A VIEW FROM THE SUMMIT

BY PAUL G. IRWIN

After more than two years of preparation, the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development (UNCED), or Earth Summit, took place June 3-14 in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil. One hundred seventy countries were officially represented at the biggest event ever sponsored by the United Nations. One hundred eighteen heads of state attended the meeting, whose goal was to create a new framework (the Earth Charter), comprehensive agenda (Agenda 21), and series of agreements that would protect the environment while at the same time provide the means for human beings to develop fully.

For those of us who work to protect animals through changing international policies, UNCED was a unique opportunity. Never before had the world's political leaders seriously considered a declaration that would recognize the intrinsic value of animals and nature, as well as agendas and treaties that would implement so life-affirming an ethic. We were hopeful that the United Nations would take significant steps to protect animals and the Earth, following the lead of its own recent statements and those of other international groups.

Unfortunately, however, concern for the life and beauty of our planet did not prevail in the deliberations. The Earth Charter, formally titled the Rio Declaration on Environment and Development, opens with the assertion that "human beings are at the center of concerns for sustainable development." In Agenda 21 and various treaties, opportunities for protecting species or habitats were bypassed or ignored. Both the reality and the rhetoric of caring for animals and the Earth were edited out of final versions, as northern, developed countries and southern, developing countries tried to cut deals that would give each the maximum share of natural resources.

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Amidst representatives of indigenous peoples, Sen. Albert Gore speaks in Rio. The HSUS sponsored the IPCM on behalf of CRLE, EarthKind, and HSI.

Despite the disregard for animals demonstrated at UNCED, the meeting represented a giant step forward in creating a global framework to protect animals and the environment. The most significant was the inclusion of this new framework of international relations. The 500 pages of Agenda 21 lay out major issues that will complete the framework: the document addresses climate change and the atmosphere, high seas fisheries management, a marine sanctuary transfer, institutional arrangements, poverty and consumption, and financial resources.