

Children and the Environment: Weaving a Web for Survival

by David Lazarus

We depend on children and the environment for the survival of the species. Yet evidence that the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) has gathered shows we are on a rough road, one that could be signposted, "No Return." But it also shows that adults can unite to reverse this situation.

The road to save our children and our Earth is a straight road. There can be no detours by those who say we lack the means or the money. There can be no detours by those who advocate the status quo. The same it always was, the same it will be," said UNEP's Executive Director Dr. Mostafa K. Tolba when he launched the 1990 State of the Environment Report in Mexico City on World Environment Day June 5 this year.

The report on Children and the Environment was launched as a joint effort between UNEP and the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) represented by its Executive Director Mr. James Grant, under the theme "Children and the Environment".

The stark fact that emerged from the Report is that the degradation of the environment is jeopardizing the planet's future, including that of our children.

"Each year, millions of children die from pollution, chemical poisons, poor sanitation, malnutrition and common diseases. Even the unborn are not safe," said Dr. Tolba. Radiation, viruses, drugs and chemicals increase the chances of miscarriages, stillbirths and birth defects.

The prospect is not much better when a baby is born. If the child is from a developing country it may be one of 14 million who do not reach its fifth birthday as a result of a

number of environmental hazards. These include pollution or environmentally related problems like malnutrition and diseases like diarrhoea and measles. Or it could be one of the three million who are severely disabled by these causes.

Deforestation and desertification, for example, cut food production and increase childhood malnutrition. Pollution of water and air affect children more severely than adults. Respiratory infections kill 4.2 million children under the age of five in the develop-

ing world each year. In industrialised countries, the main environmental causes of death and disability among children are exposure to various forms of pollution and to hazardous chemicals in the environment.

Ozone depletion and atmospheric pollution leading to climate change may be the harbingers of diseases with which future generations will have to live. Homelessness, the burgeoning population and hunger are other side-effects of environmental degradation that the international community must address.

The World Summit for Children, resolved to reverse these gloomy prospects by supporting the Plan of Action for Implementing the World Declaration on the Survival, Protection and Development of Children in the 1990s.

Summit participants noted the fact that if we work together we can reduce poverty and protect the environment. But to cope with the world's many environmental ills, will require fresh levels of international cooperation.

There already exist examples of global cooperation, which shows that the world is united on the issues. In general, the overall quality of the water in rivers and streams of the industrialised world has improved since the 1970s.

A Convention on Transboundary Air Pollution; precious resource—our children.

"It is a moral imperative for each generation to safeguard and improve the prospects of future generations. Intergenerational equity and intergenerational responsibility are age-old, sacred trusts. The unborn cannot make their wishes known. But we can", reminds Dr. Tolba.

The Summit will indicate that something can and must be done. People are willing to change if governments give top priority and action to lofty principles such as the right of

edge by the end of the decade.

A growing realization by parents that they can keep their children healthy is one of the major incentives for smaller families. There are 1.7 billion children under the age of 15 in the world; hence more than 32 per cent of the planet's population belongs to the next generation. And work is currently under way to persuade people to have fewer children.

Measures that include the Convention of the Rights of the Child unanimously adopted by the General Assembly in 1989, and UNEP's vital environmental Conventions and Plans for Action will help ensure a world for tomorrow's children.

