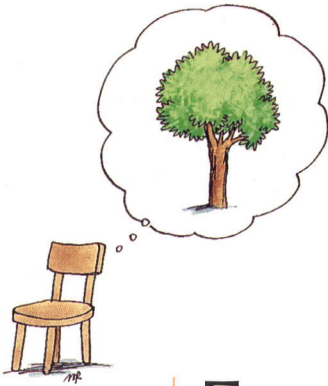


ENVIRONMENTAL PROTECTION: A SHARED RESPONSIBILITY



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European citizens are concerned about the state of the environment. They want their children and grandchildren to have the same right as we have to clean air, clear water and green forests. The European Union shares these concerns and has accepted the principle of sustainable development. Since 1992, the focus of EU environmental policy has been to match production and consumption patterns to what our environment can sustain in the long term. Climate change and the depletion of the ozone layer are two instances where the limits of sustainability may have been exceeded. Pre-1992, EU environmental policy concentrated on corrective action. This was not always successful, partly because there was no integrated approach between environmental protection and economic activities in other sectors which went on harming the environment. Now the EU promotes partnership and shared responsibility to prevent and, where possible, reverse environmental degradation. It seeks from a coalition of government, industry and consumers a commitment to conserve resources, to re-use and recycle old products, to dispose of waste safely and develop environment-friendly energy sources. As pollution knows no frontiers, the EU sees its policy as part of a global strategy to save the environment for future generations.

THE CHALLENGE FOR EUROPE

We are engaged in a race against time. The need for a pro-active policy to protect the environment is universally recognized in Europe and elsewhere.

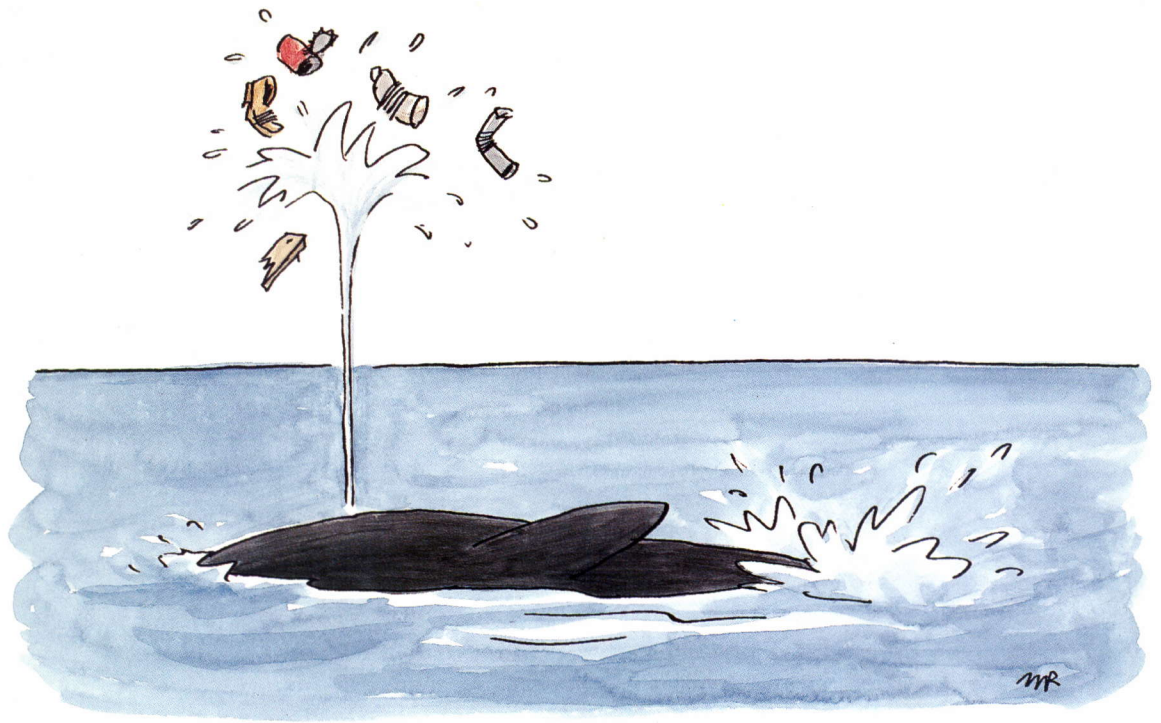
Social progress and economic prosperity have depended on activities which deplete the earth's resources and cause pollution. The products we need and the vital services we use — from transportation to health-care systems — use these resources and create waste and pollution as by-products.

