

Workshop on Media and the Environment

Entertainment that Changes the World

In the early eighties, a movie called *The Day After* changed the way Americans thought of nuclear power. Those couple of hours of celluloid had more impact on the national psyche than years of speech-making and documentation. South Asia is now searching for a way to make the citizens of its countries wake up to the slow death of our environment, to shock its people into realization. The media is the agent, but exactly how to go about it was the subject of discussion at last month's Workshop on Environmental Reporting in South Asia, held in Dhaka.

The workshop, organized by the Asian Mass Communication Research and Information Centre (AMIC) and Devfeature, Bangladesh, was supported by the Asia Foundation. As reporting on the environment is doubly difficult in countries with largely impoverished and uneducated populations, participants were eager for expert advice and the chance to share their problems.

Environmental studies have become more technical, more global, and certainly more politicized. At the coming Earth Summit in Rio de Janeiro this June, optimists hope that the North-South divide will disappear, but in all likelihood, borders will continue to create differences in the way the rich and the poor handle the world around them. Two days ago, Malaysian Prime Minister Dr. Mahathir Mohamad accused the developed North of polluting the environment indiscriminately. At a conference of developing countries on environment, Mahathir said the North should not dictate the conservation policies of the South. The earth may know no artificial frontiers, but environmentalism is becoming an increasingly potent political weapon. Poverty and population are only two of the new factors in

protection of the environment. Over-industrialization, too many cars, and a hungry consumer-dictated West are also factors.

Says Victor Valbuena, of AMIC, "Theatre, traditional entertainment media, all these can have enormous impact on the public mind. That's what we have to aim for." In order to reduce pollution, halt deforestation, and clean up our rivers, the media has to play a very active role in first telling people what their actions can lead to.

Governments can often have different stakes in the game. A recent example in Bangladesh was a minister's visit to a forested area, where he was

by S. Bari
must expose the misdeeds of the administration." He acknowledges the dangers of such a stance in a region where democracy is often just another word, but feels, "It is our role to criticize lack of action or illegal actions on the part of our governments."

The next step for the media, Gunawardene recommends, is to decide whether it will take up advocacy journalism. It is one thing to report willful dumping of chemicals or the killing of elephants for their tusks; it is quite another to take a stance. The press in our part of the world takes stands on politics, economics,

adds Gunawardene.

To be effective in his or her reporting, a journalist needs to network, within the country, and, in the case of environmentalism, within the region. During the workshop, studies of conservation action in certain countries were of benefit to others. Nepal's water management plans have a direct bearing on India and Bangladesh, for example. Similarly, the flood action plan here was an eye-opener for participants from other nations.

Obtaining the information one needs is often the greatest obstacle in investigative journalism. Gunawardene suggests developing alternate sources of

you will find that other sources will be much more open: try your local university, research groups, and non-governmental organizations."

In some cases, however, the authorities can be compelled to provide information. This is not always easy in South Asia, but in the US a government department can be legally bound to reveal information. In Sri Lanka, activists have agitated for years for a Freedom of Information act, which is now in Parliament. We don't yet know the exact contents, but it's a first step," Gunawardene encourages. Such legal reforms can be brought about with the active support of the media.

At the suggestion of Devfeature's Saleem Samad, the idea of a South Asian Forum of Environmental Journalists was born. This is not to contest the Asian Forum, says Samad, "but perhaps the Asian Forum is just too vast. It covers half the globe; with a smaller unit we could be more effective." Such a group could well be the most significant event to emerge from the workshop.

Samad is thrilled about the workshop's success. "The participants have actually seen Bangladesh, they haven't been stuck in conference rooms. They ate traditional food, went to interior villages, saw our rivers." He believes this exposure is essential for participants to get the most out of a workshop.

As the session draws to a close, Valbuena cautions the journalists: "Environmental reporting covers a great deal, from the quality of life to the food we eat and the air we breathe. Be careful not to categorize and label it." In a world of increasing interdependence of disciplines, it is self-defeating to compartmentalize issues. One issue leads to another; one cause can not be cut off from other causes.



Pollution landed with a bang on this part of the world

presented with a cheetah. The administration mouths a regular series of banalities on protecting animals, but violates its pronouncements with equal regularity. "In this case," says Nalaka Gunawardene, a science and environment journalist from Sri Lanka, "the press

social issues, but there is little condemnation of environmental vandals. The majority of the participants in this workshop agree that on environment issues the media should advocate a certain view. The mission is conservation, there is no right or wrong here,"

information. One cannot depend on government departments to tell a journalist how many tonnes of garbage are choking the sewers or whether the new development on the wetlands is actually a death-trap. "Government sources must be consulted, but

Environmental Conflict

Flares Up

by Suvendrini Kakuchi

Malawi and Namibia to carry out a controlled trade in their now rising elephant populations for much-needed foreign exchange.

The Africans' case has focused attention on a fundamental threat facing the global environmental movement — why the US\$5 billion annual wildlife trade hardly benefits the producer countries.

The issue had been dormant for many years but sur-

prelude of what will happen in June and we need to get over this fast," said a senior official of the UN environment programme.