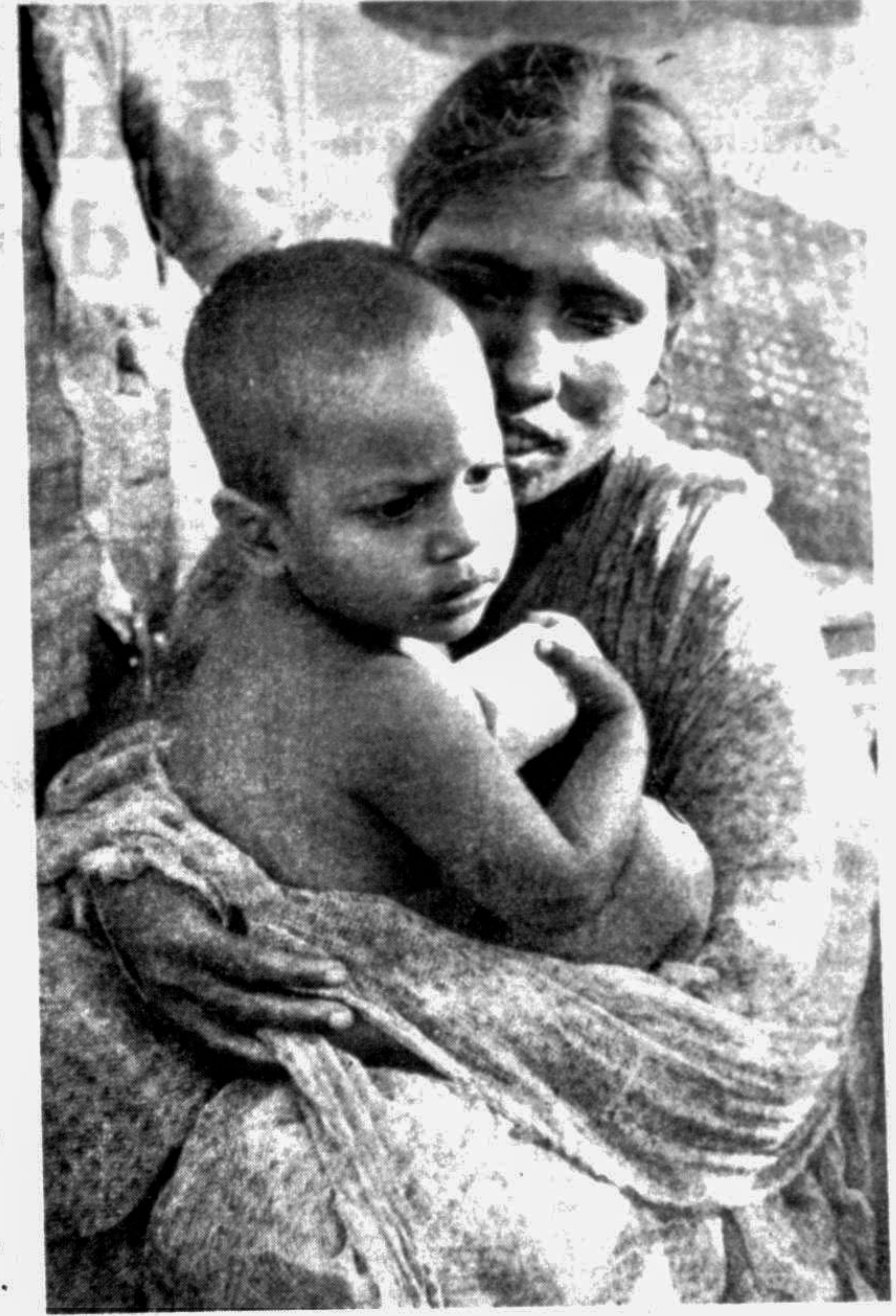
The work will, no doubt, continue unabated.

Children are sturdy and fragile like the environment. Both depend on humanity for sustenance and survival. We must ensure that the bond between the earth and its children is not in danger of being polluted to the detriment of the planet and ourselves.

"The state of our children, and the state of our environment, say more than anything else about our state of our civilization and the prospects of our future as a species. If we have the courage and vision to succeed, we may be remembered as the generation which pioneered a new way forward," said Mr. Grant and Dr. Tolba in their joint World Environment Day statements.

The message rings true for the world. We must clean up the planet to save the children.

David Lazarus is Co-ordinator, Programme Communications, UNEP.



A child in the comfort of her mother's lap. Will he live up to the age of 5 and beyond? —Star Photo

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action plans to reverse the deterioration of the regional seas has been adopted by nine regions, and the dumping of low-level radioactive waste in the Atlantic Ocean has been halted since 1983.