Historically our planet's remarkable regenerative capacity was able to cope with the environmental impact of human activity. But this capacity is now stretched beyond its limit. The two need to be brought back into balance as quickly as possible.

Our environment is threatened in many, often interrelated ways. There are no piecemeal responses; this is why the EU has developed an integrated overall strategy to reflect this reality.

What are the main threats? Global warming and the ensuing climate changes that could transform temperate zones of the earth into arid deserts and flood low-lying regions as ice caps melt is one prospect of environmental degradation that faces mankind. It is caused by the release into the atmosphere of greenhouse gases, principally carbon dioxide (CO₂) from the burning of fossil fuels. Another consequence may be a sharp rise in skin cancers as the protective ozone layer in the upper atmosphere is depleted by man-made chemicals.





The environment is further threatened by acid rain (which affects in particular forests and lakes in the northern regions of the EU), the destruction of tropical forests and the extinction of many species of animal and plant life.

The quality of water, both for drinking and bathing is another growing problem. More needs to be done to control agricultural pollution, while the supply of fresh water is causing problems in some areas of the EU.

Disposing of the billions of tonnes of waste produced by our consumer society is another huge challenge. In the EU alone, more than 21 million tonnes of toxic waste have to be treated each year.

THE EU'S RESPONSE

Since 1970, the Union has adopted more than 200 directives aimed at improving the quality of air and water, controlling waste disposal, monitoring industrial risk and protecting nature.



The European Parliament and environment

The European Parliament battles to protect the environment. It considers that environmental protection is neither a brake on economic growth nor a threat to jobs, but on the contrary a vital ingredient of balanced economic and social development for present and future generations. Better to prevent damage than repair it at great cost, to limit use of non-renewable resources, to reduce production of waste, to develop cleaner technologies, and to make polluters pay for the damage they cause.

To achieve these ends, Parliament has managed to impose or speed up adoption of measures to reduce pollution from motor vehicle emissions, to protect the ozone layer, to ban exports of waste to developing countries, and to strengthen rules on environmental impact assessment in the case of large private or public works. It was also the initiator of moves to integrate environmental protection into other Union policies, notably by introducing the notion of 'greening' into the European budget. The Parliament and its Environment Committee will be increasingly vigilant in monitoring the way the rules it has helped establish are applied in practice.

Key legislation sought to limit sulphur emissions that cause acid rain, to eliminate the use of certain ozone-depleting substances, to control the shipment and transport of hazardous waste or to set standards for bathing water at beaches throughout the EU. The thrust of the legislation was corrective rather than preventive.

This approach changed in 1992 with the adoption of an action programme entitled 'Towards sustainability'. This sets out a pro-active EU strategy up to the year 2000 based on integrating environmental policy and the interests of those economic sectors which impact on the environment. These are sectors which at the same time depend on a good quality of environmental resources for their further development.

The objectives in this document — the EU's fifth environment action programme — were ambitious. They embodied the central theme of the 1992 Rio Earth Summit, the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development (UNCED).

The programme sought to integrate the environment into policy and practice in five key sectors: transport, manufacturing, energy, agriculture and tourism. It also set out to widen the range of environmental policy instruments to things like fiscal incentives and voluntary agreements. The strategy is based on partnership — between government, industry and

consumers — and on shared responsibility among the main actors. The aim of EU legislation is to set a framework of minimum requirements applicable throughout the EU. Individual Member States are free to fix national standards which are higher than those set at Union level.

