

## Foreboding of an environmental disaster

**How people preserve or abuse the environment largely determines whether living standards improve or deteriorate. Population growth, urban expansion, and resource exploitation do not bode well for the future. Without practicing sustainable development, humanity faces a deteriorating environment and may even invite ecological disaster.**

KHALID MD. BAHAUDDIN

**H**UMAN population growth is the primary threat to the world's environment. Each person requires energy, space and resources to survive, resulting in environmental losses. Our population is rapidly rising beyond the earth's ability to regenerate and sustain us with a reasonable quality of life. We are exceeding the carrying capacity of our planet, challenging the existence of several species, including our own.

When people think of human impacts on the environment, they often think in terms of total population and population growth. The scale of our activities depends on population, consumption and the resource or pollution impact of technologies; all three of these factors are steadily increasing.

### Urbanisation

Rapid urban growth can bring environmental problems for cities. With many cities growing at 4 to 5% a year, provision of clean water, sewage, electricity and roads can rarely keep up with population growth. Lack of sewage treatment leads to water

pollution, eutrophication and biodiversity loss in rivers and around outlets. Water demand may lower river and groundwater levels. The International Decade for Drinking Water Supply and Sanitation (1980-90) documented the growth of those without clean water in urban Africa, rising from 28 million to 31 million; those without safe sanitation rose from 38 million to 47 million.

We have transformed half the world's land for our own uses -- around 11% each for farming and forestry, 26% for pasture, and another 2 to 3% for housing, industry, services and transport. In most parts of the world, cultivated land has not expanded in line with population growth, decreasing the amount of farmland per person. The area per person has declined slowly in developed countries, from 0.65 hectares in 1965, to 0.51 hectares 30 years later. In developing countries, where population growth is faster, the area per person fell from 0.3 to 0.19 hectares over this same period.

### Freshwater

Freshwater is crucial for survival, health, agriculture, industry,

comfort and leisure. But freshwater sources are limited -- there is only so much to go around; the larger the population, the less there is for each person.

In 1995, some 436 million people were already suffering water scarcity or stress, causing severe development problems. There are conflicts among farmers and between rural and urban needs, and heightening tensions between countries dependent on the same resources, such as with India and Bangladesh.

The UN's 1996 population projection has estimated that, by 2050, the projected number of people suffering water stress or scarcity will have risen to 4 billion approximately.

### Biodiversity

Most ecologists believe that human activities are causing mass extinction. Since 1600, 484 animal and 654 plant species are known to have become extinct through human actions. The total extinction of a species is drastic and irreversible, but local extinction is also serious, and far more common. The Global Biodiversity Assessment listed the major threats to biodiversity as habitat loss, fragmentation and degrada-

tion, due to the need for land for farms, dwellings, industry, services, transport and leisure. Of those species that are threatened, habitat loss affects 44% of bird species, 55% of fishes, 68% of reptiles, and 75% of mammals.

Population density is closely linked with most forms of habitat loss. A sample of non-desert countries where wildlife habitat loss has been estimated showed that the percentage loss tends to be highest where population density is highest. The top 20% of countries, ranked in terms of habitat loss, had lost an average of 85% of the original wildlife habitat. Their average population density was 189 people per square kilometre. The 20%, with lowest population density, had lost an average of 41% of their wildlife habitat -- and their average population density was only 29 people per square kilometre.

### Forests

We lose forests at the rate of 112 million hectares each decade, an area twice the size of Kenya or France. Highly populated countries such as India and China have almost come to the end of their period of deforestation and have begun to reverse forest loss. Some of the fastest rates of deforestation are found in middle-income developing countries with strong commercial logging interests (Indonesia 2.4%, the Philippines 3.5%, and Thailand 2.6%).

A number of studies have found a strong correlation between population density and deforestation

rates on national levels. A recent report by the United Nations Population Fund estimated an average loss of 1.8% of forests per year between 1980-90, where the population density was 89 people per square kilometre. Areas with slower deforestation tend to have lower population density; where there are just 34 people per square kilometre, the deforestation rate was only 0.5%.

### Coastal environment

High percentages of human population and activity are located on or near coasts. Coastal areas have always been important for trade, transport and defence, containing some of the densest concentrations of human population and activities today. Nearly two-fifths of the world's populations live within 150 kilometres of a coastline. A recent assessment found that over half the world's coastlines are at risk from coastal development, with over one-third at high risk. Nearly three quarters of the world's marine protected areas are similarly threatened. In addition, human activities over vast inland areas impact coasts and coastal waters. Much of the water pollution and sediment eroded from whole watersheds is transported to the sea.

