# Global Threats to People of Color

Dana Alston and Nicole Brown

Throughout the history of development, colonial powers and transnational corporations alike have exploited natural resources for their own profit and power with little regard for the social, political, and environmental impacts on local groups. While long overdue, mainstream environmental and conservation organizations have recently started to identify the global links among social, economic, and environmental problems. Slogans like "We are all in this together," "the circle of poison," and "everyone's backyard" are used with increasing frequency in their conversations.

Yet, this rhetoric does not quite get at the problem. It often seems to suggest the problems of environmental degradation are shared equally by all people. If we examine environmental issues internationally, the same domestic pattern of disproportionate exposure to environmental hazards and degradation exists worldwide among those who are nonwhite, poor, less educated, and politically less powerful. This international linkage between poverty, race, and environmental degradation can be even more clearly defined when exploring specific global issues such as the environmental impact of war, underground nuclear testing, and the exportation of hazardous industries and waste. The extractive nature of modernization and industrialization also contributes to the accelerated degradation of the environment around the world. Let's look at each of these problems in turn.

## Ecological Impact of War

The war in the Persian Gulf demonstrated once again how international events are affected by domestic issues and vice versa. To find lasting solutions to the problem of environmental degradation at home, global issues must be addressed in many places simultaneously.

One reason for this is that ecological deterioration and warfare are inextricably linked. As warfare occurs, natural resources are destroyed

and thus become more scarce. As this happens, competition for them becomes increasingly intense and sometimes even violent. Since World War II, all major conflicts in the world have been played out in developing countries. The roots of many of these conflicts are both historical and contemporary. They can be found in the colonial creation of artificial nation states and political boundaries in Africa, Asia, Latin America, and the Middle East. They can also be found in the politics and rivalries of the Cold War era, during which the United States and the Soviet Union fought a series of proxy wars in the Third World. Finally, they can be found in the exploitative economic policies promoted by countries of the North, as they attempt to retain control over, and access to, valuable natural resources in the South.

The word "ecocide" was coined after the war in Vietnam to describe the environmental devastation that took place in that country between 1968 and 1975 at the hands of the U.S. government. Vast areas of tropical forests, mangroves, and farmlands, as well as thousands of people, fell victim to intensive bombing and the use of chemical weapons and defoliants. Indeed, ecologists have shown that much of the damage caused by the war is irreversible. A document published by the Political Ecology Group reports that the thirteen million tons of bombs dropped on Vietnam pockmarked the land with 25 million craters and displaced three billion cubic meters of soil, causing water shortages and disease (Karliner *et al.* 1991). Undetonated bombs and shrapnel continue to maim and injure people and the land. Hundreds of thousands of Vietnamese suffer from cancer and other diseases; and thousands of children, both Vietnamese and American, are still being born with birth defects as a result of chemical poisoning.

When the oil fields in Kuwait began to burn in 1991, the world focused its attention once again on the environmental impact of war—this time in the Persian Gulf. The full extent of the ecocide in the Gulf is still unknown. What is known, however, is that the damage caused by the world's largest oil spill, vast burning oil fields, and millions of tons of explosives dropped on the area will adversely affect the ecosystems and economies of the entire Gulf region for decades to come.

One of the most ecologically deteriorated countries in the Americas is El Salvador, where civil war raged between 1980 and 1992. For twelve years, the Salvadoran army aggressively pursued intensive bombing and scorched-earth policies, patterned after those used by the United States in Vietnam. The objective was to destroy the physical environment that provided cover for the popular guerrilla forces. By 1989, the Salvadoran air force had dropped more than 3,000 tons of U.S.-made bombs on the countryside (Hall and Faber 1989; Faber 1989).

As a result of these policies, important wilderness areas and forests have been reduced to secondary-growth scrub, farmlands have been destroyed, virtual wastelands have been created, and the landscape remains scarred with bomb craters. According to Salvadoran environmentalists, bombing in the Chalatenango mountains destroyed at least 12,000 acres of valuable pines (Hall and Faber 1989; Faber 1989). This deforestation has led to soil erosion and will eventually affect the climate.

