

*Address of  
His Excellency Mr. Pongpol Adireksarn  
Minister of Education, Thailand  
and President of SEAMEO Council  
at the International Conference on Gender Issues in Biodiversity Conservation  
at SEAMEO BIOTROP, Bogor, Indonesia  
February 6, 2003 at 10.00 hrs.*

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Deputy State Minister of Women Empowerment, Republic of Indonesia,  
Professor Satria Sumontri Brojonegoro,  
Director-General of Higher Education, Ministry of Education,  
Dr. Arief Sadiman, Director of SEAMEO Secretariat,  
Dr. Handoko, Director of SEAMEO BIOTROP,  
Dr. Ruben Umaly, Executive Director of ASEAN Foundation,  
Representative from UNESCO Jakarta,  
Distinguished Participants,  
Ladies and Gentlemen,

Let me, first of all, congratulate SEAMEO BIOTROP and its collaborating agencies, particularly the Ministry of Education and Ministry of Women Empowerment of the Republic of Indonesia, ASEAN and UNESCO, for having successfully organized this International Conference on the very important and challenging topic of “Gender Issues in Biodiversity Conservation”. I feel privileged to take part in the Conference, and consider it an honor to have the opportunity to give an address.

## Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen,

I am here to address you in the capacity of the President of the Southeast Asian Ministers of Education Council, and also as Minister of Education of Thailand. But I must confess that I have a long-term personal interest in the subject of biodiversity, and this is indeed a subject dear to my heart.

It began with my childhood love affair with the seas of Thailand and their rich ecosystems. As a young boy, I had always dreamt of joining the navy, but was disqualified in the entrance examination of the Naval Academy due to near-sightedness. To console me, my father sent me to the United States where I completed the senior high school and continued my higher education to obtain my Masters' Degree. My student-day visits to the Smithsonian Institute and the many national parks in the United States, widened my perspective and led me to firmly believe in the importance of the world's diverse natural resources.

Later, when I became Minister of Agriculture and Cooperatives, overseeing the Royal Forestry Department, the Fisheries Department, and the National Parks, I further expanded my knowledge on the natural resources and agriculture. And as Minister in charge of Tourism, I made it a policy to focus on ecotourism and personally led many high level missions to inspect important national parks both in Southeast Asia and in many parts of

the world. My association with countless experts in agriculture, forestry, and marine sciences, coupled with my actual visits and personal experiences inspired me to write four adventure novels in English, the Pirates of Tarutoa, Mekong, Until the Karma Ends and the Kingkong Effect, all of them depicting the diverse natural habitats and marine life of Southeast Asia, as well as important local wisdoms of the Southeast Asian people.

Over the years, however, I have come to realize that it is the people that matters the most in the conservation of biodiversity. Education therefore is the key to successful conservation, since education, formal, non-formal, and informal, can mould and change the pattern of human activities. Up to now, human activities have been mainly responsible for the rapid destruction of biological resources in all parts of the world.

Convinced of the power of education, my father and I, with the support of the Tourism Authority, have been working on a Nature Learning Center for students and the public. This Centre located in a buffer zone area at Chet Kot (เจ็ดคต), Saraburi (สระบุรี), near Khao Yai (เขาใหญ่) National Park, will serve as an open laboratory, a natural library, and an open classroom for science and natural history learning, physical education, arts, and scouting, for the schools in the Saraburi (สระบุรี) and nearby provinces. It will also serve as an eco-tourism park for the general public in the future.

Having recently taken over the portfolio of Minister of Education, I now make it a policy to visit remote and island schools in all parts of Thailand. Last week, I led a delegation of about twenty senior officials on a four-day trip to the coastal towns and island communities in the Andaman Sea, to meet with local educators, community leaders and visit some of the schools, including the Science Schools in Trang and Satun. The main purpose of the visit is to give them policy directions about education reform and to promote the integration of local contents in the school curriculum. In the South particularly, the sea and the marine eco-systems are their source of life, therefore they should learn how to keep the sea clean and plentiful, not only for now but for future sustainability. The universities and colleges in the Southern area of Thailand should also specialize in marine science, deep-sea fishery, ship-building, and marine eco-system and conservation. If we do not teach them to love and respect their environment, not only they will tend to destroy it, but there can be no sustainable development in the region.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

You will all agree that biodiversity represents the very foundation of human existence, and that biodiversity loss poses a serious threat to development. Yet everyday, our biological richness is being reduced at an alarming rate. The loss has such profound ethical and aesthetic implications, as well as serious economic and social costs: the disappearance of genes, species, ecosystems and

human knowledge that represent a living library of options made available by nature to generations of human beings. It is sad but true that many people world-wide lack the knowledge and appreciation that biodiversity plays a critical role in directly meeting human needs, particularly in terms of food security, health and medicine, recreation and research opportunities, and that biodiversity maintains the ecological processes upon which our survival on earth depends.

Thus, serious threats and destruction continue, including habitat destruction, overexploitation, pollution, global climate change, and invasion or displacement of species. These are caused by social and human problems such as poverty, population growth, rapid urbanization, lack of relevant education and unsound economic, social and educational policies.