### Mangroves

Mangroves cover an estimated 18 million hectares of the earth's tropical coastlines, around one quarter of the total. Mangroves host unique species, and are important nurseries for commer-

cial marine species.

It is estimated that around half of all tropical mangroves have been destroyed. The Philippines, Puerto Rico, Kenya and Liberia have lost over 70%. Major pressures are cutting for fuel wood and timber; habitat conversion for coastal development or aquaculture (often shrimp farming); and damming of rivers which alters water salinity. Other direct and indirect causes of these pressures include: population growth, tourism and resource consumption in and around coastal areas.

### Coral reefs

The world has an estimated 255,000 square kilometres of near-surface coral reefs, constituting one of the richest resources of biodiversity on the planet. A recent study estimated that 58% of the world's reefs are threatened by human activity, almost half of these seriously so. In Southeast Asia, which has very high levels of coral and fish diversity, more than 80% are potentially at risk.

The threats to coral reefs are many: over-fishing, pushing fish stocks below their maximum sustainable yield; destructive fishing practices; and extraction. Water pollution from industry, sewage, fertiliser, and sediment eroded from deforested or badly farmed areas, all wash into the sea, reducing light levels and physically smothering corals.

### Marine environment

Oceans make up seven-tenths of



Is this the future we are aiming for?

the planet's surface, and we use an estimated 8% of their total primary productivity. Yet we have fished up to the limits or beyond, altering the ecology of a vast range of marine species.

Assessments from 1999 found that 44% of major fish stocks have already been exploited to their maximum sustainable yield. Another 16% are over-fished, meaning future catches will fall unless remedial action is taken.

Pollution from oil spillages, runoff and rivers includes sewage, industrial effluents, fertilisers, pesticides and herbicides. Air pollution is the source of one-third of marine pollutants.

There are now around 50 known "dead zones" with no or low oxygen. Most of these have appeared over the last half-century, and are blamed on excessive influx of nitrogen and phosphorus from farming and sewage.

The dead zone in the Gulf of Mexico is 4,144 square kilometres, doubling in size since 1993.

We need to voluntarily limit our growth, and promote contraceptive use, before nature controls our population for us with famines, droughts and plagues. Our children's future depends on us.

How people preserve or abuse the environment largely determines whether living standards improve or deteriorate. Population growth, urban expansion, and resource exploitation do not bode well for the future. Without practicing sustainable development, humanity faces a deteriorating environment and may even invite ecological disaster.

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## Serbia joining European Union?

**Serbia remains outside the European Union, while all other breakaway republics -- Croatia, Montenegro, Macedonia, and Bosnia-Herzegovina -- are potential candidates for becoming members of the European Union, as they are under the stabilisation and association process.**

MOHAMMAD AMJAD HOSSAIN

**W**HILE no government in Bangladesh tried the war criminals after the country became independent, the government of Serbia has arrested Radovan Karadzic, 13 years after he ordered the worst acts of brutality Europe has endured since the Nazi campaign -- including the siege of Sarajevo and the slaughter of 8000 Muslims men and women in Srebrenica -- as head of the breakaway Bosnian Serb Republic during 1992-1995.

Radovan Karadzic was on the run in Serbia when there was a demand to try him for war crimes in the international criminal court. Karadzic, a psychiatrist, was unrecognisable, with a long beard and without his distinctive hairdo. He was found practicing alternative medicine in Serbia.

Successive Serbia governments had claimed they could not find him. The present coalition government in Serbia, however, not only arrested him but also placed him in the hands of the International Criminal Court

in The Hague a few days back.

Serbia remains outside the European Union, while all other breakaway republics -- Croatia, Montenegro, Macedonia, and Bosnia-Herzegovina -- are potential candidates for becoming members of the European Union, as they are under the stabilisation and association process. Another breakaway state, Slovenia, has already joined in. The European Union told Serbia it had to find and arrest Karadzic before it could hope to join.

In a statement on July 31, the Council of European Union appreciated the efforts of the Serbian government in arresting and transferring Radovan Karadzic to the International Criminal Tribunal for former Yugoslavia in The Hague, which is a significant step in the process of reconciliation in the western Balkans and in Serbia's rapprochement in Europe.

