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 such life-affirming ethic. We were hopeful that the United Nations would take significant steps to protect animals and the Earth, following the lead of its 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.

Paul G. Irwin is president of The HSUS.
Amidst representatives of indigenous peoples, Sen. Albert Gore speaks in Rio. The HSUS sponsored the IPMC on behalf of CRLE, EarthKind, and HSFI.

Despite the disregard for animals demonstrated at UNCED, the meeting represented a giant step forward in creating a global framework to protect animals and their habitats. The two-year series of meetings held in Rio de Janeiro from March 2 to April 3, 1992, known as the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development (UNCED), was the last in a series of meetings that began in Nairobi in 1972 and continued throughout the 1980s. Known as the 5th United Nations Conference on the Human Environment (UNCED), the meeting between leaders of indigenous peoples, religious organizations, cultural associations, women’s alliances, animal protection organizations, environmental activists, indigenous peoples, and international educators was a historic moment in the process.

At UNCED The HSUS sponsored the Indigenous Peoples Media Centre (IPMC) on behalf of the HSUS, EarthKind, and HSFI. The media center, operating out of the International Press Center, held six press conferences and issued many press releases articulating indigenous perspectives on issues of environment and development. The IPMC staff helped facilitate a dialogue between leaders of indigenous peoples and representatives of Global Legislator for a Humane Environment, including U.S. senator Albert Gore.

As the nongovernmental, parallel conference of UNCED, the 92 Global Forum served as an opportunity for participation for various groups outside the formal meeting. More than 25,000 individuals, representing 9,000 nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) from around the world, registered at the Global Forum. Included were religious organizations, cultural associations, women’s alliances, animal-protection organizations representing environmental activists, indigenous peoples, and international educators. More than 650 press representatives from around the world participated in the forum.

The Earth Summit in Rio does not turn into a dead end. The preservation of biological diversity requires the protection of each species and the deterioration of habitat on much of the planet. We must invest in the future of life and to make compassion for all creatures, our shared concern. The HSUS will vigorously seek to ensure that humane concerns are part of the Earth Summit’s list of priorities.

CRLE staff participated in the parliamentary Earth Summit, held in Rio June 5–7 as a continuation of meetings begun in previous years in Oxford (England) and Europe. This conference of members of the world’s parliaments included spiritual leaders, scientists, journalists, artists, and business leaders. The Holy Mother The Dala Lama, Senator Gore, Archbishop Helder Camara of Brazil, and Kenyan Green Belt movement leader Wangari Maathai were among the participants. The conference endorsed the Earth Charter of the International Coordination Committee on Religion and the Earth (ICCRE), which CRLE helped to draft.

The Beach Boys teamed up with EarthKind and the Love Foundation for American Music, Entertainment, and Art to raise awareness about the activities of global NGOs. This initiative would provide video cameras to NGOs with a story to tell and who need a way to tell it. The Beach Boys have agreed to give a concert to raise $100,000 to kick off the effort to put 1,000 broadcast-quality video cameras in the hands of NGOs around the world.

“...The United Nations Environment Programme fully supports this project,” said Noel Brown, Ph.D., director of the United Nations Environment Programme.

The Read from Rio: A Time for Action

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