In Guatemala, the army's violent counterinsurgency campaign of the past few decades has resulted in the death or displacement of thousands of people and the devastation of the country's environment. As in El Salvador, the government army of Guatemala has been pursuing scorched-earth policies. For example, in the late 1980s, the government, with assistance from the U.S. Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA), launched a defoliation campaign under the guise of the "war on drugs."

The northwest highlands region—identified by the Guatemalan army as a "conflict zone"—was targeted supposedly for the eradication of marijuana and opium poppies. The intensive use of highly toxic defoliants such as glyphosate and paraquat has resulted in extensive ecological damage, as well as the poisoning of people and animals. As a direct result of the defoliation campaign, by mid-June 1987, "14 people had died and hundreds were poisoned after drinking contaminated water. People experienced nausea, skin irritation, vomiting, respiratory problems and diarrhea. Hundreds of cattle also died after drinking contaminated water" (Rossdeutcher 1987).

At the same time, the Guatemalan government has been actively encouraging colonization of the forests as an answer to social pressures for land reform. The country has the most inequitable system of land distribution in the Americas: 2 percent of the population owns 80 percent of the farmland (Dewart & Eckersley 1989). As part of their counterinsurgency strategy, however, the government army has designated much of the land colonized by peasants as "counterinsurgency zones."

Ranchers and military officers have been allowed to expropriate land in the name of national security and thereby expand their pastures and landholdings. Hence, the 1970s map of potential cattle-grazing areas is almost identical to the military map of counterinsurgency zones in the 1980s (Dewart and Eckersley 1989). The military campaign has thus helped the army and the Guatemalan elite to consolidate control over mineral-rich areas and the most arable lands.

In addition to the direct environmental impact of war, there are indirect consequences as well. Refugees and displaced persons put additional stress on the environment as they venture further into forests in search of cover or overpopulate preexisting settlements. For instance,

after the U.S. invasion and bombing of Panama City in December 1989, some 30,000 people fled the capital to the nearby forests, where they cut down trees to build homes and plant crops. Certainly, deforestation due to colonization of the forests has been occurring in Panama for decades. However, as Stanley Heckadon-Moreno, former director of the Institute of Renewable Natural Resources, pointed out in a 1990 interview in the *Washington Post,* in the immediate aftermath of the invasion the rates of colonization and deforestation increased markedly.

The survival of the Panamanian tropical forest is crucial for the continued operation of the Panama Canal. The rainforests produce the water necessary for that operation. Yet, the felling of trees along the canal's watershed causes not only a drop in the canal's water level due to decreasing precipitation and lower groundwater tables, but also the erosion of exposed soils. This leads to the accumulation of silt, which threatens the canal and its reservoirs. It is estimated that "at current rates of siltation, the canal's cargo limits, revenue, and clientele will be reduced drastically by the year 2000" (Voelker 1988).

The ecological impact of warfare cannot be considered in a vacuum. War not only worsens the ecological crisis, but may increase the very poverty and inequity that may have led to the conflict. By themselves, cease-fire agreements and peace treaties are not lasting solutions to war. The social and economic structures that create the conditions for war and revolution must be replaced by a more equitable and just distribution of power, wealth, and resources. This equity must be achieved both between and within nations.

Trade, economic assistance, and military policies that reinforce inequities and promote underdevelopment in the name of multinational corporate interests must also be dismantled and replaced by more fair and just policies and practices. Military responses to economic and social problems—whether direct, as in the case of the United States in Vietnam, or indirect, as in El Salvador (75 percent of U.S. aid to El Salvador supported the war effort)—are not sustainable solutions. They do not address the underlying problems. Instead, they often exacerbate them.