Since the Rio summit in 1992, the conservation of biodiversity has become the common concern of the world. In Southeast Asia, a region rich in tropical biological resources, however, problems such as poverty, rapid urbanization, and rapid environmental degradation, continue to create threats to our biodiversity. By looking at the rate of reduction of the region's rainforests and mangroves which are actually among the world's most fragile habitats, we can estimate the extinction rate of species. Experts have repeatedly warned that if the present trends continue, the countdown for extinction date may very well be within our lifetime. It is therefore very important for our region to urgently

mobilize the support and cooperation of all parties concerned, at the national, regional, and international levels, to promote the knowledge and the awareness of the people, men as well as women, to act now, to stop or slow down the depletion of biodiversity, and to conserve, sustain, and seek to learn more about the processes of the biodiversity evolution before it is too late.

In this connection, I am very happy to see that SEAMEO BIOTROP is working in close collaboration with ASEAN and UNESCO in the organizing of this Conference. ASEAN, a younger regional organization than SEAMEO, comprises exactly the same membership. It has launched its ASEAN Regional Centre for Biodiversity with an interesting website serving as a biodiversity gateway to information in Southeast Asia. I am also happy to note that ASEAN has recently upgraded its sub-committee on Education to the committee level, and seeks to cooperate more with SEAMEO.

UNESCO, on the other hand, is an international organization for the promotion of education, science, culture, and communication within the United Nations system. It has very clear policies and programs on biodiversity conservation, science education, and gender equality. The biodiversity programs of UNESCO that I found particularly strong is the Man and Biosphere (MAB) Program, the Intergovernmental Oceanographic Commission (IOC), and the World Cultural and Natural Heritage Conservation. As President of the Thai National Commission for UNESCO, I know that Thailand

and other countries in Southeast Asia have been making efforts to link these network of scientific experts with the teaching – learning in schools, particularly through the Associated Schools Project Network to ensure a broad based sustainable development.

In this light, may I therefore suggest that, within SEAMEO which is the Education Ministers' Organization, we should promote closer cooperation between BIOTROP, TROPMED, SEARCA, and RECSAM, and strengthen their linkages with schools and universities. Outside SEAMEO, linkages should also be further promoted with both ASEAN and UNESCO in science education in general and in the conservation and management of biodiversity in particular, in order to maximize the benefit and avoid duplication of effort.

As Education Minister, I greatly appreciate the fact that Education for Conservation and Sustainable Development is one of the key topics of your Conference. This necessarily involves both the learning of natural sciences and the social and human sciences. In this respect, it is very important to make sure that science education aims not only at preparing future conservation scientists, but also promoting future citizens who are science literate and capable of coping wisely with unprecedented environmental challenges of the future. Science education should also relate to the local environment and daily life, and must not rely too much on textbook study and memorization of facts and theories. Relating science education to everyday life also means anchoring in the local context,

encouraging students to conduct field visits and undertake local science projects, involving local community problems and come up with ways of possibly preventing environmental catastrophes at the local and national levels. Most important of all, science education should whet the students' appetite for more scientific learning, for further explorations and research, by making them enthusiastic and genuinely interested in life, and in biodiversity of their locality.

But indeed, biodiversity is a very broad concept. The conservation and management therefore involves a wide-range of tasks and responsibility at various levels. The role of men and women in these tasks is undeniably and equally important, and hence the pertinence of the gender issues in biodiversity conservation.

Men and women perform different functions in their everyday life, in the family and in the community. Their opportunities to conserve and manage biodiversity are therefore different, yet interrelated and complementary. To ensure gender balance in biological conservation, educational equity is the first step. Equal access to education, particularly in the field of sciences and natural conservation, as well as in related fields, should be further promoted. Job opportunity in biodiversity conservation and management for both men and women, as well as gender analysis in biological research are also very necessary to ensure the reduction of gender disparity, and promote gender balance in the development of biodiversity.

To bridge the gender divide in biodiversity, it is useful to present gender balanced role models. In Thailand, if I may be allowed to cite my country as an example, His Majesty the King is known as “กษัตริย์เกษตร” or the Agriculture King. He has initiated countless projects in all parts of the country that are linked with agriculture and sustainable development. Her Majesty the Queen, on the other hand complements His Majesty’s initiatives with her interest in the conservation of watershed areas and protecting the endangered species of animals and marine life. One of their children, Princess Maha Chakri Sirindhorn, who is an educator, launched her own project of a network of schools with a botanical garden where teachers and students set aside a botanical reserve area for biodiversity study and field projects. I have visited some of these schools and found that they help stimulate the school community’s awareness and enthusiasm in conservation and enhance the students’ effective learning by doing.

In conclusion, I want to emphasize that biodiversity is the very essence of life, yet there is so much about its processes that we still do not understand. To preserve it we must encourage learning and observation by people. For people are an integral part in the learning processes, in the conservation and the management of the biological systems. And by people, I mean men and women, boys and girls, at the local, national, as well as international levels.

For, in nature, species are never isolated, they live in relationship with

larger ecological complexes that make up the entire planet's ecosystem.

May I declare open the International Conference on Gender Issues in Biodiversity Conservation, and wish all of you a successful Conference. And I thank you for your very kind attention.

Thank you.

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