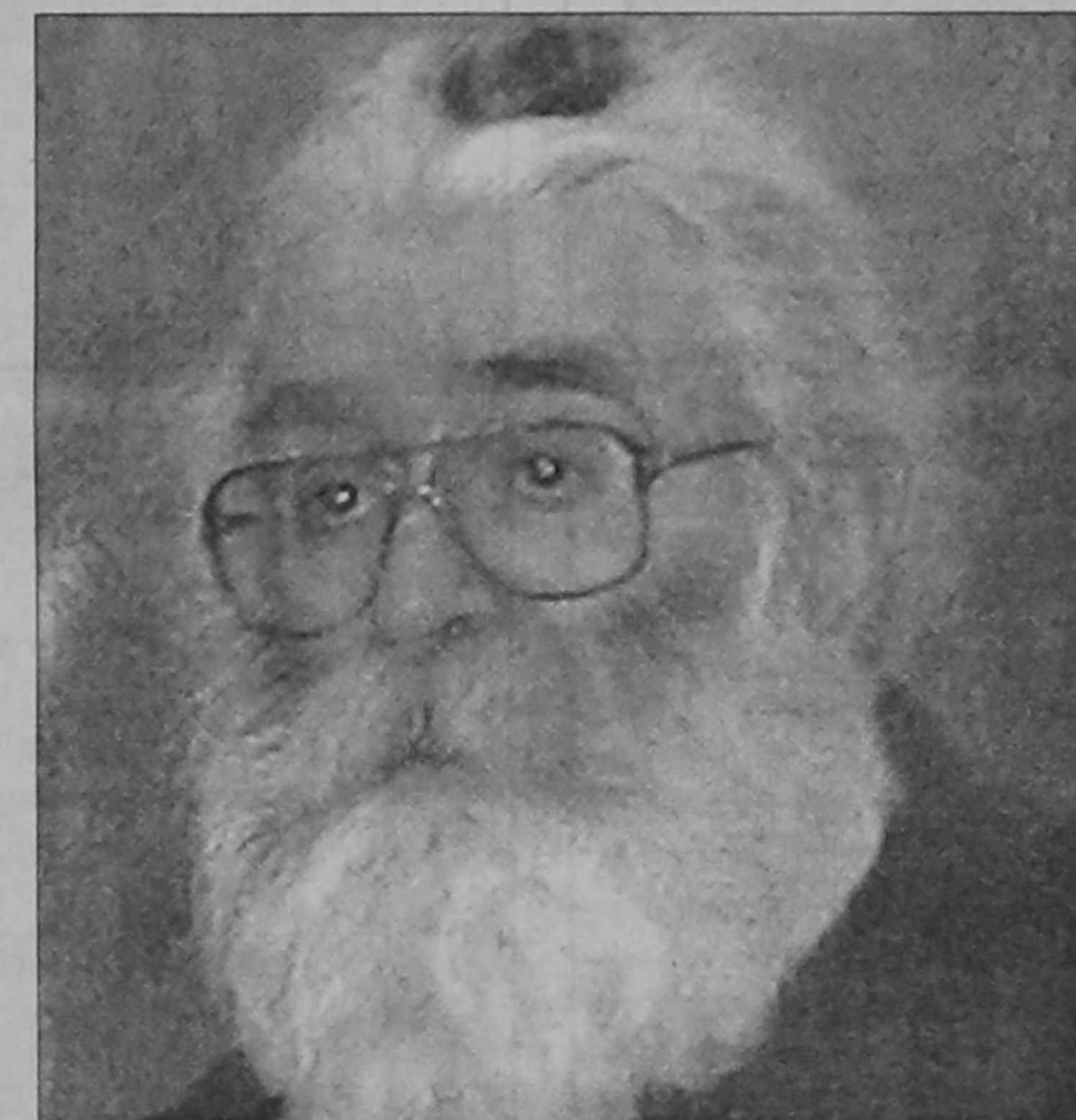
The European Union also urged Serbia to continue on this course, and to locate the last two indicted. Another person is a military leader

Ratko Mladic. Both Karadzic and Mladic have been charged with genocide, crimes against humanity and war crimes.

Possibly finding no other alternative, the Serbian government took a great risk, because the majority of the people were against the pressure of western countries. Serbia's pro-western government was able to arrest him after less than a month in power. Radovan Karadzic will now face the music in the International Criminal Court.