## Underground Nuclear Testing

Underground nuclear testing has long been a worrisome problem for Native Americans. While the testing has not fouled the land in immediately obvious ways, it has threatened the cultural survival of the people. As Western Shoshone Pauline Estevez told us about the events of January 27, 1951:

> On that day we saw a flash of lightening. Then a dull clap of thunder followed and the earth beneath our feet trembled. We had no idea of what was going on; and the next day our mother took us to the desert to pray and to try to understand what we had seen and felt. But there was no answer, and we felt sad and empty when we got back home. It was much later when we heard that we had experienced the first atomic bomb test on the Nevada Test Site—right here on our land.

The militarism of the post-World War II era has promoted and encouraged the development and use of nuclear weapons and technology. That development—from the mining of uranium to the manufacture and testing of weapons—has had, and will continue to have, far-reaching and deleterious public health and environmental effects. Moreover, the shroud of secrecy around testing makes it difficult to assess its present and future impact. What is clear, however, is that testing has endangered the lives and livelihoods of thousands of indigenous peoples around the world. From the Aborigines in Australia to the Western Shoshone Indians in Nevada, from the inhabitants of the Central Asian Republic of Kazakhstan to the natives of the French Pacific, indigenous peoples throughout the world have witnessed the destruction of their lands by nuclear testing.

According to the Center for Defense Information (1991), since 1945 when the United States exploded the first atomic bomb at Alamogordo, New Mexico, six nations—the United States, the Soviet Union, Great Britain, France, China, and India—have detonated a combined total of at least 1,910 nuclear explosives at some 35 sites around the world. That's an average of one explosion every nine days. The United States has exploded nuclear weapons in Alaska, Colorado, Mississippi, New Mexico, and Nevada, as well as in Japan, the Marshall Islands, Christmas Island, the Johnson Atoll, and over the southern Atlantic Ocean. Since 1974, however, all U.S. nuclear tests have taken place on Western Shoshone lands at the Nevada Test Site. The Soviet Union exploded weapons in Semipalatinsk, Kazakhstan, and on the island of Novaya Zemlya. China tested its weapons at Lop Nur in Sinkiang province, home of the Uighur people, a national minority. Since 1962, Great Britain has been testing at the Nevada Test Site, having abandoned its former sites on aboriginal land in Australia and on southern Pacific islands. The French first exploded nuclear weapons in Algeria but, since 1966, have used the southern Pacific atolls of Mururoa and Fangataufa. India's single nuclear explosion took place in the Rajasthan desert near the Pakistani border.

Despite treaties and accords calling for the limitation of nuclear testing and committing the signatories to work toward its discontinuance, the world still awaits a treaty to ban nuclear testing. Both categories of nuclear tests, atmospheric and underground, spread radiation. The 1963 Partial Test Ban Treaty prohibited all but underground testing. This did not, however, eliminate the risk to the environment, for radiation has continued to leak into the atmosphere and groundwater. Moreover, serious geologic effects could result from the shock waves triggered by a nuclear explosion.

Many public health problems are associated with nuclear testing and radiation. The victims are not only test-site workers and military personnel directly involved. Civilians also may be exposed to airborne and waterborne contamination. While high levels of radiation result in severe injury and death in a short time, lower levels over a prolonged period also have damaging effects, of which the best known is cancer. For example, in southern Utah, communities downwind from the Nevada Test Site, suffer from rates of thyroid and bone cancers eight to twelve times higher, respectively, than the national average (Center for Defense Information 1991).

Because numerous South Pacific islands and the seas around them have been used for underground nuclear test sites, island women have been giving birth to deformed and critically ill children. Other women have developed cancer and cannot conceive at all. In some parts of the region, unusually high rates of poisoning from the ciguatera fish—the most common type of fish poisoning—may be connected with the ongoing U.S nuclear testing in the region. Whole islands have been destroyed. As a result, the inhabitants of these islands have become sick, have been killed, or have been displaced.

