

Lesson from my sons on ecology

GLOBAL warming... the ozone hole... rain forest destruction... mass extinctions of species... loss of top soil... We read about looming environmental disasters so often that we stop paying attention.

It is hard to get excited about things that might materialise in the distant future. Most of us reading this newspaper today will be dead long before then. We have much more pressing concerns now.

That is how it frequently seems. But two birthdays within the last month brought home to me that those environmental threats are not so far off. One of the occasions was the ninetieth birthday of my father; the other, the fifth birthday of my twin sons.

Dad was born in 1902. He grew up in a world totally unlike the world in which he now finds himself. Food was still kept in ice boxes, rather than in refrigerators employing chlorinated fluorocarbons that end up in the atmosphere. Transport was still predominantly by horses, rather than by internal combustion

engines burning lead-containing petrol that ends up in our lungs. Cavalry brigades were still a major instrument of war, and nuclear weapons that could destroy the world had yet to be invented.

The environmental decisions that society is making now will mould my sons' lives as much as will the decisions that my wife and I are now making about their education. For example, if present trends of deforestation continue, the destruction of the world's tropical rainforests will be virtually complete around the year 2030. I will probably be dead then, but my sons will be in their prime.

Those rainforests harbour half of the world's species. They control tropical climates and water supplies, and they retain tropical soil. Timber from the rainforests are an important source of foreign exchange for Third World countries.

With the end of the rainforests, developing countries that are already poor and unstable will become even more so. Americans and Europeans alike have had

Jared Diamond, winner last week of the Science Book Award, discovered that it's up to parents like him to save the environment.

recent vivid examples of how the state of the Third World affects our own lives. It's not just the shared global atmosphere and temperature that connect us to the Third World. Immigrants, exports, and essential raw materials connect us as well. There is no way that my sons' generation will be able to insulate itself from Third World instability. Nor can we blame that instability on Third World citizens.

Thus, we are not the first humans to destroy our own environment. Nor are humans the first species to do so. Populations of elephants, rabbits, goats, deer, cats and other species have also driven themselves into extinction by destroying their resource base. But humans have far more destructive power than these animals.

Modern humans, especially, have much greater destructive power than did ancient civilisations, and there are many more of us now. Does this mean that an environmental disaster inevitably looms ahead? It often feels as if the juggernaut of destruction is unstoppable, fuelled by the needs of billions of under-

developed people. Today, Haiti and East Africa are starving. Tomorrow, perhaps, the Himalayas and sub-Saharan Africa. Gradually, starvation may spread to the rest of the world.

In fact, our problems are not all insoluble. We don't need to invent new technologies in order to solve them. Instead, we 'just' need to halve population growth and reduce per-capita consumption of resources. Some countries have made significant progress at doing so, by measures to lower birth rate and to protect natural habitats.

For example, one might not have expected Indonesia to be a country that sets biological conservation among its priorities. Indonesia is one of the world's poorest, most densely populated nations. It has to deal with immense problems in feeding its people and financing health care and education. If conservation were a luxury that only rich nations can afford — as some critics claim — Indonesia would be ignoring conservation.

In fact, Indonesia is developing a comprehensive

national parks programme. It has dedicated 20 per cent of the land area of Indonesian New Guinea (Irian Jaya) as national parks and protected areas. The decision was made out of cold, correctly calculated self interest: its future depends on natural resources. The main threat to Indonesia's forests comes from the wasteful timber consumption of First World countries — notably Japan and the US.

These, and other measures, have been achieved despite the fact that the government policies of some of the richest countries (including my own) not only don't promote birth control and conservation, but actively oppose them.

Government policies result from politicians' perceptions of what the electorate wants. Hence the main missing ingredient needed to solve our environmental problems are — our own convictions and political will.

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