But the gulf seems unbridgeable. "When southern producer countries sit down at the negotiating table they are desperate to sell their valuable natural resources to the North which, cash-laden, decides when and how they will buy," explained Peter Kramer, director of WWF International.

They are dealing with a system where a Volkswagen or Toyota goes up in value every year whereas the prices of coffee or bananas have been the same for decades," Kramer said.

To blunt the criticism, some of the importing countries have promised assistance to producer countries. Britain, for instance, has pledged US\$1 million for wildlife conservation.

But environmentalists say it only adds insult to injury. "A million dollars is a joke in the face of the enormous budget needed," said Kramer.

While the consumer appetite of the North is the most visible obstacle to reaching a solution, the concern for short-term economic and political benefits among developing countries has also proved discouraging.

Japanese media reports accused the Indonesian delegation at the conference of being composed more of wildlife traders than conservationists.

WWF criticised Malaysia for condemning a proposal by the Netherlands to ban the trade of two highly traded species of tropical timber, ramin and merbau.

The recently-concluded CITES meeting saw over 1,000 delegates and environmentalists discussed about 2,500 animals and 35,000 plant species.

— IPS

Three months before the Earth Summit in Brazil, participants at a conservation meeting in Japan get an advance look at the clash between the North and South on environmental issues.

faced at the Kyoto meeting for the first time when the four South African states asked to resume a limited trade in elephant products.

Argued Gail Annot of the Wildlife Society of Zimbabwe: "Africa is always pictured with a begging bowl. But Zimbabwe's successful wildlife management methods, based on the principle that wildlife can support itself, has proved that foreign exchange can be earned through the carefully monitored export of wildlife instead of depending on Western aid."

Experts said the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development (UNCED) in Rio de Janeiro in June will likely be bogged down by a split into South and North camps.

The CITES conference is a

Bathtub Breeding Protects Venezuelas Crocodiles

by Olga Sheean

LIFE in the Blohm household was never dull, reflects Cecilia Blohm.

"It was never easy taking a bath at our house. Instead of sweet-smelling bath salts, our bathtub was usually filled with pungent sardines and several lively baby crocodiles. Sometimes we forgot to take them out. For our unsuspecting guests, those were memorable occasions."

What began as a bathtub experiment, was developed by Cecilia and Tomas Blohm into the most successful Orinoco crocodile breeding and reintroduction programme in South America. Now, some of 40 years later, the Blohm's private ranch — El Masagual — is one of three breeding centres involved in the programme.

These centres, which now breed crocodiles in concrete tanks, provide hope for the long-term survival of one of the world's 12 most threatened animals.

A group of specialists including the Blohms helped establish an integrated conservation programme for the country's five crocodile species.

The Orinoco crocodile (*Crocodylus intermedius*) was selected as the priority. Funds were provided by the Fundación para la Defensa de la Naturaleza (FUDENA), an associate of WWF — World Wide Fund For Nature.

Venezuela's Orinoco River basin is the last remaining stronghold for the Orinoco crocodile. Once numbering several millions, the species was heavily hunted for commercial trade from 1920 to 1950, reducing wild populations to around 2,000 animals.

Now, the greatest threat to the crocodile is the destruction of its habitat. On the Cojedes and Capanapara Rivers, crocodiles face food shortages as fish die from too much fertilizer in the water. Dredgers damage the banks and destroy crocodile nests. Under these conditions, the Orinoco crocodile is battling for its survival.

In the state of Guárico, the 2,500-hectare El Masagual ranch provides safe refuge to crocodiles taken from the Cojedes River. These animals form the basis of the captive-breeding programme and are eventually released into suitable protected areas.

In 1992, 200 Orinoco crocodiles were released into the wild. Last year's yield was increased to 300 animals which were released into the Capanapara National Park and Cano Guaritico Wildlife Refuge.

Scientists are still experimenting with the best age and conditions for release. Currently, the crocodiles are released when they are around three years old, and measure one metre long. "As the design and quality of our nursery

tanks improve, we plan to release one-year-old crocodiles in increasing numbers," said FUDENA biologist Alfredo Arteaga.

Hatchlings are kept in concrete pens and fed chopped freshwater fish and vitamin supplements. By the time they reach reproductive size, they

crocodiles. "In 1980, the university's first captive adult crocodile was killed by locals," said Andres Seijas, a biologist from Venezuela's National Experimental University of the Western Plains (UNELLEZ). "They did not want to eat the animal or take its skin for trade. Instead, they wanted its



Breeding and re-introduction sites for the Orinoco crocodile

are moved to pools where they thrive on live chickens. The animals are regularly weighed and measured and, before release, some are tagged with radios for monitoring.

On Venezuela's northwestern floodplains, in the state of Apure, Hato El Frio — another ranch — provides an ideal release site for the Orinoco crocodiles. This 80,000-ha. Ranch supports a variety of wildlife.

Cono Guaritico, a tributary of the Apure River flowing through the ranch, is particularly rich in wildlife. It is also an important nursery for many fish species and was declared a wildlife refuge in 1989.