With the end of the Cold War and the disintegration of the Soviet Union, the geopolitical climate that led to the rapid development and buildup of nuclear arms no longer exists. Despite this, nuclear weapons and technology remain, and testing continues. Moreover, recent nuclear disarmament proposals raise grave questions about the monetary cost and the public health and environmental impacts of disposal. In particular, what will be the consequences of disposal for the minority, rural, and disenfranchised groups that bore the brunt of nuclear testing in the first place.

## The International Waste Trade

With the increasing restrictions on toxic waste disposal in the United States and Western Europe, as well as public opposition to it,

waste management companies and illegal waste traders are seeking alternative dump sites overseas. They target the politically and economically less powerful nations of the world, who have benefited the least from industrialization. The president of Zimbabwe, Robert Mugabe, has stated that "it is not fair that the poorest nations should suffer the worst effects of a progress in which they do not share" (Mpanya 1990).

The governments of developing countries are often lured by the large sums of money offered by waste-trading firms and the prospect of additional employment and development opportunities within their borders. This is simply an extension of the pattern of targeted dumping on communities of color in the United States.

Increasingly, however, governments in Africa, Asia, and Latin America are resisting the dumpers and have labeled the practice "toxic terrorism" and "economic extortion." In 1988, the Organization of African Unity (OAU) issued a resolution that called the dumping of nuclear wastes in Africa "a crime against Africa and African people." Now, after a strong campaign by African countries to impose a strict ban on the practice, in addition to stiff fines and prison sentences for violators, South Africa is the only country on the continent that still accepts toxic wastes. Evidence exists that the so-called "homelands" have been used as dumping sites for wastes from the United States.

With Africa becoming less accessible to them, international waste traders are increasingly targeting Central and South America, as well as the Caribbean, for dumping. Over the past few years, they have learned the value of presenting their proposals as development plans that promise employment, electricity, and social and technological progress. Wastes exported from the United States to Latin America range widely: asbestos, incinerator ash, municipal wastes and sewage, and industrial chemical toxics. By recently adopting a ban on waste imports as part of its new constitution, Colombia joined a growing number of Caribbean and Latin American countries who have said "no" to the waste trade.

Many environmental activists who focus on international waste trade issues strongly believe that Asia and the Middle East will now become targets. Cyprus, Lebanon, Turkey, China, and the Philippines have already suffered contamination from traded wastes. On the other hand, Central America is currently suffering from extreme environmental problems of a different source. Karliner (1991) asserts that they can be traced to "decades of development policies that have favored production for export over production for local needs, and the intensive exploitation of natural resources over the sustainable use of these assets."

In many cases, agricultural development has led to ecological and social disasters. Forests, wildlife habitats, and peasant villages have

been cleared to make way for large plantations and roads. Forced to farm unsuitable land, displaced peasants and small farmers contribute to deforestation and soil erosion by clearing steep hillsides and tropical forests. All this has occurred in the name of agricultural development. Central America provides a case study of how misguided agricultural and development assistance policies have contributed to the degradation of the environment in developing countries. For the past 40 years, the aim of the prevailing development model in Central America has been to diversify the region's economies and integrate them into the world market. Economic growth through agricultural exports has been the theme. The agro-export model promotes the production and export of cash crops. Since the 1950s, the region's agro-export sector has been steadily expanding with the support of the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) and multilateral lending institutions such as the World Bank and the Inter-American Development Bank (IDB).

Beginning in the 1950s, when the emphasis was on cotton production, the development banks gave assistance to the local oligarchy, which expanded agricultural production at the expense of the *campesinos* who inhabited the fertile, volcanic Pacific plain. Then, in the 1960s and 1970s, monies from the World Bank, the IDB, and USAID financed the rapidly expanding cattle industry, as well as coffee and banana plantations. More recently, with the breakdown of the traditional agro-export market—characterized by falling prices for beef, sugar, coffee, and cotton—USAID and multilateral lenders have focused on nontraditional crops such as melons, snow-peas, broccoli, and flowers (Karliner *et al.* 1989).