Efforts to address the possible threats of ozone depletion led to the Adoption of the Vienna convention for the Protection of the Ozone layer in 1985 followed in September 1987 by the Montreal protocol in Substances that Deplete the Ozone Layer—a landmark in international cooperation to protect the environment.

An international legal instrument to preserve biodiversity, and a plan of Action to Combat Desertification are on the agenda.

These steps which have already been taken, and the ones that the international community is resolved to pursue, will help protect our most

every living creature to pursue health and happiness.

If governments are not ready, people are.

Surveys demonstrate that people are ready to accept more governmental regulation to protect the environment.

Simple, low-cost measures can be introduced to alleviate health and homelessness, education and hopelessness, poverty and malnutrition.

Advances can be made, if there is a will.

In light of recent progress, several UN agencies believe that the 1990s will see the worst malnutrition virtually eliminated.

Some 535 million people first gained access to clean water during the 1980s and safe sanitation was provided for a further 325 million. The goal of safe water and adequate sanitation for all can be reached using present know-

ledge by the end of the decade.

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Alarms have been sounded about the environmental effects of a war in the Gulf. Many fears have been aired about the impact of oilwell fires and spills on land, but the worst danger could be to sealife. Such creatures as the dugong, one of the world's rarest marine mammals, could be wiped out. Gemini News Service has been investigating the hazards to the environment posed by war and finds that on land the most exotic species live in remote regions far from Kuwait. By ALLAN THOMPSON

Marine Wildlife Threatened with Annihilation

these animals to be severely impacted by a war.

Jim Berreen, environmental spokesman for Britain's Green Party, predicted a boom in rat and cockroach populations because of the killing off of predatory animals and breakdown of sanitation systems. Berreen's tone was of almost biblical plague proportions.

But others, like film producer and author Michael McKinnon, say their main concern is for the welfare of marine life.

"There is no question if they've mined the well heads and there are massive fires and the oil starts to pour into the Gulf, that will be a catastrophe no question," McKinnon said.

"But it's hard to tell what the degree of the land damage would be, the catastrophe is much more likely to be a marine one."

McKinnon recently spent three years producing the television series Arabia: Sand, Sea, Sky, just published in book form by BBC Enterprises.

McKinnon's book chronicles the immense variety of wildlife in the Arabian Peninsula, but also points out that its more exotic species—baboons, gazelle, oryx, cheetah—are severely depleted and now found only in remote regions, far from Kuwait.

The marine life of the Gulf, while not as rich and varied as that in the Red Sea, is still a treasure and one very much at risk in the current crisis.

"Depending on the scale of the conflict, planktonic life and hatcheries in the northern Gulf could be severely impacted," McKinnon said.

Oil slicks could cover the water, blocking out sunshine and killing of plankton production and the development of coral reefs.

"It's pretty bloody obvious if you cover an enclosed sea with a lot of goo, it's not good for anything," the Green Party's Berreen added.

At most risk are the dugongs, "highly endangered and very shy marine animal," McKinnon wrote. "The only living herbivorous mammal which is strictly marine."

The dugong is regarded as one of the rarest marine mammals in the world, but thrives in the sea grass on the shores of the Gulf. Oil spills and accidents during the Iraqi war, wrote McKinnon, led many biologists to believe the creature had vanished from the Gulf until a recent aerial survey turned up one of the World's largest colonies.

He added: "The Arabian Gulf was transformed from its status as a doubtful refuge, to a vital sanctuary for the global population of (dugong) sea-cows."

The area is also home to an array of crabs, some of the best shrimp in the world, mud-skipper, pearl oysters and many varieties of fish.

Green turtles and leatherbacks congregate during the spring and summer near islands in the Gulf to lay their eggs and would be in particular danger from oil spills.

