marine environment, urban environment etc. UNIP has close links with more than 6000 non-governmental bodies across the world associated with environment. UNEP is assessing global, regional and national environmental conditions and trends and developing international and national environmental

instruments. It is also strengthening institutions for the wise management of the environment (Deepak, et. al. 2006).

The another key body of the UN is Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) tasked with reviewing and assessing the most recent scientific, technical and socio-economic information produced worldwide, relevant to the understanding of climate change notably caused by human activity. IPCC was constituted in 1988 by the World Meteorological Organization (WMO) and the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP), two organizations of the United Nations. The IPCC was awarded the 2007 Nobel Peace Prize. Climate change or global warming is attributed to greenhouse gases emitted during the reckless, greedy or unavoidable use of energy resources. It poses a great danger to mankind and the world. The United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) signed by 155 countries in 1992 made far-reaching agreements to meet this challenge. In 1997 Kyoto Protocol set the target and time frame to accomplish the agreement. (Sharma 2004). UNFCCC convened its COP-15 in December 2009 at Copenhagen, Denmark. Representatives of 192 nations from across the world participated in the crucial summit. The Copenhagen accord recognized that climate change is a big danger in the present times and the world should keep any further increase in temperature below 2 Degrees Celsius to reduce this danger.

Climate change has hit islands hard with some in danger of disappearing completely as sea levels rise. The most significant impacts of climate change are on sea level and sea-surface temperature (SST) rise. In 2007, the United Nation's Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) warned that a rise in sea levels of between 18 and 59 centimeters by 2100 would be enough to make the Maldives virtually uninhabitable. The report anticipates an average temperature rise of four-to-five degrees Centigrade by the end of the century. The change is primarily due to the excessive use of fossil fuels although other reasons are also the contributory factors. According to the UN report India will be among the countries most affected (Bhandari 2009). In 2009 the world's first underwater cabinet meeting organized by the Maldivian president was a symbolic cry for help over rising sea levels that threaten the tropical archipelago's existence (Kumar 2010). IPCC held its Workshop on Sea Level Rise and Ice Sheet Instabilities at Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia from 21-24 June 2010 and submitted its report to the UN.

N-Habitat is also one of the agencies associated with protection of environment. In the area of environment, UN-HABITAT assists local authorities on Basic Urban Services, such as waste management, water, sanitation; and Sustainable urban mobility and transportation issues; Urban poverty and environment nexus through capacity building, providing technical advise, guidelines, tools, etc. In 1977, the United Nations Conference on Desertification (UNCOD) adopted a Plan of Action to

Combat Desertification (UNCOD) adopted a Plan of Action to Combat Desertification (PACD). Despite serious efforts, UNEP concluded in 1991 that the problem of land degradation in arid, semi-arid and dry sub-humid areas had intensified. In December 1992, the General Assembly agreed and adopted resolution 47/188 to establish an Intergovernmental Negotiating Committee (INCD) to prepare, by June 1994, a Convention to Combat Desertification, particularly in Africa.

Since the Ozone depletion is a global problem, serious efforts are being made at international level to control it. The UN, in the pursuit of its environmental programme, has also decided to regulate the use of CFCs and production by various countries. India has also signed Montreal Protocol which aims at eliminating emission of CFCs in a phased manner. The time limit has been set 2000 for developed countries and 2010 for developing countries. UNEP has warned the world community and has given a slogan “Global Warming is a Global Warning” (Gupta 2010).

The UN is always describing the environment protection as a core issue in its key plans. Millennium Development Goals (MDG) is a multidimensional agenda of UN started in September 2000, in which world leaders joined their hands to a new global partnership to reduce extreme poverty and setting out a series of time-bound targets – with a deadline of 2015. MDG has eight targets and goal number 7 is meant for ensuring Environmental Sustainability. Through this UN aims to integrate the principles of sustainable development into country policies and programmes and reverse the loss of environmental resources. Reducing the biodiversity loss, by 2010, is a significant target of UN in the area of environment.

Tourism is rapidly growing in the world because of improve living standards, rising incomes, competitive tour packages, and improvement in transport facilities around the world. This growth can boost economic benefits of host communities and countries. At the same time, it will leave negative impact on environmental and socio-cultural of such communities. Natural resources depletion and environmental degradation associated with tourism activities are matters of concern in tourism-rich regions. In many mountain regions, small islands, and coastal areas, tourists are generating much waste during their recreation and enjoyment. The Mount Everest is becoming the world’s highest dumping spot of plastic and other non-biodegradable wastes left by the tourists. Intensive tourism and recreational activities in coastal areas can not only lead to beach destruction and coastal degradation, but can also threaten coral reefs and other marine ecosystems.

United Nations strives for sustainable tourism and a ‘Global Code of Ethics for Tourism’ has been introduced by the World Tourism Organization (UNWTO) in late 1999, setting a framework for

sustainable development of international tourism. It includes nine articles outlining the basic rules for governments, tour operators, developers, travel agents, workers, as well as host communities and the tourists themselves. The United Nations General Assembly adopted the Global Code of Ethics for Tourism at the end of 2001. In 2002, the UN World Summit on Sustainable Development in Johannesburg addressed sustainable tourism in its 'Agenda 21', mentioning to Develop programmes, including education and training programmes, that encourage people to participate in eco-tourism, enable indigenous and local communities to develop and benefit from eco-tourism, and enhance stakeholder cooperation in tourism development and heritage preservation, in order to improve the protection of the environment, natural resources and cultural heritage.