The negative environmental impact of the agro-export model of development has been both direct and indirect. Direct degradation results from pesticide pollution and contamination, chemical depletion of soil nutrients, and deforestation; while indirect degradation follows from the displacement of large segments of the population to marginal lands where they settle and attempt to farm. This contributes to deforestation, soil depletion and erosion, and diminished water tables (Karliner *et al.* 1989).

These two categories of environmental destruction are interrelated. With the advent of large-scale cotton production in the 1950s, for example, thousands of *campesinos* were forced off their land in the Pacific lowlands to make way for the cotton plantations. Subsequently, they were encouraged to clear nearby forests for farming. After about two years, they were once again pushed out by the expanding cotton plantations. As a result, by the late 1960s, the forests of the Central American Pacific plain had been turned into large expanses of cotton (Karliner *et al.* 1989).

The intensive use of pesticides and chemical fertilizers leads to chemical dependency of the land. Since fertilizers permit year-round cultivation, the soil is not allowed to lie fallow and replenish itself. Moreover, the continuous harvesting of a single crop drains soil of its nutrients and reduces its regenerative capacities, thereby contributing to the dependency of the land on chemical fertilizers.

Pesticides kill parasites as well as their natural predators; and over time, many of the parasites build up a resistance to the chemicals. As a result, the continued and increasing use of pesticides becomes necessary. Furthermore, as farmers continue to plant traditional staples such as corn alongside pesticide-protected products for export, food crops that traditionally grew without chemical inputs become chemically dependent.

The nearly indiscriminate use of pesticides, which has characterized the agro-export industry in the region since the introduction of cotton cultivation in the 1950s, has serious deleterious effects on the land and the health of people and animals. Many of the chemicals, such as paraquat and DDT, are banned in the United States by the Food and Drug Administration. In fact, "an estimated 75 percent of the pesticides applied in Central America are either banned, restricted or unregistered in the U.S." (Faber *et al.* 1986).

Agrochemicals contaminate not only soil and produce, but also, as they flow into rivers and oceans, water supplies and fisheries. Farmer families who use pesticides also risk their health. The World Health Organization documented the highest concentration of carcinogenic DDT ever detected in human beings in the breast milk of mothers on the southern coast of Guatemala (Allamilla 1991).

Another negative consequence of the agro-export industry has been the unquantifiable loss of genetic material. This has also led to a loss of indigenous knowledge associated with the biodiversity of their region. In Guatemala, for example: "Indigenous farmers used to grow up to 130 types of maize depending on the exact soil quality of their land. Now they use hybrid seeds imported from the United States. The intercropping method of using the symbiotic qualities of maize, beans, and squash is rapidly disappearing" (Roth-Arriaza 1991).

The agro-export development model has helped to reinforce the social, political, and economic inequalities that characterize the nations of Central America. It has led to human and financial resources being diverted from the production of food for domestic consumption to the cultivation of crops for export. The new patterns of land tenure have pushed the majority of the population onto land unsuitable for farming and have increased destruction of the region's forests. The model has

benefited large-scale commercial producers to the detriment of small subsistence farmers.

Attempts to incorporate small farmers into agro-exporting have proved unsustainable and almost always entrapped small farmers in a vicious cycle of indebtedness and dependency. Pesticide runoff, denuded hillsides, deforested lands, depleted soils, and contaminated rivers and seas—this is the environmental legacy of agricultural development in Central America gone awry.

## Northern NGOs and the South

Over the last decade, tensions have been growing between developing countries and nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) of the North focused on environmental issues and wilderness conservation. Many Southern NGOs feel that those in the North are dictating economic and cultural policies to them and imposing their political views. Some have labeled this behavior "paternalistic." Others see it as an extension of the colonial attitudes of the past. Among the issues in contention are: diversifying the decisionmaking process for agenda and priority setting; achieving self-determination of indigenous peoples and national sovereignty; and redistributing financial resources.

