

Cleaning up the world's oceans

At the UNEP's conference in Washington, nations agreed to draft a global treaty to ban ocean pollutants

Buttressed by alarming evidence of rising levels of pollution in the world's seas, and increasing threats to human health, governments which attended the global conference of the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) in Washington, D.C., from 23 October to 3 November 1995, committed to negotiating a new global agreement to ban persistent organic pollutants (POPs).

The 110 countries which participated at the conference are now committed to working towards a legally binding agreement that will eliminate a prioritised list of POPs, including DDT, PCBs, dioxins and a number of pesticides.

Both the 'Washington Declaration' and the detailed Programme of Action agreed at the conference commit the international community to "develop[ing] a global, legally binding instrument...for the reduction and/or elimination of emissions and discharges, whether intentional or not, and, where appropriate, the elimination of the manufacture and the use of, and illegal traffic in" the prioritized POPs. After controls are in place, additional POPs could be added to the list, if scientists agree that they are harmful.

At the same time, the agreement recognizes the special needs of developing countries, calling for "economically feasible and environmentally sound" alternatives, as well as a "step-by-step" approach, if necessary, in moving away from POPs.

DDT, for example, is used heavily in developing countries to protect crops and control mosquitoes and the strains of malaria they spread. With regard to DDT, Salif Diop, special advisor to the Minister

of Environment in Senegal, said "It's good to ban these products, but we have to find the right substitutes."

POPs are volatile and travel long distances via air or water. They accumulate in the fatty tissues of animals, including humans, and there is growing evidence that they lead to cancer, damage the reproductive and immune systems and cause developmental problems.

The overwhelming majority of POPs are unnatural, artificial chemicals. They are extremely persistent, with some taking many decades to completely disappear. They concentrate through the food chain, a phenomenon known as bioaccumulation, with life at the top of the food chain, such as humans and marine mammals, accumulating damaging levels of these chemicals.

In March 1996, a UNEP-linked Inter-governmental Forum on Chemical Assessment will meet to further examine the scientific and technical aspects of eliminating POPs. Participants will work out a process to agree on proposals for action that will be considered at UNEP's next Governing Council meeting in January 1997.

Several of the governments involved in the Washington Conference have suggested that the Montreal Protocol on ozone depletion serves as a good 'model' for addressing POPs, and that the treaty negotiations could be concluded by the end of 1997, if governments show good faith and commitment to moving forward in addressing this critical issue.

Actions decided

In addition to POPs, the Washington Conference agreed on actions for other land-based pollutant categories, that is,



sewage, radioactive substances, heavy metals, oils (hydrocarbons), nutrients, sediment mobilization, litter and physical alteration and destruction of habitat.

It also addressed related cross-sectoral issues, especially in relation to mobilization of resources (financing to assist developing countries), capacity building, the establishment of a clearing house, and institutional follow-up at the international level, coordinated by UNEP.

With regard to sewage, the plan instructs UNEP to draft a proposal to address inadequate treatment and management of waste water including raw sewage that is discharged into oceans and seas. A statement from UNEP pointed out that large amounts of untreated municipal waste water are released directly into sea water in industrialized as well as developing countries.

As part of the UN's monitoring and follow-up to the 1992 Earth Summit, this year's Commission on Sustainable Development (CSD) will focus on ocean issues at its annual meeting, set for 18 April to 3 May 1996. It is expected that key issues addressed at the Washington Conference, including POPs, sewage and institutional follow-up by UNEP and other international agencies, will be a special area of concern. ¶

This piece is by Clifton Curtis,
Oceans/Biological Diversity Political
Advisor, Greenpeace International