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Spaceship Earth and Water for the Future

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Spaceship Earth and Water for the Future

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A discussion of water problems reminds me of my favorite water man—the late Sextus Frontinius—who was appointed Rome's water commissioner in the first century, A.D. He found himself in the position classic to water managers; he was told, "We need more water, go and get it—and by the way, you cannot have any more money." So, being a man of ingenuity, he looked around and decided to find out where the water went. He found that it mostly went to waste. He thought of various ways to overcome the waste and is today known as being the first to enunciate the great principle: halving the demand is the equivalent of doubling the supply. He did very well; he did not have to build any more aqueducts, and one would have thought he was destined for glory. Unfortunately there is a sad end to the story—he eventually committed suicide in order to avoid being put to death by Nero. One only hopes that those who are tackling similar problems in the United States, and elsewhere, will not find themselves as hard pressed.

I must confess that the title of the talk has caused me a certain degree of anguish. The analogy of Spaceship Earth is somewhat disturbing. It is perhaps seductive, but certainly misleading, for two reasons. In the first place the spaceship concept suggests the totally false premise that we are careening through space in this purpose-built object with a mission—knowing what we are going to do. But the problems faced by this conference, and the United Nations Water Conference at Mar del Plata are decidedly different. Certainly we are careening through space, but do not quite know why. We do not even know what we are trying to do as we careen through space, and the whole process is a disorderly, fascinating, potentially productive and exciting one.

A second point also troubles me about the analogy. As the Apollo astronauts sat in their capsule atop the rocket at Cape Kennedy, they could be certain of one thing: they knew that they numbered three at lift-off, and that there would be no

* Executive Secretary, U.N. Water Conference at Mar del Plata, Argentina, March 14-25, 1977.

more than three when the thing splashed down again. We in Spaceship Earth, if it is a spaceship, can not be sure of that. As we whirl through space, we simply do not know how many of us there will be tomorrow, the next day, or the next week. We do know that every time the planet spins around there are more people, there are more people demanding more water and demanding better water; each new person needs more water in order to stay alive and enjoy the blessings of the civilization that he has grown accustomed to—and to which he is entitled. This is the kind of problem that one does not have in a spaceship.

Our concerns demonstrate the failure of the spaceship analogy. The conference at Mar del Plata is but one of the series of conferences that have been organized under the auspices of the United Nations to deal with what Lady Jackson (Barbara Ward) has come to call global housekeeping. We are concerned with one central issue: How do we, inhabitants of this planet and the governments that represent us, so arrange our affairs as to ensure that there will be no water crisis—or rather, no serious, recurring, or more rapidly recurring water crisis—before the end of this century. It is a big job, but one the conference can successfully handle.

In this perspective, the conference falls into the long series of conferences organized by the United Nations. The first was the conference on the conservation and utilization of resources which was convened in the mid-1940s. That conference was convened as a result of a very imaginative initiative by the then-U.S. Secretary of the Interior. It brought together with great success a very large number of scientists, technologists, and administrators to consider how the world could best use and conserve its resources. It preceded the environmentalists, but was a successful attempt to deal with one of the vital housekeeping problems that arises in the course of managing this one earth that we all occupy.

A number of conferences have followed. There has been, for example, a conference on the application of science and technology to development. There have been conferences on the peaceful uses of atomic energy, on the peaceful uses of outer space, on the environment (Stockholm), on population (Bucharest), and on women (Mexico City), each of which attempted

to deal with one of the problems faced by the majority of the occupants of Spaceship Earth. In addition, there was the recent human settlements conference in Vancouver, the food conference in Rome, and the water conference at Mar del Plata. Down the road is a conference, to be held in Nairobi, on the problems of desertification—how you create deserts by applying water to them, and how you eliminate deserts by applying water more intelligently.

At the Mar del Plata water conference, we have attempted to bring to the attention of governments the specific water and water-related problems that stem from the earlier conferences. For example, it is quite obvious that if the world is to achieve the ambitious food goals set in Rome there will have to be an almost frightening array of activities affecting water. I do not mean that the rich countries will merely have to dig into their pockets, but that there will have to be improvements in irrigation, in the use of water in agriculture, and in other vital water uses. Similarly, at the human settlements conference, the participants agreed that there should be action taken between now and 1990 to provide safe drinking water and reasonably adequate waste disposal facilities to the vast majority of the world's population, who now have neither. What is needed is a practical program—a set of commitments by developed countries to give those problems priority, to provide some of the finances and some of the technical cooperation that will be necessary to achieve the habitat goal.