Raising issues similar to those raised by communities of color in the United States, Southern NGOs have challenged the international conservation and environmental movements to build partnerships based on mutual respect, shared interests, and equity. They contend that a relationship with integrity is one in which the voices of developing countries are heard, their needs addressed adequately, and their cultures respected. If Northern NGOs are unwilling or unable to accept this kind of partnership, many Southern activists suggest that they should stay home. Hira Jhamtani of the People's Network for Forest Conservation in Indonesia addressed Northern NGOs this way: "Educate your own public. The time has come for you to put emphasis on action-oriented public education in the North rather than to continue supporting projects that maintain the status quo of oppression [in the South]" (Jhamtani 1991).

## Debt-for-Nature Swaps

The first debt-for-nature swap took place in July 1987, when Conservation International (CI) raised money to buy $650,000 of Bolivian debt. Because the country was having difficulties repaying its loans, the

original lending institution, Citibank, sold the debt to CI for about 15 cents to the dollar. In return, Bolivia's president agreed to set aside the value of the original debt for conservation purposes—to extend protection to 3.7 million acres of tropical forest and establish a fund for its management (Adam 1990).

To date, debt-for-nature swaps have been arranged or explored in a host of countries, including Ecuador, Argentina, the Philippines, Zambia, Poland, the Dominican Republic, Jamaica, Guatemala, Venezuela, Honduras, and Brazil. These swaps were promoted by the Nature Conservancy, Conservation International, World Wide Fund for Nature (WWF), and other conservation NGOs. Financial support has come from private and public financial institutions, the United Nations, and the governments of Norway, Sweden, and the United States. Kathryn Fuller, president of the U.S. branch of the WWF, says, "These arrangements have allowed conservationists to develop unprecedented relations with the international financial community. Now that these relations are in place, other novel ways of supporting conservation efforts may emerge" (Adam 1990).

Despite the potential benefits from protecting critical parts of the biosphere, the debt-for-nature strategy has undermined the efforts of indigenous peoples to achieve self-determination and ownership of the lands where they have lived for centuries. The Coordinating Body for Indigenous People's Organizations of the Amazon Basin (COICA)—representing 1.2 million Indian people in Peru, Bolivia, Ecuador, Colombia, and Brazil—addressed these issues in an open letter to the environmental and conservation community in 1990:

> We are concerned about the debt-for-nature swaps that put your organizations in a position of negotiating with our governments the future of our homelands. We know of specific examples of such swaps, which have shown brazen disregard for the rights of the indigenous inhabitants...
>
> We want to make it clear that we never delegated any power of representation to the environmentalist community nor to any individual or organization within the community.
>
> We propose joining hands with those members of the worldwide environmentalist community who recognize our historical role as caretakers of the Amazon Basin; support our efforts to reclaim and defend our traditional territories, and accept our organizations as legitimate and equal partners (COICA 1990).

COICA has come up with an alternative to the dept-for-nature deals: "debt-for-Indian-stewardship" swaps, where foreign debt would

be traded for demarcation and protection of traditional territory. Indigenous peoples would play a leading role in arranging them and take responsibility for protecting and developing the preserved areas.

Although debt-for-nature swaps are growing in popularity among large conservation organizations in the United States, a growing number of Latin American organizations are expressing reservations. The Declaration of the Andes, which emerged from a meeting of 220 representatives of Latin American NGOs in 1991, called for suspension of all debt-for-nature swaps while national and regional policies on debt are elaborated. It also called for suspension of all debt-service payments and debt-for-nature negotiations until the principle of ecological debt is accepted and the amounts calculated.

During a September 1991 conference in Brazil organized by the Brazilian Institute for Economic and Social Analysis (IBASE), participants took a strong stand against debt-for-nature schemes. A statement summarizing the meeting declared that "such transactions are part of a more general strategy for converting debt, reaffirming the creditors' political and economic domination over the debtors within a development model which commercializes life in all its aspects" (IBASE 1991).