The United Nations has formulated a treaty to avoid the threats from recycling of ships. In September 2010 Turkey has signed a UN backed treaty promoting less hazardous recycling of ships. The agreement will ensure that ships do not pose risk to human health and the environment. (Down to Earth 2010).

**Symbolic and People Oriented Missions of UN :** Besides above programmes, UN has declared certain days and years for a specific environmental activity like 5 June is World Environment Day (WED). It is a day that stimulates awareness of the environment and enhances political attention and public action. The United Nations Conference on the Human Environment was held from 5–16 June 1972. The first World Environment Day was on 1973. World Environment Day is similar to Earth Day and is hosted every year in a different city with a different theme and is commemorated with an international exposition in the week between the dates 5 to 11 June. Few examples of WED are :

<b>Year</b>	<b>Theme</b>
1974	Only One Earth
1977	Ozone Layer Environmental Concerns
1984	Desertification
1986	A Tree for Peace
1987	Environment and Shelter : More Than A Roof
1988	When People Put the Environment First, Development Will Last
1989	Global Warming; Global Warning
1990	Children and the Environment

- 2000            The Environment Millennium – Time to Act
- 2009            Your Planet Needs You – Unite to Combat Climate Change
- 2010            Many Species. One Planet. One Future

UN has marked some other days, viz., UN World Water Day – March 22 UN World Day to Combat Desertification and Drought – June 17 UN World Habitat Day – first Monday in October International Day for the Preservation of the Ozone Layer September 16 International Mountain Day, Dec. 11 International Day for Natural Disaster Reduction Second Wednesday of October 2011 has been declared the International Year of Forests 2011 by the United Nations, to raise awareness and strengthen then sustainable forest management, conservation and sustainable development of all types of forests for the benefit of current and future generations. On the same pattern UN declared a particular year related to environment, viz.,

International Year of the Ocean (IYO)	- 1998
International Year of Mountains (IYM)	- 2002
International Year of Ecotourism (IYE)	- 2002
International Year of Freshwater (IFV)	- 2003
International Year of Deserts and Desertification	- 2006
International Year of Planet	- 2008

### **International Year of Biodiversity**

In the series of relentless efforts of saving environment, we can quote here another people oriented scheme of this world body i.e. ‘United Nations Billion Tree Campaign’. Plant for the Planet : Billion Tree Campaign is a worldwide free planting campaign of United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) with the goal of a billion trees being planted during 2007. Under this campaign, anyone, from individuals and communities, to corporation and nations are asked to enter tree-planting pledges on a special websites set up by UNEP. The idea was taken from Professor Wangari Maathai, winner of the Nobel Peace Prize in 2004 and founder of Kenya’s Green Belt Movement.

Last but not least we can emphasis the UN role in tackling the issue in form of cooperation with more than 100 other agencies of the world. GEF is one of the notable forums among others. Global Environmental Facility (GEF) was established in October 1991 as a \$ 1 billion pilot program in the World Bank to assist in the protection of the global environment and to promote environmental



sustainable development. The United Nations Development Programme, the United Nations Environment Program, and the World Bank were the three initial partners implementing GEF projects. As part of the restructuring, the GEF was entrusted to become the financial mechanism for both the UN Convention on Biological Diversity and the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change.

The UN has documented a number of authoritative reports, survey findings, statistical data, etc. which are becoming base guidelines for the nations to realize the gruesome challenges of environmental imbalances and are motivated to change their course of actions applying advance planning and participation of masses.

### **Suggestions :**

United Nations is formulating several schemes and plans to save the environment but there are certain observations that maximum activities are advisory in nature. Due to lack of binding provisions rich and developed countries are violating the norms set by UN. The developed countries have 22 per cent of world population but they are using more than 88 per cent of world population but they are using more than 88 per cent of natural resources. Developed countries are producing more CFCs and emitting Green House Gases in comparison to the countries of third world. During COP-15 in Copenhagen, BASIC nations have raised this point that big nations are consuming 73 per cent energy of the world so they have to take the responsibility of reduction in GHGs. UN should lessen this discrimination for the sake of mankind.

### **Conclusion :**

The civilization of Indus Valley, Peru and Mesopotamia reached their ends due to environmental imbalances. Our ancient human society was fully aware of the needs of the environment. In Indian context Vedic culture was synonyms in protecting environment as people were worshiping the several elements of nature, like rivers, mountains, trees, soil and animals etc. It has been penned in Varah Puran that “One who plants one Peepal, One Neem, One Bar, ten flowering plants or creepers, two Pomegranates, two orange and five mango trees, does not go to hell.” In the contemporary world rivers are getting attention and respect in various countries echoing the Vedic sentiments but in a pragmatic way. The protection of environment is the duty of each and everyone in this world. Since UN is a common voice of the nations, it has implemented fruitful work plans to provide less polluted environment. UN is keenly striving for Eco-tourism and protection of Biodiversity. It is also funding various schemes to keep our environment neat and clean. Thus it may be attributed that with certain obstacles, UN is discharging its duty in a responsible way. Indeed its efforts are commendable.



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