The programme laid down that all future EU policy-making had to incorporate environmental protection requirements. Draft laws and other policy instruments in agriculture or transport, as in other sectors, will each be assessed for their environmental impact before being submitted for adoption by member governments.

The main fiscal or economic incentives in favour of environmentally friendly goods and services were tax breaks for the purchase of low-emission automobiles and an EU-wide carbon/energy tax. The fifth programme also targeted better public information and education, support for R&D and other specific aid mechanisms.



FOCUS ON PRIORITIES

Early in 1996, the European Commission published a progress report on the implementation of the fifth action programme and drew up a set of new priorities in view of the mixed progress achieved to date. Advances were made in several areas like cutting emissions of ozone-depleting substances, heavy metals and sulphur dioxide, nature conservation, waste management and disposal and industry-related risks.

On the other hand, effective action is still needed in areas including climate change, the acidification of rivers and lakes, urban issues (including air quality, noise and waste) and a comprehensive policy on water.

The picture which emerges from the progress report, and from a 'State of

the environment' paper from the European Environment Agency, is that many of the elements required to drive forward an integrated overall strategy are now in place or are being readied. The main doubts arise over the existence of the political will to take the necessary strategic action..

To give the process fresh impetus, the Commission quickly followed the progress report with the publication of an action plan confirming the strategy of the fifth programme and identifying priority areas. These include strengthening integration, broadening the policy instruments even further and improving the implementation of EU environment legislation by national governments.

The integration scorecard

This is what the Commission's 1996 progress report said about the five economic sectors targeted by the fifth action programme:

Manufacturing: 'In spite of the recession, encouraging progress has been made (mainly by big industry) towards achieving the fifth programme's aims'.

Transport: 'Most basic elements for measures and instruments for a more sustainable transport sector are already identified in the fifth programme. The growth in traffic presents a major problem. It is a complex task to overcome the obstacles and curb this trend'.

Energy: 'The programme's approach to energy remains as valid today as at the time of its inception. ... (However) new ideas and solutions need to be identified to complement those already highlighted'.

Agriculture: 'There has been progress towards integrating EU agriculture and environmental policies. Although certain instruments of the common agricultural policy (CAP) take better account of the environment, it is still too early to measure their effects. On the other hand, the 1992 CAP reform did little to systematically integrate environmental concerns'.

Tourism: 'Evidence of some progress in integrating environment and tourism can be seen, but the objectives of the fifth programme and the measures and instruments have not been implemented fully or nor on time'.

In transportation, an area where progress has been particularly hard, new priorities must focus on better road vehicle emission and fuel standards as well as on a better balance between modes of transport. Elsewhere, extra efforts will be needed to promote energy saving and energy efficiency, and cut the use of fertilizers and pesticides in agriculture.