## Biodiversity

The term "biodiversity" has often been used to describe the variety of biological life on the planet. However, according to the most recent working definition proposed by a consortium of international organizations, biodiversity comprises the vast global collection of genes, species, habitats, and ecosystems, as well as the cultural diversity that is its human expression. This broader definition is important because many Northern pharmaceutical and agricultural companies, as well as many conservation NGOs, have promoted various schemes to preserve biological diversity at the expense of cultural diversity. Perhaps the most controversial of these schemes involved the collection of plant materials for highly profitable biotechnology enterprises without any compensation to the source country.

An example of this general problem occurred in Madagascar, an island off the coast of southern Africa. According to a briefing document on biodiversity issued by the Panos Institute, three-quarters of the children of Madagascar who have had leukemia in recent years are alive thanks to the rosy periwinkle, the basis of two powerful anticancer drugs (vincristine and vinblastine). The people of Madagascar originally identified the medicinal properties of the plant, but earned nothing from the subsequent sales of the drugs. The Panos Institute (1992) documents

that if Madagascar had received a reasonable share of the profits, rosy periwinkle would become the country's largest single source of income. This new revenue would also have provided a powerful incentive for environmental protection.

There has recently been an onslaught of Northern biologists eager to harvest the rich diversity of plants and study them for possible medicinal, industrial, or agricultural use. However, testing each individual plant species for its potential is time consuming. As Jon Tinker, president of the Panos Institute, so aptly put it, "If it takes 50 Amazonian peoples at least 10,000 years to identify 50 psychotropic [mind-affecting] plant-based drugs, how long would it take 50 transnational companies to rediscover them by checking through one million Amazonian plant species?" (Tinker 1991)

This logic has not escaped the eye of private industry. Of all the plant-based drugs in the modern medicine chest, three-quarters were discovered through ethnopharmacology, which draws on indigenous knowledge to help pinpoint useful plants (Panos Institute 1992). This has prompted Northern companies to send experts to the jungle to "harvest" native peoples' knowledge about the uses of various plants. Jason Clay (1990a, 1990b) of Cultural Survival calls this quest for indigenous knowledge "the last great resource rush."

In capitalist society and law, governments grant individuals, corporations, government agencies, and universities patents and copyrights to safeguard their knowledge and the products based on it. The question thus arises: What are the rights of indigenous peoples regarding the basic raw materials found on their ancestral lands and the knowledge that often unlocks their use? Organizations committed to indigenous self-determination have called for international agreements and laws to protect these rights.

In 1988, the International Society of Ethnobiology (ISE) also expressed concern by drawing up an eight-point plan based on the idea that "native peoples have been stewards of 99 percent of the world's genetic resources, and there is an inextricable link between cultural and biological diversity." At its second meeting, in China in 1990, the ISE resolved to work toward securing "the recognition of traditional and indigenous knowledge as inventive and intellectual, and, therefore, worthy of protection in all legal, ethical and professional frameworks" (Panos Institute 1992).

As they did in the debate over debt-for-nature swaps, indigenous people approach biodiversity as a question of land ownership, sovereignty rights, and cultural autonomy. Over the past two decades, numerous indigenous groups have formed organizations to protect these rights. The Kuna Indians of Panama organized the First Interamerican

Indigenous Congress on Natural Resources and the Environment. Some 70 groups from seventeen countries of the Western hemisphere were represented at the event. Other alliances have grown out of the work of the Mbuti of Zaire, the O'Odham of the Sonoran Desert in the United States and Mexico, the Pehuenche of Chile, the Mopawi of Honduras, and COICA of the Amazon Basin.

If Northern conservation organizations, universities, and industries continue to support the extraction of plant materials and the knowledge about their uses without compensation, such activities will continue to be seen by people everywhere as another form of cultural domination and an attack on the rights of indigenous people to sovereignty and self-determination.