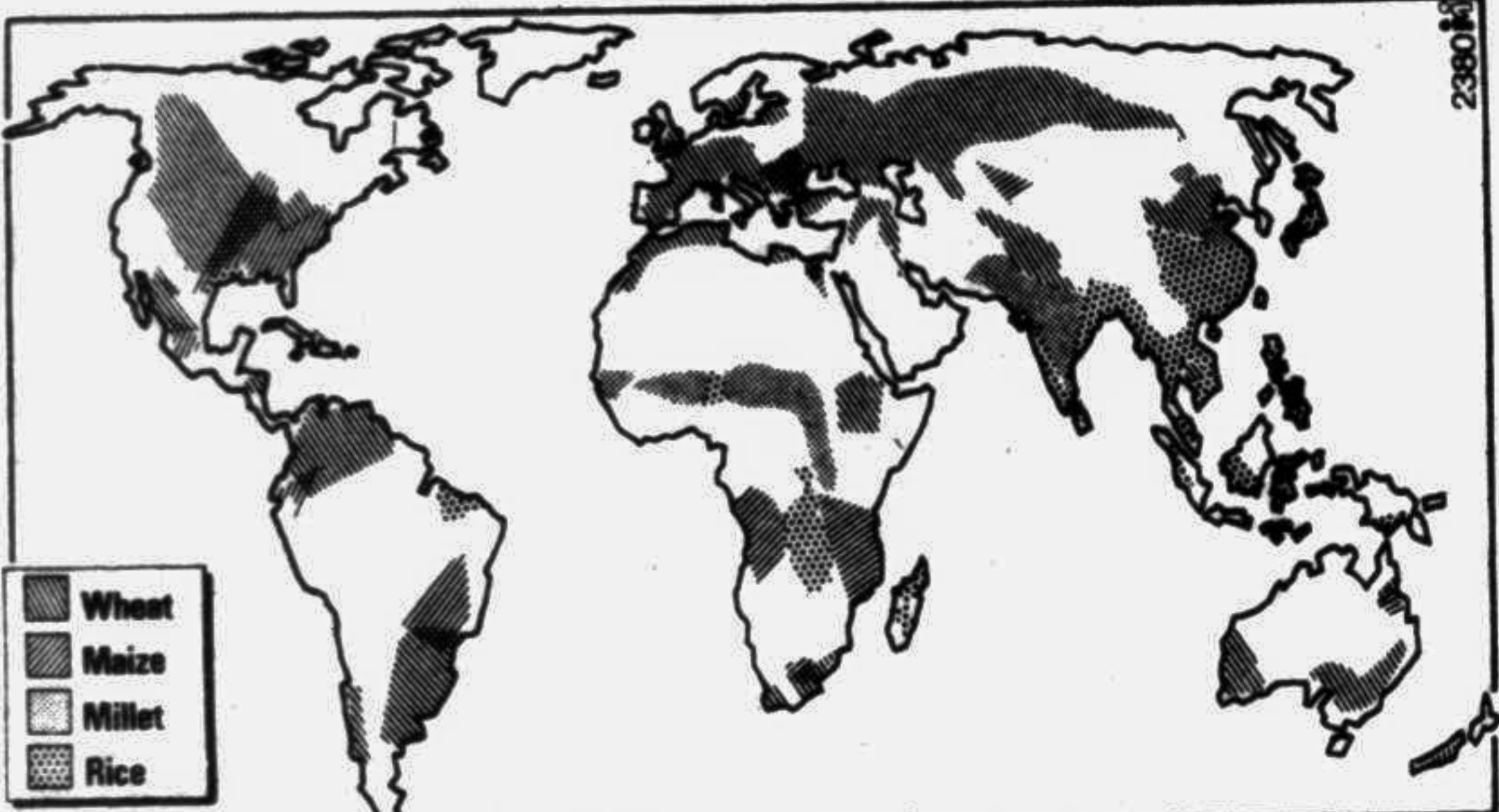
Berreen said: "In recent years there has been an enormous effort to protect depleted wildlife—a conflict like this would put the kibosh on things."

