

**WHAT EVER
HAPPENED TO
AGENDA 21?**

**OR THE WORLD'S
BIGGEST
SALVAGE
OPERATION**

BY GERMAINE W. SHAMES

On the morning of March 22nd, at the crack of dawn, one hundred and fifty environmentalists from sixty-five countries, delegates to an international conference for non-governmental organizations (NGOs), trudged, bleary-eyed, up the slopes of Mount Yoash in Israel's Negev Desert.

"There is hardly a sign of a border from here," intoned the Dalai Lama from the summit, looking out over Jordan, Egypt, and Saudi Arabia without acknowledging the military installations, electronic fences, and barbed wire so jarringly visible to the rest of us. "From this I conclude that borders are a mental creation, sometimes troublesome, but in the mind."

The statement raised more than a few eyebrows. Real or imagined, borders are a pesky problem for environmentalists. National borders. Perceptual borders. Borders between the industrialized and developing worlds... The environmentalists, now perplexed as well as tired, descended from the mountaintop as if carrying the world upon their shoulders.

Every conference has at least two agendas. The official one, and another that emerges as delegates down cups of coffee together and linger in the corridors after workshops. This particular conference, hosted by the Society for the Protection of Nature in Israel, was convened for the purpose of exploring the role of non-governmental organizations in protecting the environment. The unofficial—and more com-

elling—agenda surfaced almost immediately: how to salvage the spirit and substance of the 1992 earth summit in Rio?

Many of the delegates present had been to Rio, experienced the headiness of seeing their dreams transcribed into accords and endorsed by heads of state. Two years later, they have learned the meaning of the term "greenwash." The terrible truth every environmentalist knows: Agenda 21, the United Nation's 800 page action plan for sustainable global development, is a sleeper. World leaders have failed to take the tough measures needed to translate international accords into on-the-ground action. In countries such as Brazil, Colombia, the former Soviet Union, and scores of others where civil unrest and abrupt transitions in ideology and government make concerted action nearly impossible, budding environmental

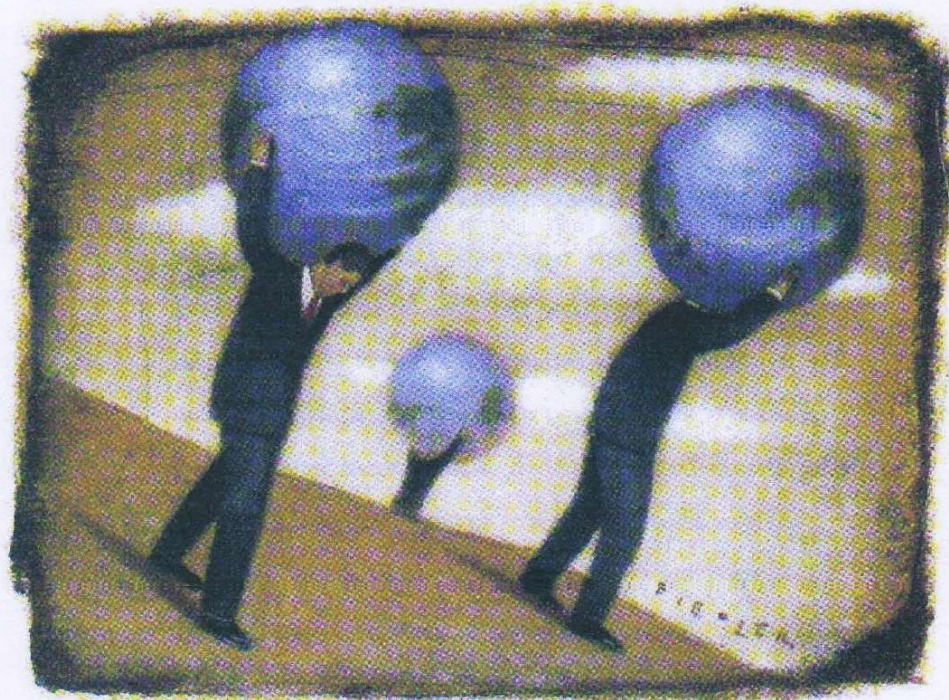
wanted to write the first check.

NGOs, strapped by default with the world's biggest salvage operation—a mission vastly disproportionate to their size and resources—scramble to mobilize on a global scale. International conferences proliferate, giving voice to the passions and fears of ordinary people engaged in a superhuman struggle.

"Governments are adrift," bemoaned Sara Parkin, Scottish founder of the UK's first Green Party, "with no paradigm for handling problems of global environmental degradation and no means for monitoring environmental treaties. Everyone's cheating."

A mass nodding of heads. Not a single voice of dissent.

Brazilian academic, Eduardo Viola, rose from the audience to confront Michael McCloskey, chairman of the Sierra Club.



movements are virtually paralyzed. In Europe, formerly dynamic Green parties lose thrust and unravel.

Judging from the tone of the conference, the road from Rio has been downhill for most environmental activists. The earth summit left a number of loose ends—among them a shortfall of more than \$60 billion dollars needed to implement Agenda 21. Even as the ink dried on the international environmental accords, Green momentum hit the wall: everyone signed on but no one

"The United States boasts of shaping a new world order, but environmentally there is nothing new about it."

McCloskey, a mild-mannered man at the helm of a large established NGO that has weathered its share of storms, reminded his interlocutor that environmental progress occurs in cycles, and cautiously predicted further advances toward the end of the '90s. Russian delegate A.N. Gennadijev grimly concurred, pointing to his own nation's Green movement, on ice since Yeltzin's eco-

conomic reforms. A Bulgarian journalist seated in the audience shook his head vigorously and sighed, "Five, ten years is too late, too late..."

NGOs everywhere are in a race against time. In Argentina, FUNAM (environmental defense fund) activists use "guerrilla theater" to stoke public outrage against politicians' environmental indifference. The African Biodiversity Institute in Kenya resurrects indigenous conservation traditions in an effort to stem the pace of development and redress its devastating effect on the continent's flora, fauna, and social fabric. India's Narmada Bachao Andolan (people's movement against unsustainable development), whose founder Medha Padkar was imprisoned at the time of the conference, resorts to civil disobedience to halt logging and the building of dams.

There is no pausing to calculate odds or savor small victories. Brent Blackwelder, vice president of Friends of the Earth, admitted to sometimes feeling as if he were "rearranging the deck chairs on the Titanic."

"We used to be the ones ahead of the game," added Parkin, reflecting on the environmental activism of the '60s and '70s, "but now the easy years are over." Which brings us back to borders, and the lessons of the earth summit. The world is of one piece but not of one mind, NGOs have learned through bitter experience. On one point, however, all but the most nationalistic delegates were adamant: if environmental degradation recognizes no borders, neither can humankind afford to.

Joseph Tamir, veteran activist and retired member of Israel's Knesset, stated their case when he passed along a tidbit of wisdom told to him by his six year old granddaughter, "To see the Green way is to see far away."

While world leaders continue to haggle over Agenda 21's price tag, a dogged if battle-worn network of thousands of non-governmental organizations, most small and funded on a shoestring, keep the fragile flame of eco-globalism alive. As the conference closed, that flame shone a little brighter. Maybe the Dalai Lama was right after all. ☸