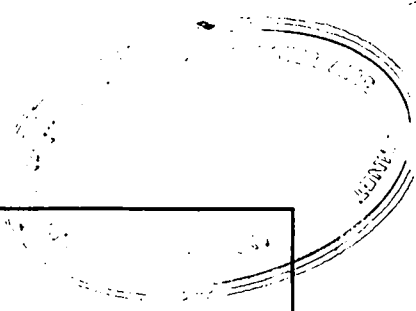




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PRIME MINISTER

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**SPEECH BY THE PRIME MINISTER
OPENING OF THE 18TH GENERAL ASSEMBLY OF THE
INTERNATIONAL UNION FOR THE CONSERVATION OF
NATURE AND NATURAL RESOURCES
PERTH - 28 NOVEMBER 1990**

Your Royal Highness
Premier Lawrence
Distinguished international guests
Ladies and gentlemen

Australia is proud to host the 18th General Assembly of the IUCN.

We do so aware of the responsibility we bear - as stewards of the Australian continent and as active participants in the global environmental movement.

This is indeed a heavy responsibility - *first*, because ours is an ancient, huge and extraordinary land mass that shelters and nourishes unique species of plants and animals. It is a laboratory for scientists, a magnet for tourists and above all a priceless part of the heritage of the world.

Second, ours is a special responsibility because of the unique history of human habitation on this continent.

For at least 40,000 years, the Australian Aboriginal people exercised exclusive stewardship of this continent, acting out their belief not that they owned the land but that the land owned them.

If conservation means deep spiritual respect for the land, and identification with it; if conservation requires an accurate understanding of the place of humankind in the grand scheme of creation; if conservation means taking from the land today without compromising your children's rights to fulfil their needs tomorrow, then the Australian Aborigines were perhaps the world's first conservationists.

For them, land care was literally a way of life.

It is only in relatively recent times - the last two hundred years - that this continent has undergone the impact of Western settlement.

But those two centuries are of course the two centuries since the Industrial Revolution.

In that time, prosperity and quality of life has been created for some - but certainly not all - of the world's growing population. And those incomplete gains have been achieved only through the progressive conquest of the world's natural environment by farming, mining, the growth of cities, the spread of industry.

Soils have been degraded; seas and rivers and lakes have been polluted; huge parts of the world's tree cover has been obliterated; the fragile Arctic and Antarctic environments have been damaged.

The Australian continent may seem to European or Asian eyes one that is vast, timeless, empty and untouched.

Relatively speaking, it is. But no-one can ignore the fact - and Australians do not ignore it - that even here, much of the landscape bears the mark of human activity that has wrought permanent environmental change - and, not infrequently, degradation.

That brings me to the third way in which Australians bear a special responsibility.

We are the only people whose nation occupies an entire continent. So the physical integrity of the Australian land mass is duplicated precisely by the political integrity of the Australian nation.

This means that what Australians decide to do to preserve the environment of this large continent, or to destroy it, assumes real and lasting significance.

At the same time, as a modern society and open economy, Australians understand the vital dynamic of global interdependence.

We know that the prosperity of all nations is determined by the economic decisions of each nation - a vivid example of which is provided by the tragic impasse in the current GATT negotiations.

And we know too that the environmental well being of the globe is equally a shared responsibility.

Australians are exposed - as are we all - to the danger of global warming and of ozone depletion. Australians share the loss we all experience when a living species ceases to exist somewhere in the world.

So Australians are coming to recognise, as are we all, the dilemma of modern life:

- We still face the pressing need to feed the people of the world and to create policies that provide the opportunity for growth and prosperity.
- But in the long term, such economic development is sustainable only if it is ecologically sustainable - otherwise the gains made by this generation are achieved only at the expense of those who are as yet unborn.

So for all these reasons, Australians are acutely aware of our responsibility to care for and to protect the unique landscape that is our national home.

And in particular, we are endeavouring to show the way forward towards implementing a viable and effective process of ecologically sustainable development.

We have established working groups that are examining the Australian economy, sector by sector - agriculture, forestry, fisheries, mining, manufacturing, energy use and distribution, transport and tourism.

This way, by careful study and broad community participation, we are endeavouring to ensure that our quality of life is maintained for now and for the future.

And we have also established the Resource Assessment Commission, an independent advisory body that conducts enquiries into complex resource use issues - such as forestry and coastal zones - so that more informed and integrated decisions can be taken.

We are working too, with the Australian States, to develop a national environment agreement to rationalise our processes and to ensure better environmental protection.

Australia is also at the forefront of international environmental action. We are leading the way in the reduction of emissions of all greenhouse gases.

