

BAHA'I CHAIR FOR STUDIES IN DEVELOPMENT

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Environmental Stewardship and Sustainable Development

A Symposium organized by the Baha'i Chair for Studies in Development, DAVV and the Jimmy McGilligan Centre for Sustainable Development, Indore

Concept Note

As India marches forward on the path of economic prosperity, many concerned voices are being raised that this development should not come at the cost of destroying our cultural, spiritual, and ecological heritage. Today one of the gravest dangers facing the country and the world over is the alarming damage to the natural environment and the earth's ecology – much of it the result of the pursuit of policies aimed at economic growth. Whether it is the irresponsible mining or extraction of natural resources from the earth and the oceans, or dangerous levels of pollution in the air and water, or production of toxic and environmentally hazardous waste, or the process of desertification, soil degradation or deforestation, or the loss of natural habitats and the extinction and endangerment of species or the depletion of the ozone layer and the melting of the earth's glaciers– the damage to the environment has reached catastrophic proportions and the scale of damage done is in many cases beyond repair.

Although numerous environmental activists, academicians, policy makers and world leaders have made earnest attempts to address this challenge by seeking to reverse policies that cause environmental damage and pass legislations to control this damage – the fact remains that these interventions are having limited results. The degradation of the environment continues at an alarming rate. Consider the statistics. The world has already lost 80% of its forests. At the current rate of deforestation, 5-10% of tropical forest species will become extinct every decade. Every hour, 1,692 acres of productive dry land become desert. 27% of our coral reefs have been destroyed. If the rate continues, the remaining 60% will be gone in 30 years. We are using up 50% more natural resources than the Earth can provide.

While there is a general rise in consciousness about this issue among the masses of the people, there are also those who in the name of development and pursuit of national interest ignore the gravity of the situation and continue pursuing policies that destroys natural resources. In such a setting, the strong collective will required to bring decisive change is lacking. The resolution of the seeming paradox between pursuing material development and protecting and preserving nature requires, among other things, greater clarity of thought about the proper relationship that must exist between human beings and nature.

The timeless wisdom contained in the world's spiritual and religious heritage points to a synergistic relationship between human beings and nature as part of one interconnected whole. In this perspective, nature is viewed with respect and reverence as a bestowal of the divine, as a reflection of divine attributes, and as a trust to be preserved. This holistic conception was disrupted with the era of materialism where the consciousness of the interconnectedness of all beings was replaced by a fragmented and mechanistic worldview which saw nature as a mere source of raw materials to be exploited at will for profit and gain.

The challenge before the present generation lies in reconciling the impulse for advancement and material progress on the one hand with an attitude of profound respect for nature that is based on a sense of interconnectedness and oneness. The pursuit for progress of course is an imperative of the human spirit. Unlike animals, the mark of nobility of the human being has been the power of the mind and intelligence which has allowed humanity to overcome the limitations of nature, to build civilizations and to develop the sciences, technology, arts and literature. Human beings have the power to bend the laws of nature to their will. With the aid of science and technology we have found a way to travel in the sky and underwater, to stay warm in cold and cold in heat and to turn night into day by harnessing the power of electricity in a blub.

Yet to sustain life on earth, these powers of the human being must be harmonized with the principle of the oneness of all existence which requires human beings to live in harmony with nature with an attitude of great respect and cooperation. The principle that must guide humanity's interaction with nature is thus that of environmental stewardship. From among the countless species in the biosphere, human beings have the responsibility to be conscious, compassionate, and creative participants in the evolution of the life of the planet.

Questions for discussion: The implications of the principle of environmental stewardship are truly profound for the life of the individual as well as for society. How can the understanding of these implications be instilled to an ever greater degree in a way that does not trivialize the issue by turning it into a slogan or a pet program that inspires superficial enthusiasm for a short period? How can this principle be integrated into the functioning of organizations? How can it be incorporated to ever greater degree at the level of policy?

The principle of environmental stewardship can only be meaningfully understood and applied when it is seen as part of a moral framework for society that includes other spiritual principles such as the willingness to sacrifice for the common good; a conviction in the oneness of humankind and a sense of trusteeship towards other human beings as well as towards nature; the willingness to overcome greed and selfishness with a commitment to service and a sense of duty and responsibility towards the Divine and other human beings. How can the understanding of these principles and the relation between them be deepened?