## The 1992 UNCED Meeting

In June 1992, the United Nations Commission on Environment and Development (UNCED) convened in Rio de Janeiro to consider the future of humanity as it struggles to balance development pressures against an increasingly imperiled global environment. Billed as the "Earth Summit," UNCED was called for in 1989 because of the interest by the international community in developing a "report card" on global progress in the area of the environment since the first Conference on the Environment in Stockholm in 1972. The UNCED process was expected to produce:

- several new treaties on climate change, global warming, biodiversity, forests, and biotechnology;
- a charter of rights (an Earth Charter);
- an agenda for the 21st century (Agenda 21); and
- a redefinition of the roles and responsibilities of various UN agencies.

As Northern governments and environmental organizations defined their narrow agendas, political positions, and priorities for UNCED, Southern NGOs became increasingly vocal about their concerns. The Conference of Non-Governmental Organizations in Consultative Status with the U.N. (CONGO) brought together organizations that collectively cover all regions of the world and all domains of human endeavor. Like communities of color in the United States, CONGO integrates environmental concerns into a broad agenda that emphasizes social and economic justice as well. These organizations deal with issues of poverty, peace, human rights, the status of women, health, education, and youth, among many others.

Dr. Sibusiso M. Bengu—a South African and CONGO's representative to the UNCED planning committee—expressed the concerns of many NGOs and other grassroots movements about the conference, which appeared to be focusing more and more on narrow conservation concerns to the neglect of the more challenging tension between environment protection and community development:

> NGOs involved in development are concerned that the West is using development as an excuse to discuss and bring in their environmental concerns at the expense of development issues. The UN conference must not be allowed to be hijacked by the Greens who do not care about underdevelopment, which has a claim on so many lives in the Third World (Bengu 1990).

Several initiatives and proposals from the South were offered to reduce the growing tensions between Southern and Northern NGOs prior to the Brazil meeting. One such initiative was the Proposal for NGO Interamerican Dialogue, which suggested cooperation among social movements, NGOs, and the indigenous peoples of the Americas. North American NGOs were asked to commit themselves to start campaigns, initiatives, and programs involving the South only after consultations with the largest possible number of Latin American and Caribbean social movements and NGOs. The proposal also recommended establishing a joint monitoring and solidarity-building system to avoid the destruction of the natural world and to prevent the imposition of measures that further promote poverty and powerlessness. Finally, the Latin American organizations outlined their current opposition to debt-for-nature swaps and the Enterprise for the Americas Initiative.

Despite this and other efforts toward relieving North-South tensions, fundamental disagreements continued to emerge. Among the issues in dispute were: 1) Who should pay the costs of global environmental programs? 2) How can North-South transfer of environmentally sound technologies be assured? 3) How can multinational control over natural resource exploitation be limited? 4) What is the role that population growth plays in environmental degradation? Poor nations say that the unbridled consumerism of the industrialized countries and a development model in which the only concern is economic growth are at the root of global environmental degradation. For their part, industrialized nations accuse developing countries of not making the environment a high priority and of not having a strong commitment to curbing population growth.

## Conclusion

As we define and address the environmental issues that affect people of color globally, it is important to realize that they can be neither discussed nor dealt with effectively in isolation. Many of them are the outgrowth of the political, economic, and social imbalances inherent in the capitalist market system—imbalances which are manifested in policies and structures that work to the advantage of the Northern industrialized countries. Moreover, many of these same structures and policies are at the root of the inequities and injustices that face people of color in the United States today.

Rectifying this situation requires more than just political and economic will. It also requires the wholehearted, earnest commitment of the countries and institutions of the North to listen to, respect, and negotiate around the perspectives and recommendations of the South. A more complete and comprehensive analysis of the political and economic situation facing countries of the Southern hemisphere is needed. It should acknowledge the role that race and poverty play in the international system. The subsequent debate around these issues has to be led by voices from the South and should result in the development of alternative policies that eliminate the injustices and imbalances of the present system.