The Mar del Plata conference was preceded by a very successful period of regional preparatory meetings; the first of these was held in Bangkok in July 1976, the second at Lima during August 1976, the third at Addis Ababa at the end of September 1976, and the fourth in Geneva at the beginning of October 1976. At each of these preparatory conferences the member governments produced reports on water problems in their countries and the likely demands, problems, and solutions considered by the governments. These reports have been collated in a set of regional reports which are to be published.

During the regional meetings the governments considered recommendations to be proposed at the Mar del Plata conference. These recommendations vary in style from region to region. For example, the African region placed a great deal of

emphasis on measures to improve net worth—the assessment of water resources. They did so for two reasons: partly because Africa needs significant development in that area, and partly because its regional meeting was preceded by a meeting of hydrologists.

Nonetheless, the general contents of these recommendations are generally uniform. An example might be the Latin American recommendations. They cover a fairly obvious set of topics: planning; water management; institutions for water management, laws, and regulations; assessment of supply and demand; efficiency in water use; community water supplies; use of water for agriculture, energy, recreation, and navigation; technology, conservation, and the environment; floods and droughts, cooperation in hydrological studies, and international rivers.

On each of these subjects, the recommendations note what would be nice to do, but contain no stirring call for action. In the case of international rivers, a very large element of compromise is evident. The proposal adopted in Latin America is virtually the same as the one adopted in Bangkok, and it is obvious that a recommendation adopted, by consensus, by a group that includes a downriver country like Bangladesh and an upriver country like India, is likely to be a meek proposal.

However, international agreement on difficult political and economic questions, such as those of international rivers and the use of shared water resources, cannot be resolved in a one or two week meeting. The resolution will take place through the normal processes of treaty-making, and of law-making at the international level. Hopefully, the International Law Commission will draft appropriate legal texts.¹ The scholarly and professional communities, through organizations like the International Law Association, will also, hopefully, continue their efforts to propose the sort of formulae that governments might eventually accept.²

When agreement does come it will come because the force of circumstances propels people in that direction. I know of one

1. A brief sketch of the current activities of the International Law Commission on the legal aspects of international water-courses is contained in Nanda, *infra*.

2. For a summary report on the legal norms recommended by these organizations see Nanda, *id*.

developing country which has a somewhat successful treaty for the common use of an international river with one of its neighbors. It is trying unsuccessfully, however, to establish a similar arrangement with another neighbor. The reason the arrangement can not be brought to fruition, I am told, is not political, but is because the other neighbor has not yet reached a point of development where it needs to make use of that water; until that time it is not going to enter into commitments whose outcome it can not foresee. Nevertheless, we can be sure that the discussions and decisions taken at Mar del Plata and regional conferences will propel the international community further along the road to agreement.

A major issue affecting the management of water is conservation, and the resulting set of environmental considerations, with which environmental programs are concerned. The U.N. Environment Program has therefore been most generous in helping us to organize the regional meetings, and in the case of the Mar del Plata meeting it assisted the neediest among the developing countries to send representatives.

An additional important contribution made by the conference is certainly the series of reports and papers submitted by governments and discussed at the conference. Earlier we had asked governments to present papers at the conference relating to their national experiences in broad problems of water management. The compilation of these papers and the preparation and analysis involved in each were invaluable in creating a new-found awareness of water management concerns on both the national and international levels.

There is no guarantee that the Mar del Plata conference or a similar intergovernmental conference would bring about what Barbara Ward considers necessary to make Spaceship Earth a flyable object: "Rational behavior is the condition of survival. Rational rules of behavior are what we largely lack," or what Buckminster Fuller wants everybody to do, "to think clearly." However, as the preamble to the Latin American proposal has aptly stated, the conference at Mar del Plata has provided a magnificent opportunity, "to raise problems, to exchange experience, and to identify techniques and solutions that may help governments to take decisions in this matter, focusing their attention on the major issues in the water sector

which demand the attention of the world community." If even half of the delegations to Mar del Plata sensed that we should focus our efforts in these directions, the conference will have achieved something worthwhile.