The International Criminal Court, however, has been facing criticism for conducting such cases for so long that they lose their impact. The procedure is so slow that two judges died during the trial of former Serbian president Slobodan Milosevic. Slobodan Milosevic, in fact, contributed to delays in the trial by manipulating the proceedings.

The important part of the case is that Milosevic, who was on trial in the same court on charge of genocide and crimes against humanity, died before receiving any verdict whatsoever.



Karadzic: Ticket to the EU?

Milosevic was charged with 66 counts, including genocide in Kosovo. He had waged four wars. Milosevic was found dead in his prison cell in The Hague on March 10, 2006 while the case was proceed-

ing. The Court could not reach a verdict even after four long years.

It was the first time that a sitting president was faced with charges of war crimes. Another convicted former Croatian Serb leader, Milan

Babic, an ally of Milosevic, committed suicide in his prison cell on March 5, 2006. He was serving a 13-year prison term for committing crimes against humanity.

The arrest of Karadzic seems to be motivated more by pragmatism than by morality. The best way to spread democracy, and to protect human rights of all citizens irrespective of ethnicity, could be to reward the Serbian government with full membership of the European Union.

The arrest of Karadzic is a tremendous success, but does not eclipse the need of bringing Ratko Mladic, a Bosnian-Serb military leader, to justice. He was responsible for carrying out genocide against Bosnians. Possibly, he is still at large in Serbia. If he is brought to justice the tragic chapter of genocide in Bosnia and Kosovo will come to an end. Therefore, it is requested that the court should proceed cautiously but expeditiously to bring the perpetrator to justice.

The trial in the UN's International Tribunal for former Yugoslavia in The Hague is a glowing example to follow for bringing the war criminals in Bangladesh to justice.

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## The 'process' president

**Cherwitz is a professor at the University of Texas, and the rhetoric course he teaches focuses on ways to bring people of difference together. He saw that Obama recognised the value of getting the process right--and he was drawn to the candidate's cool cerebral style and the absence of the partisan heat that had become so divisive.**

ELEANOR CLIFT

**B**ARACK Obama is a process guy. That doesn't sound like much of a compliment, but changing the way Washington works is at the heart of his message. The election will not be won on his energy policy or health-care policy. If he wins, it will be because voters want to fix the way we make decisions -- and they think Obama will drive the modern-day equivalent of the biblical moneychangers from the temple and set the country back on course.

"If anybody can do it, he can," says Richard Cherwitz, an expert in political communication who came away impressed with Obama after meeting him at a backyard barbecue in Austin, Texas.

Cherwitz is a professor at the University of Texas, and the rhetoric course he teaches focuses on ways to bring people of difference together. He saw that Obama recognised the value of getting the process right -- and he was drawn to the candidate's cool cerebral style and the absence of the partisan heat that had become so divisive. He'd seen George W. Bush as

governor and admired the way he talked about transcending differences. "I'm a uniter, not a divider," Bush repeatedly said. But Bush abandoned it as a governing strategy, and, with rare exceptions, catered to his party's base as president.

With the Democrats certain to pick up seats in the House and Senate and poised to capture the White House, Cherwitz says that even with the Bradley effect, where people tell pollsters they'll vote for a black candidate but in the privacy of the voting booth do otherwise, the deck is so stacked against the Republicans, "I don't see how this guy will not get elected."

Then why doesn't he have a bigger lead in the polls? The conventional wisdom is that Obama should be way ahead, but he's still a relative unknown. Voters want to see more before they make up their minds.

He hasn't really established himself in Washington, other than to defeat the most formidable political machine in modern politics. Beating Hillary is what he's doing, not his legislative record or his years as a commu-

nity organiser or even his rhetorical gifts.

To close the sale, Obama needs what's known as a Reagan moment. The country wants reassurance that he's up to the job in the same way the electorate held back in 1980 until candidate Reagan appeared on stage with President Carter in the single debate of the season, his easy manner and jovial banter carrying the evening and the election.

The two campaigns have agreed to the three debates scheduled for the fall, and while Obama doesn't have Reagan's charm and personal warmth on the stump, the physical contrast with McCain is stark.

It's not even a question of age; it's the persona that is projected, one a graceful athlete, almost a ballet dancer, the other a more tightly wound wrestler in body type and body language. "I may be projecting too much on him -- he is a little aloof," Cherwitz says of Obama, "but I think he is going to put smart people at the table, and it won't be about left or right, it'll be about making the right decisions." That's where process matters.

