

# INTRODUCTION

The ESCAP region encompasses a vast territory extending from the Russian Federation in the north, to New Zealand in the south; from the Cook Islands in the east, to the Republic of Armenia and Georgia in the west. The environmental diversity of Asia and the Pacific is therefore vast, and is contrasted by the region's coldest and hottest deserts, verdant tropical rainforests, extensive grasslands, and rich alluvial plains. The region also embraces two of the world's three largest oceans (the Pacific and the Indian), together with its highest mountains (the Himalayas and Karakoram). It is this great variation in geography, topography and climate that provides the unique diversity found in the region's ecosystems. For example, Asia and the Pacific houses about thirty per cent of the world's tropical forests, and its marine and coastal environments are amongst the most productive in the world, supporting over two-thirds of the world's coral reefs and two fifths of its mangrove habitats.

The pressures on these rich natural resources and environmental systems have, however, been continuously increasing over the last decade. Rapid population growth, urbanisation, rising economic output and consumptive lifestyles, coupled with an increasing incidence of poverty, have all contributed to the region's shortfall in meeting the sustainable development goals which it set for itself at Rio. Environmental disruptions can be seen in the form of increasing atmospheric pollution, destruction of biodiversity, depletion of aquifers, and the pollution of aquatic and marine ecosystems, as well as increasing loads of municipal, industrial and hazardous wastes.

The population of the region more than doubled in the latter half of 20<sup>th</sup> Century, from 1.7 billion in 1960, to 3.6 billion in the year 2000; according to the United Nations it will reach about 5 billion by 2025. To date, the accompanying demands of this burgeoning population have largely been satisfied through increased economic output, which has quadrupled in the last twenty years. While economic growth has no doubt assisted in reducing poverty in the region, the adoption of unsustainable consumption patterns is now becoming a severe problem. Traditional concerns in relation to population and the environment have largely focused on aggregate population levels. However, it is currently accepted that the impact of humanity on the world environment is as much a function of per capita consumption as overall population size. For

example, to replicate the pattern of grain consumption as evidenced in the United States today, by 2025 the regional requirement would be 4.5 billion tonnes of grain, or the harvest of more than two planets at earth's current output levels. Moreover, while the affluent consume, the poor are compelled to enhance processes of environmental erosion through cutting trees, growing crops on steep slopes or marginal land, and exploiting fragile resources, simply to meet their basic needs for survival. It is therefore the enlarging polarisation of lifestyles, both globally and intra-regionally, that is presenting the overwhelming challenge for sustainable development in Asia and the Pacific.

An additional cause that has struck the environment harshly in recent years has been the negative effect of globalization, involving trade, investments and debts. A large proportion of the region's exports, which have in turn contributed to the depletion of its natural resources, have been to meet the industrial and other needs of developed countries of the world. Globalization has contributed to the region's rapid economic growth, although investments have declined following the economic crisis in the latter half of 1997. Ironically, the environment has again suffered because of this decline, as the economic downturn inevitably led to sustainable development retreating down the list of national priorities. In most nations, budgetary allocations for the environment have been reduced, leading to fewer investments in conservation and protection activities, and delays in investments in capital renewal and cleaner technologies. As the region continues to undergo spontaneous transformation and economic development, the impacts of associated activities on the terrestrial, aquatic, and atmospheric ecosystems are anticipated to become more acute with time. In addition, whilst globalization has strengthened the economic linkages of the world, some countries could find themselves short of valuable financing overnight, as capital and financial flows change direction.

In the forthcoming Rio+10, in 2002, the greatest unexpressed fear of the diplomatic community is that it will be a reprise of Rio+5. The promotion of effective regional and sub-regional cooperation is therefore even more vital for providing opportunities for a coordinated response to global initiatives. The dwindling availability of international financial resources, lack of technological transfer between developed and developing nations, and unfavourable

trade regimes, demand enhanced regional unity in a proactive response to offset the negative trends identified throughout this report.

In order to review the dynamics of the region’s environmental conditions and the status of national, regional and international responses to the changing environmental situation, the following State of the Environment Report, 2000 has been divided into five related parts, as illustrated in Figure I. The content of each of these parts is summarized as follows.

- *Part One* presents the prevailing environmental conditions in different components of terrestrial, aquatic and marine ecosystems. It has six chapters, on land, forest, biodiversity, inland water, marine and coastal environment, and the atmosphere.
- *Part Two* presents the key emerging issues in human ecosystems, which are described in terms of urban environment, wastes, poverty, and food security.
- *Part Three* highlights the responses to the problem of environment. It covers the national and regional response by various actors

including the governments, industry and private sector as well as NGOs and other major public interest groups. Topics are presented as institutions and legislation, mechanisms and methods, private sector, major groups, and environmental education and awareness.

- *Part Four* provides an overview of the key environmental issues, together with the causes and trends in environmental management and cooperation in the five sub-regions of Asia and the Pacific, i.e. South Asia, South-East Asia, South Pacific, North-East Asia, and Central Asia.
- *Part Five* discusses the prevailing conditions and trends in the region’s physical environment, their impacts on the health and well-being of the population, and the management and policy responses which have been adopted at all levels (international, regional and sub-regional) to address them. It goes on to examine projected trends and future scenarios for the environment, and concludes with a discussion of future prospects for the region.

**Figure I Framework of the State of the Environment Report in Asia and the Pacific**