We will have eliminated consumption of ozone-depleting substances by 1998 - considerably faster than urged by the Montreal Protocol.

And Australia has taken the lead, with France, in urging a total permanent international ban on mining in Antarctica. As we meet today, the parties to the Antarctic Treaty System are in conference in Chile and it is my profound hope that they will take the next steps towards our goal of protecting this fragile and precious environment.

Ladies and gentlemen,

Australia's achievement is measured - simply, if not comprehensively - in our commitment to the World Heritage List, in the creation and maintenance of which the IUCN has played such a valuable and respected role.

I record with pleasure the judgement of the IUCN that "Australia has done more to implement the World Heritage Convention than any other single country".

Australia has eight sites of outstanding universal values of culture and nature which have been inscribed on the World Heritage List.

Tropical, arid and temperate ecosystems - marine and terrestrial - are represented by the Great Barrier Reef, Uluru and Kakadu, the forests of Queensland's Wet Tropics, and of north-east New South Wales, South-west Tasmania, the Willandra Lakes Region and the Lord Howe Island group.

Our recent nomination of Shark Bay, six hundred kilometres to our north on the coast of Western Australia, and of the sub-Antarctic Macdonald and Heard Islands will add to our distinguished World Heritage record.

And as a further step, I am pleased to announce that agreement has been reached between the Commonwealth and Queensland Governments on joint management arrangements for the Wet Tropics World Heritage Area.

This Management Scheme provides a mechanism for successful cooperative management of the area. It incorporates joint funding, consideration of local community interests and professional scientific advice through two advisory committees, a professionally staffed Management Agency, a joint Management Authority and a Ministerial Council.

Through this Scheme, Australia will meet its international duty to protect this vital part of the world's heritage.

Ladies and gentlemen,

I say none of this in a spirit of complacency, or to pretend that countries, Australia included, need do no more to safeguard our global environment.

We have indeed a long way to go. My Government is very conscious of Australia's responsibility to help maintain the international momentum on a number of other environmental issues.

The loss of the world's biological diversity is one such issue.

You will all be aware of the statistics. The five million species estimated to have evolved over billions of years; the risk of losing one-quarter of these over the next 20 or 30 years; the destruction of rainforests, the loss of genetic diversity, the loss of potential pharmaceuticals and new food crops.

While some nations may be benefiting in the short-term from the activities which are leading to such losses, there can be no winners in the long-term.

Australia believes that the development and negotiation of an international biodiversity convention is a matter of great urgency.

At the last General Assembly of the IUCN, a resolution was passed calling for the establishment of a global representative system of marine protected areas.

Australia has gone some way towards achieving this goal through the establishment of the Great Barrier Reef Marine Park and other significant Australian marine reserves such as Ningaloo Marine Park, just north of Shark Bay.

There is, however, a number of other areas in Australian waters which contribute greatly to the world's biodiversity and would be valuable additions to a marine reserve system such as that proposed by the IUCN.

I am, therefore, pleased to announce that the Australian Government has decided to work towards the expansion of Australia's marine reserve system. In association with State and Territory Governments, we will investigate the establishment of a national, representative system of marine protected areas for Australia that will protect these areas, while permitting appropriate uses and promoting public education.

Ladies and gentlemen,

I trust that you will not leave Australia without having taken the opportunity to appreciate both Australia's magnificent natural environment - and the actions we are taking to preserve it.

Australians are proud of both.

And I trust that this General Assembly - and the continuing work of the IUCN - will help show us and other nations the way forward.

Since its foundation in 1948, the IUCN has become a highly respected conservation organisation, forming close and valuable working relationships with government and non-government agencies alike. It has also maintained an important international focus upon the world's environmental problems.

The key to the organisation's success has, in part, been the expertise it has been able to draw upon from its membership. It is this expertise, assembled here today, which is required for the complex issues to be considered over the coming week. The challenge will be to do more to integrate economic considerations into many of these issues.

Your meeting indeed comes at a critical time in the evolution of international affairs. The events that we have witnessed of late - the transformation of superpower relations and the revolutions of eastern Europe - will ensure the historians of the future see our times as marking irreversible change. The overthrow of totalitarian rule in eastern Europe has not only changed the political landscape, bringing both freedom and democracy to millions; it also offers hope that as these people shape their economic destinies in this new order the past decades of environmental devastation can now be reversed.

We must not overlook of course the persistence of substantial regional problems - not least of course the potential for conflict in the Gulf. However the balance sheet is surely positive - and must surely give us renewed confidence in the capacity of international forums such as yours to achieve lasting and beneficial change.

I wish you all a productive and informative week and hope that it provides a solid foundation for your work in coming years.

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