

EDITORIAL

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

The UN HABITAT Conference was, in at least some respects, an outstanding success. There was real movement on the Recommendations for National Action but the Conference ultimately was at loggerheads on the Declaration of Principles and the question of Institutional Arrangements. Specifically, the Conference was simply unable to reach agreement on whether the proposed UN Institution on Human Settlements should be primarily tied to UNEP or ECOSOC and to the Department of Economic and Social Affairs. As the answer to this question also implies the actual location of the unit, both matters were left open for discussion and decision by the General Assembly this fall. Large groups of representatives at the Vancouver meeting, and earlier at Nairobi, felt that if settlement and environment activities were tied together functionally both areas would suffer as a result. The UN, at its New York headquarters has, of course, had an institutional structure dealing with settlement matters – which up to now has not been characterized as successful. An administrative link-up of environment and settlement would, in our view, not auger well for either. While there is overlap at some levels, the two subjects are really distinct. Settlement shouldn't be confused with environment – the former is not more than a microcosm of the human environment. Moreover, it is doubtful that UNEP will pull out of its financial bottleneck if settlement is linked to it. The biggest pledgors and contributors to UNEP will surely want to be certain that funds are targeted at environmental affairs. A fusion of the two areas could only result in a weakening of both – something neither the industrialized nor the developing nations desire. Settlement activities will require strong funding and an independent institutional base.

If anything, HABITAT surely reflected the expectations of many of the world's peoples. Those expectations will best be fulfilled by leaving well enough alone and permitting UNEP to concentrate on its proper task, with the UN separately handling the very complex matter of human settlement.

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No one can guess how much oil, coal or other minerals the Antarctic might contain. The amounts could be quite considerable. Recently, 12 nations held secret talks in Paris on the exploitation of Antarctica. These nations agreed in 1959 to hold in abeyance territorial claims for 30 years so that the continent could be reserved for scientific research. It is perhaps the world's last untouched natural area. The parties to the 1959 convention are all countries maintaining scientific research stations in Antarctica. They are: Argentina, Australia, Belgium, Chile, France, Japan, New Zealand, Norway, South Africa, the USSR, the UK and the USA. Many more countries maintain temporary summer stations. By trying to establish agreed procedures, it is argued, the treaty nations are now seeking to head off any future resources grab which would be harmful to the ecological balance and global security. While we do not know much more about the Paris talks and will not know much more about those which will follow, we fear that the original purpose of the treaty – to preserve intact the Antarctica region for all posterity – is being reversed. Many of the Antarctic Parties are the same ones opting for extended continental shelf economic zones. None of this can be a plus for the environment. We hope that the "land grab" trend can be at least slowed down to allow for some clear and realistic thinking about the future of Antarctica.

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More Wildlife Preservation

(Re: M. Thiele, Letters, EPL 1:3 at 113)

Thiele puts his finger on a general problem in the protection of endangered species. The effect of conservation is that prices on certain products from protected species may rise considerably because of speculation.

On the other hand, if we did not protect endangered species, a comparable situation would occur. Small populations of some species would probably lead to rising prices on products from them, and the subsequent increased demand might cause the extermination of such populations.

Concerning trade with polar bear furs in Norway, we are pleased to inform you that the Norwegian Parliament in May this year approved ratification of the Washington Convention of 1973 on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora. When the Convention enters into force, trade with polar bear furs will be prohibited unless the skins are from bears killed before the Convention entered into force.

Norway earlier ratified the Agreement on Conservation of Polar Bears.

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UNEP: Promises, Promises

(Excerpt from letter to the Editor, re: D. Zalob, "The UN Environment Programme: Four Years After Stockholm", EPL 2:2 at 50)

I read your article concerning the UN Environment Programme with greatest interest. I fully agree that the programme of UNEP in the first four years was more a programme of promises than of effective results.

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