As a self-described white male

associate dean in his 50s at one of the top five public universities, Cherwitz has lived through the challenges of affirmative action.

After Supreme Court decisions banned taking race into consideration except as one of many characteristics, minority enrollment dropped, forcing educators to look at other ways to boost the numbers of underrepresented groups.

In Texas, where Anglos are no longer the majority in the state, the number of Hispanics and African-Americans in graduate school at the University of Texas is at best 10 percent nationally, only 7 percent of PhDs are awarded to minorities.

Cherwitz developed an internship for undergraduates in what he calls intellectual entrepreneurship. It is available to all students wrestling with what they will do once they graduate, and its mission is to help students discover their intellectual passion and encourage "citizen-scholars" to pursue advanced degrees in a variety of academic fields.

Diversity was not Cherwitz's chief motivation, but when he looked up after 10 years (the course was first offered in 1997), he realised that more than 50 percent of the students enrolling are first-generation college students and minorities.

"Affirmative action is a wonderful thing, a necessary thing, but it's not sufficient," he says. "And it's not just a political issue; it's an

academic issue. We can't fulfill our mission without a diverse classroom. How can I teach search and seizure when there's no one who understands what it means to have the police come after you?"

Explaining to students in his course on rhetoric how to adapt to an audience and how to talk to people "not like me," is harder when the classroom is homoge-

nous, he says. "While I can't prove it," Cherwitz e-mailed me, "I think Obama would very much appreciate such a thoughtful approach to increasing diversity -- one not mired in the same old political fights ... That, after all, is the hallmark of his campaign."

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Good orator. Good leader?

## Sports stars should prove they are not airheads

**B**OO hiss. My plea to return the Olympics to their original state of glorious, proud, ratings-boosting nudity has fallen on deaf ears. But there is another aspect of the ancient games worth reviving: the competition for the position "champion of rhetoric" -- which is Greek for "smarty-pants."

In the old days, competitors had to be incredibly brainy. The Greeks had no respect for people who had great physical accomplishments but were idiots. Compare that to today, when people who are physically beautiful but obviously airheaded (Paris Hilton, Britney Spears, the present writer) are undeservedly celebrated.

You may not know exactly what spouting rhetoric entails, but most people have heard the term "rhetorical question." Well, that can be defined as a question asked by someone who is so intelligent that he asks the question not because he seeks an answer but because he has a condition which makes him physically incapable of shutting up at any time of night or day. Here's an example.

Two nights ago, I said, "What time is it?" and my wife answered: "Two am, go to sleep, cretin."

But last night I asked, "What time is it?" rhetorically (as indicated by a certain intellectual tone in my voice), and she replied "Two am, go to sleep, cretin, and stop talking in that dorky voice."

A more correct response would have been reflective silence. Most of my co-workers ignore everything I say, so clearly some people recognize that I often employ classical Greek speaking techniques.

Rhetorical speeches have the wonderful advantage of not needing an audience. One can do them by oneself miles from anyone else -- indeed, many

people have enthusiastically recommended that that's exactly where I should do them.

We should have scheduled this for the Beijing Olympics. Asia has always been the place where people have recognized that brain, not brawn, is the most important tool of a person of action. This is the lesson taught by many Asian classics such as the Vedas, the Buddhist scriptures and The Karate Kid.

Anyway, I am not just speculating idly here. The Times of London gave British poet Fanny Walker a whole page last week in which she made an impassioned plea that performance poetry be included in the 2012 London Olympic Games as the nearest equivalent to Greek rhetoric.

"Glorious, tall, lithe, muscled athletes standing on the podium next to greasy four-eyed alcoholics with pot bellies. For the mental picture alone, it's an idea worth getting behind," she wrote.

So how are we going to do it? I propose that the 2008 Beijing Olympics Intellectual Sports Division starts here and now. Send me your finest poems, one-liners, or other displays of world-class intellectual prowess, and I will print the best of them in this space.

This will have significant and far-reaching results. First, we will demonstrate to the world that being a world-class athlete is not necessarily better than being a typically over-educated Asian wimp. Second, it will fill up this column faster so I can go home to engage in other key intellectual activities such as going to sleep on the sofa.

But most of all, it gives Asians the chance of doing what they do best: we may be puny nerds but we do the whole puny nerd thing so damn well we should be recognized for it.

No taste for intellectual activities? Go to our columnist's website: [www.vittachi.com](http://www.vittachi.com).

