

## UNESCO Celebrates the 25th Anniversary of the 'Biosphere Conference' and the Birth of Its MAB Programme and Biosphere Reserves

Following our publication of a prime mover's 'The Silver Jubilee of MAB and Its Revival' (Batisse, 1993), and the launching by its Director-General of the United Nations Educational, Scientific & Cultural Organization's Newsletter *All of Us: Environmental Education Dossiers* (Mayor, 1993), UNESCO celebrated, on 7 October 1993, at its headquarters in Paris, the 25th anniversary of the 'Intergovernmental Conference of Experts on the Scientific Basis for Rational Use and Conservation of the Resources of The Biosphere', more simply and generally called 'The Biosphere Conference', which resulted in essence from the International Biological Programme (IBP) and led to the launching in 1971 of UNESCO's Man and the Biosphere (MAB) Programme (Anon., ND) and their subsequent gradual development of the world network of Biosphere Reserves (Batisse, 1982, 1990).

### *Recapitulation in Time*

This solemn but enjoyable celebration involved addresses by several of the principal original &/or continuing actors on The Biosphere's 'stage' who — besides the two already mentioned — included the President of IBP and of The Biosphere Conference (Professor François Bourlière\*, of France), the Scientific Director of IBP throughout its life (Dr E. Barton Worthington, CBE, of England, UK), and the then Director-General of the Food & Agriculture Organization (FAO) of the United Nations (Dr Edouard Saouma, of Lebanon).

Among memorable points which stood out in the half-dozen main addresses were (1) that tackling the human population and resource-use explosion as the basis of practically all the world's ills, was the top priority as had stood out at our own 4th International Conference on Environmental Future in Budapest in 1990; (2) that the World Soils Map, with which thousands of workers had been involved for years through UNESCO and FAO, was never mentioned by the media though they devoted thousands of hours and pages to the antics of 'pop' stars and stage personalities; and (3) that the more than 370 Biosphere Reserves which are now scattered practically throughout the world constitute an impressive indication of how the interests of Man and Nature can be taken care of together and to the benefit of both. This last point was enlarged on by the Director-General of FAO who emphasized that, of all human activities, agriculture affects The Biosphere by far the most, but that we have to beware, as agricultural productivity will need to be doubled to take care of the projected population increases in three-quarters of the world.

### *Biosphere Recognition Imperative and Reserves Valuable*

If our human-dominated world is to continue in anything like its present form, it will be necessary for us to recognize The Biosphere's significance and limitations, and the quintessential need that we take due care of it. For in the Universe so far as is known or currently envisaged, there is nowhere else for life to exist at all naturally or even survive protractedly without all manner of artificial support. Moreover, for equitable survival we should leave native peoples alone or at least treat them as allies, benefitting from their local knowledge and wisdom stemming from long periods of residence and contact with *their* environment. Nor should we support their pleas to emulate us, but point out to them how unhappy we tend to be!

The principle of Biosphere Reserves is very much in line with those last sentiments, attempting as it does to maintain in each case an inviolate core area, a strictly delimited and protected intermediate buffer zone, and an external transition area which 'is not necessarily delimited, but implies involvement of local population' (Batisse, 1990). The *core area* should have only a monitoring station for involvement, the *buffer zone* a research station or experiment with perhaps some human settlement having due education or training and perhaps some controlled tourism and recreation, and the *transition area* can and should have all those attributes though if necessary in less rigidly organized circumstances (*ibid.* p. 112).

The formal proceedings of the above memorable occasion were terminated by our host, the Director-General of UNESCO, who had chaired the meeting throughout, when he delivered the moving World Appeal which is published on the reverse of this page.

### *Conclusions*

Our conclusions from these proceedings and 'surrounding' conversations etc. are that there is increasing interest in, and appreciation of, the problems of The Biosphere as our own and Nature's sole habitat and life-support, but that this interest and appreciation are still not nearly acute and wide enough to engender sufficient enthusiasm and adequate funding to do more than a tiny fraction of what needs to be done if *our* world is to be saved and become sustainably viable. Here we repeat our recent contention (Polunin, 1993) that '*we humans have the unique responsibility, ultimately to the entire Universe, of safeguarding life; for it now seems that there is nowhere else that life as we know it exists in, or emanates from, than Earth's Biosphere, which it is still surely in our own but no other living thing's power to safeguard and preserve.*'

NICHOLAS POLUNIN

\* Died 10 November 1993, see the obituary by Dr Michel Batisse published on pp. 363–4 of this issue. Another pertinent great loss was of Professor Victor A. Kovda (see the obituary by Vera A. Dmitrieva & Nicholas Polunin published on pp. 364–5 of our last year's Winter issue) who, as Director of UNESCO's Department of Natural and Exact Sciences from 1958 until 1965 and later President of the International Society of Soil Science and Vice-Chairman of UNESCO's International Coordinating Committee of MAB, will inevitably, as a disciple of V.I. Vernadsky its originator, have had much to do with the latter's (and our continuing) concept of The Biosphere. — Ed.

result would have been virtually instant extinction. Hence there has been a permanent premium on maintaining the highest possible birth-rate. Hence, too, the pro-fertility attitudes enshrined to this day in many cultures and traditions.

### *Contraceptive Research and Development*

Despite the need for contraceptives that are safer, cheaper, and more convenient, than the present lot, annual world-wide funding to produce new types is — according to Dr Steven Sinding, Director of the Population Program at the Rockefeller Foundation in New York — only US \$57 millions, worth a mere 3% of contraceptive sales and well below the pharmaceutical industry's norm of investing 16–19% of sales revenues in R & D. Public sector contributions represent 3–4% of the \$800 millions of annual international support for population and family planning.

### *Maternal Mortality*

Out of 500,000 maternal deaths that occur world-wide each year, perhaps one-third are due to 'coathanger abortions' performed in developing countries. Say the total is almost 500 per day, and suppose this mass mortality occurs because the women are denied freedom of choice concerning their reproductive activities. If, as Dr Mahmoud Fathallah, of the Rockefeller Foundation, points out, there was a freedom movement in which 500 people died in a single day as a once-only event, the world would be outraged. But when 500 women die every day in pursuit of their reproductive freedom, the world hardly flickers an eyelid!

### *Reproductive Roulette in Africa*

Due to too many births spaced too closely together, the traumas of female circumcision, and poor health generally, the chance of a Sub-Saharan African woman dying from pregnancy-related troubles is, as pointed out by Professor Partha Dasgupta of Cambridge University, 1 in 20; and in the more impoverished countries, it can be as high as 1 in 6: contrast this with the North American rate of 1 in 4,000, and the Scandinavian rate of 1 in 20,000!

### *'Missing Females'*

Because of the role played by the human female in the survival of the species, she has become the biologically stronger sex. Not only do females generally live longer than males, but more males are born — as if in order to offset their greater mortality. So females should enjoy a higher survival-rate right from the start. In those many countries where they are socially disadvantaged, however, females tend to get a deal much poorer than males. Thus girl children suffer poorer nutrition and inadequate health-care overall; female fetuses are increasingly aborted in China, India, and a growing list of other countries; and female infanticide is still a pervasive practice. Whereas in developed countries there are usually 95–97 males to every 100 females, in countries of developing Asia there are now 105 males per 100 females. According to Dr Mahmoud Fathallah, some 60–100 million females have 'gone missing' in the recent past.

### *Misunderstandings on Population*

Misunderstandings abound — such as the one about the exhortation in Genesis to 'go forth and multiply' — an injunction issued when the world's population was two!

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