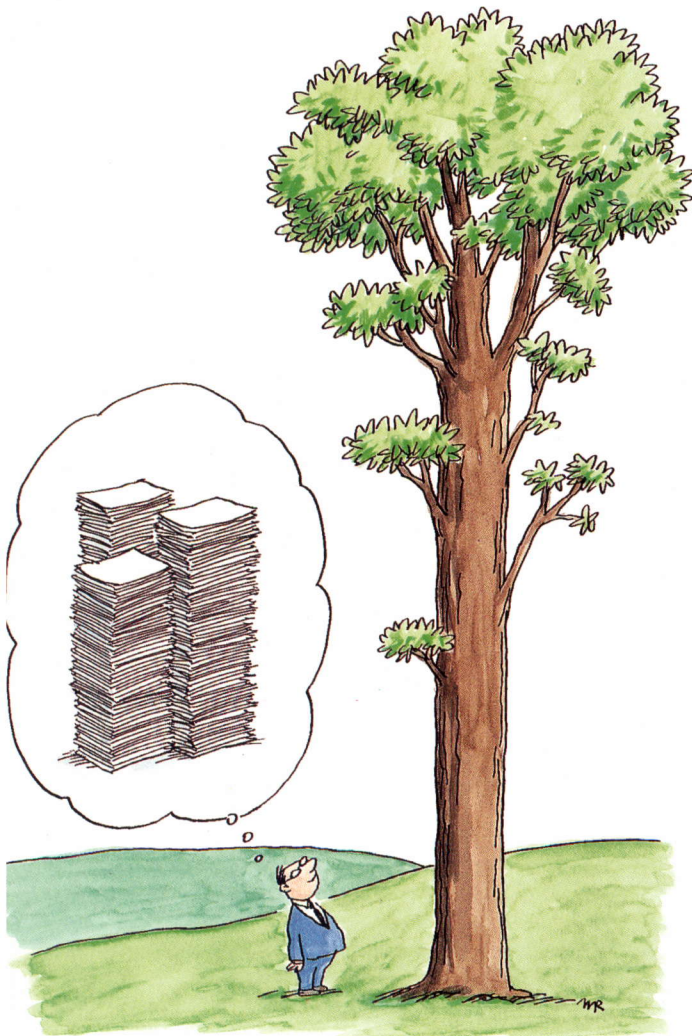
Small and medium-sized enterprises, the backbone of the European economy, must have better access to clean technology. To raise their levels of awareness, European citizens need more and better information.

PAYING FOR A SOUND ENVIRONMENT

EU environmental policy recognizes the environment as an economic resource with an intrinsic value of its own. It confirms the polluter-payer principle. But it stresses that 'green' economics can also be sound economics. Firms investing in clean state-of-the-art technology are at the same time investing in future economic and social development, which can increase their own competitiveness.

The Union recognizes the special need for financial support for its poorest members — Spain, Portugal, Greece and Ireland. The Cohesion Fund provides them with cash for environmental projects as a matter of priority.

In future, the debate is likely to focus increasingly on the use of fiscal instruments as a means of 'getting the price right'. The European Commission's 1993 White Paper on growth, competitiveness and employment aimed at stimulating debate on possible fiscal reforms, such as environmental taxes and other provisions to foster environmental protection or environmentally-friendly behaviour.



GLOBAL ACTION

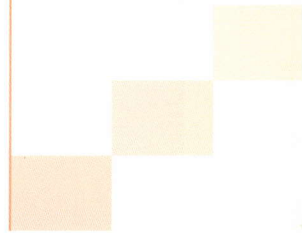
The European Union is the world's biggest trading power, with the largest integrated market. Its Member States and their citizens have reached a significant level of economic well-being. The Union is therefore better placed than many countries and regions to put its own house in order and to give a lead to others.

Environmental problems are posed in different terms in different parts of the world. In the EU and other advanced countries, the essential goal is to change consumption patterns. In central and eastern Europe, years of neglect and under-investment in pollution control (including the safety of nuclear reactors) has left a heritage of environmental degradation on the Union's doorstep which is now a primary target for EU action. Those countries which have applied to join the EU will have to adopt the existing body of EU environmental regulation before becoming members. This in itself will mark a significant step forward towards improving the environment in the EU. In developing countries, population pressure and poverty have created unsustainable development patterns.

The internal and external dimension of the EU's environment policy are inextricably linked. The Union therefore has to play a lead role in the UN and other international bodies. In this context,

the Commission published in February 1996 a policy paper on 'Trade and the environment', setting out ways in which free trade and environmental requirements can be mutually supportive and not contradictory as some people fear.

There is a perceptible feeling in Europe and further afield that many of the great environmental battles will be won or lost in the next few years. If we do not act before the 21st century, it may be too late.





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A great deal of additional information on the European Union is available on the Internet. It can be accessed through the Europa server (<http://europa.eu.int>).

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