In remarks to a World Climate Conference, Jordan's King Hussein described such a war as "an ecological and environmental disaster on a world scale... beyond our wildest fears." While many put the King's words down as so much political rhetoric, most agreed with the severity of his warning.

At the London symposium, engineering consultant Dr. John Cox said the pall of smoke that would be caused by oilwell fires would exceed that estimated in nuclear war scenarios. The clouds could lead to the failure of the Asian monsoons on which millions of people depend for their livelihoods.

The smoke could also create localised holes in the ozone layer, Cox predicted. "The consequences of an ozone hole over the Indian subcontinent would be unimaginable... the casualties from the long-term effects are likely to exceed those to the combatants."

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Global Warming will Boost Crops of Rich Countries

Global warming caused by "greenhouse" gas emission is likely to benefit and swell the larders of the industrialised countries. It will have the reverse effect on most developing countries which, currently unable to feed themselves, will face declining food production.

These are among the forecasts made by the Food and Agriculture Organisation (FAO) in a far-ranging paper on the impact of climate change on agriculture, forestry and fisheries, presented to the Second World Climate Conference just held in Geneva.

The paper says rising concentrations of carbon dioxide could increase temperate wheat yields by one metric ton a hectare. This would make it possible, according to FAO's latest production figures, for Canada, the Soviet Union and the US to grow an extra 80 million tons a year on lands now under wheat production.

Rising temperatures in tropical areas, however, would weaken monsoons and reduce the area of highlands where temperate staple crops can be grown.

The most dramatic changes could well be in areas with Mediterranean-type climates, such as southern Europe, northern Africa and northern Central America. All would be markedly drier.

The paper says: "It is conceivable that the North-South gap in agricultural production potential will widen."

It warns that there is still too much conjecture about some aspects of climate change

to warrant major investments to combat it by developing countries, already hard-pressed to meet more immediate food and agricultural needs.

The paper adds, "On the other hand, there is a scientific consensus that the greenhouse effect is real, that greenhouse emissions are rising at unprecedented rates, that some global warming seems likely within 20-30 years, and that such changes would affect crop, animal and forest growth. The risks of inaction are too great to delay responses until all scientific uncertainties are removed."

Although agriculture plays only a secondary role to industry and the burning of fossil fuels is contributing to the greenhouse effect—about nine per cent of all emissions—it is more dependent on and vulnerable to climate conditions than any other human activity, the paper points out.

The burning of tropical forests accounts for a further 18 per cent of emissions.

"Forests play a more important role (than agriculture) regarding global climate," says the paper. "Under normal conditions they are an important source of water vapour, which plays a very important role in climatic processes and is a major carbon storing ecosystem and contribute carbon dioxide and other gases to the atmosphere when burned or otherwise converted."

Among the most significant emissions of methane, nitrous oxide, ozone and certain chlorofluorocarbons (CFCs) from the agricultural and forestry sectors are those from ruminant and chewing livestock (25 per cent); paddy fields (35 per cent); animal waste (12 per cent); land clearing; fuelwood burning and the use of mineral nitrogen fertilisers.

"Emissions of these gases are likely to increase in the future given population growth and rising demand for food following per capita income growth," says the paper.

FAO says one way to limit methane emissions from cattle and other ruminants would be to improve the quality and supply of feed, which would also substantially increase livestock productivity in most developing countries.

Global marine fish production is not likely to be severely affected by climate change, although individual fish stocks might suffer.

"Areas of high productivity could be shifted polewards. The year-to-year variability of individual stocks could increase... thus posing long-term planning and management problems for individual countries and coastal states."

"Flooding of coastal areas due to rising sea level would have immediate impact, especially in Asian countries such as Bangladesh, India, Malaysia and Thailand, which have most of the world's marine and brackish water aquaculture production."

About the Author: DENNIS CRAIG has worked for three UN agencies over 22 years and is a specialist writer on international organisations.