Mingling with the domestic livestock raised on the ranch are capybaras, freshwater turtles, deer, river dolphins, giant otters and a small population of jaguar.

"The generosity and conservation ethic of private ranch owners have made it possible to establish and maintain such refuges," said Jose Ayarzagüena Sanz, Director of El Frio Biological Station. They are now working closely with UNESCO and ranch owner Dr Ivan Darío Maldonado, to declare the entire ranch a biosphere reserve by the end of 1992.

While such habitats are important, the Orinoco crocodile is also threatened by poachers. Guards regularly patrol the ranch on the lookout for wildlife poachers sneaking in by canoe, or kidnappers hoping to ransom a wealthy rancher.

Traditional beliefs have also led to the killing of Orinoco

(WWF Features.)

Environment is a Big Yawn in the South

by Mark Richardson

AT the source of the River Nile, deep in the heart of Africa, is a tiny heap of rusting bottle-tops.

It was left there in March by a group of journalists concerned for the African environment, too busy thinking about invisible holes in the ozone layer to notice what was gathering at their feet.

We had stopped beside the river for a drink, about 30 of us, and popped open bottles of Fanta and Pepsi. The tops fell on the ground and lay among the grass roots, where they were ignored and left to rust.

No one will pick them up, those bottle-tops, even though they can slice a fatal tetanus infection into any bare foot that stumbles along. It's an environmental story in its own small way, but few people anywhere in the world would think it important enough to consider.

It's a small example, though, of how environmental reporting in the Third World is suffering from mixed priorities, apathy and ignorance.

The drive to Uganda's source of the Nile came on the third day of a four-day workshop organised in Uganda by Gemini News Service. It was intended to encourage and improve environmental reporting in Africa, and was attended by curious journalists from across the continent.

Such reporting, according to Wafala Oguttu, editor of Kampala's influential Weekly Topic newspaper, is often considered "an unnecessary fuss or, at best, merely as a western-inspired and boring intellectual exercise."

Femi Ajayi, science and agriculture editor for the Daily Times of Nigeria, was more blunt. "Nobody wants to be an environmental reporter in Africa," he said. "They want a more important beat so they

as well as over-cultivating land and draining wetland areas for crops.

Such a massive task needs the help of the media, but readers are not interested in seemingly endless stories of deforestation, toxic waste and invisible ozone holes.

"Environment is still the most boring topic in the Weekly Topic," said Oguttu.

The disappearance of the forests, for example, is one of

the radio. And while "getting down to the grassroots" was the most stressed catchphrase of the workshop, few journalists know what the grassroots are.

Certainly none of the reporters who took the drive to the Nile's source gave a second thought to buying goat kebabs and roasted bananas from the stalls we visited along the way.

We tut-tutted at the char-

other communicators in the skills of reporting the environment, and for preparation and dissemination of all types of environmental education material.

There are many more environmental stories than just deforestation, of course.

Northern journalists consider the environment to be perhaps the biggest story on the planet, yet few Third World press agencies can afford the luxury of an environmental specialist. When such an assignment occurs, such as at the source of the River Nile, much of the story is missed.

At the river, it was possible to wander out into some rusty girders poking into the water and place a hand in the Nile and another hand in Lake Victoria.

The waterfall that John Speak saw when he explored the lake in 1860 was flooded away when the Nile was dammed.

The Owen Falls dam provides barely enough electricity for the district and power cuts in Kampala are frequent. The obvious, big story is that a beautiful and historic site has been sacrificed for an inefficient government project, but few would care.

Most Ugandans do not have the luxury of an electrical supply, and nor do they care for the explorations of a foreign adventurer. What they do understand, though, is that people will starve to death when they cannot open their mouths to eat after catching lookjaw, or tetanus, from a rusty wound.

The story — our bottle-tops — was gathering at our feet, but we were too busy peering across the river to notice.

— Gemini News

Mark Richardson, a Canadian journalist with the Ottawa Citizen newspaper, attended the Environmental Reporting in Africa workshop as a representative of the Gemini News Service. The workshop was sponsored by UNICEF and the Canadian International Development Agency, and his participation was sponsored by the Commonwealth Secretariat.



SELLING THE FOREST
Bags of charcoal, protected by banana leaves

coal vendor and took his photograph beside the sacks of charcoal, quaintly (and practically) covered with banana leaves, but we were happy to buy food cooked over that charcoal.

And we bought bananas from the stalls set up illegally in the forest to cater to tourists.

This was the grassroots, but we couldn't see the trees for the charcoal.

Journalists have the potential to be among the most influential people in society, yet many are so preoccupied with looking for corruption and large-scale abuse that the smaller abuses, including their own, are ignored.

In the Third World, they are given little encouragement or initiative to become environmentally aware. The responsibility of their training, says Oguttu, lies with the industrialised Northern countries.

"Forests in the Third World are estimated to consume about 50 per cent of the carbon dioxide produced in the North. Without these forests in the South, the North would be heavily polluted by their numerous vehicles and factories," he says.

Such funds should then be used to meet the costs of training journalists and