



Singapore has made an important transition from a city in a garden to a city in nature, says the writer. The hunting of birds and other animals is strictly forbidden, and animals such as otters (above), which had disappeared, have returned and are flourishing. ST PHOTO: ALPHONSUS CHERN

The Earth Summit at 30: A stocktake

It's a mixed bag insofar as the outcome of the meeting in the Brazilian city of Rio de Janeiro in 1992 is concerned



Tommy Koh
For *The Straits Times*

The world owes Sweden a big debt of gratitude. It was the first country to convince the United Nations of the importance of the environment. In 1972, the UN held its first conference on the environment in Stockholm. The Anti-Pollution Unit in the Prime Minister's office in Singapore was upgraded to a new Ministry of the Environment because of the conference in Stockholm.

In 1990, the UN decided to convene a second conference on the environment in 1992, 20 years after Stockholm. Rio de Janeiro, in Brazil, would be the venue for the conference. Unlike Stockholm, the second conference, popularly known as the Earth Summit, would have a double focus: environment and development.

The UN established a committee to prepare for the Earth Summit. My then boss at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Professor Kishore Mahbubani, and our then Ambassador to the UN, Professor Chan Heng Chee, persuaded me to put my name forward as a candidate to chair the preparatory committee. I was duly elected as no one else wanted to suffer for the next two years.

At the summit, in June 1992, the host country, Brazil, decided not to nominate one of its citizens to chair the main committee of the conference. Instead, Brazil requested me to do so. All the negotiations at the summit took place in that committee. The summit began on June 3 and concluded on June 14, 1992.

I will never forget the last day of the main committee's work. The final meeting began at 8pm and ended at 6am the next day. I was in the chair for 10 hours, with only one toilet break. Miraculously, we

managed to achieve consensus on all the matters before the committee.

EARTH SUMMIT'S ACHIEVEMENTS

The Earth Summit was very successful. Two landmark environmental treaties were opened for signature in Rio – the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) and the UN Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD). The summit adopted the Rio Declaration of Principles on Environment and Development. The summit also gave birth to two new treaties: one to combat desertification and the other was related to highly migratory fish stocks and straddling fish stocks.

Thirty years have passed since the Earth Summit. It is a good time to evaluate the results of the summit. Where have we succeeded? What are the failures? What lessons can we learn from the past 30 years?

Until 1992, there was a war between the developing countries that gave priority to development and the developed countries that gave priority to the environment. In Rio, we agreed to give equal emphasis to the environment and development. We borrowed the concept of sustainable development from the 1987 Brundtland Commission's report. Since then, the term "sustainability" has been universally accepted.

There is also now a body of international law called international environmental law. At the final session of the preparatory committee, I chaired the negotiations on the Rio Declaration and drafted it, which contains 27 principles.

Some of these principles have been universally accepted and have acquired the status of law. These principles include the precautionary principle, the polluter pay principle, the requirement to conduct an environmental impact assessment, and the obligation to inform and consult your neighbouring state about any plan which could adversely affect its environment. The National University of Singapore's law school has a very good centre on environmental law.

CBD AND UNFCCC – SUCCESS OR FAILURE?

In the natural world, all things are connected. For example, our agricultural industry and our horticultural industry depend on

the honey bee, as a pollinator. The decline in the population of the honey bee is therefore of concern. The purpose of the CBD is to stop or, at least, to slow down the extinction of the species.

Has the CBD been successful? The frank answer is that it has been a failure. We are losing species of flora and fauna at an unprecedented rate. Things are so bad that some scientists are calling this the sixth mass extinction.

The good news is that Singapore has been swimming against the tide.

We took the lead to galvanise the support of cities to conserve biological diversity. In recognition of our leadership role, the UN has named the City Biodiversity Index, the Singapore Index on Cities' Biodiversity. Our message to the world is that cities can co-exist with nature.

Singapore has also made an important transition from a city in a garden to a city in nature.

The hunting of birds and other animals is strictly forbidden. Animals such as the hornbill, otters, wild boar and jungle fowl, which had disappeared, have returned and are flourishing.

The UNFCCC is the mother treaty on climate change. It has 197 parties. The parties meet annually. The annual meeting is called the Conference of Parties or COP, in short. The meeting in Glasgow in 2021 was COP 26. COP 27 will be held in Sharm el-Sheikh, in Egypt, in November.

The reports of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change or IPCC, have established beyond any reasonable doubt that the climate is changing, and the change has been caused by man's activities. The challenge is to bring down our total emission of carbon dioxide and other greenhouse gases before it becomes impossible to limit the rise in temperature to 1.5 deg C.

At COP 21 in Paris in 2015, the French succeeded in producing an agreement against all odds. The

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agreement does not exempt the developing countries. All countries are called upon to make a sacrifice for the common good. Every country is asked to make a nationally determined contribution. However, according to the UNFCCC Secretariat, the current nationally determined contributions would exceed the goal of 1.5 deg C and be close to 3 deg C.

NOT TOO LATE

Experts do not agree on whether the goal of 1.5 deg C is still achievable. The pessimists believe that the battle is lost. The optimists believe that it is still achievable if all of us raise our ambitions, to decarbonise our economy, our industry, our business, our transport system, our power industry, our shipping and aviation industries and the way we live.

The Singapore Government is taking climate change very seriously. It sees climate change as a challenge but also as an opportunity. Sustainability and the green economy will create many new businesses and jobs.

The Government has produced an ambitious Green Plan. It has also pledged to achieve net zero by or around 2050.

My own view is that the battle to limit the rise of temperature to 1.5 deg C has not been lost. If the world responds to the commitments made at COP 26 in Glasgow, and takes more ambitious steps to transition to a low-carbon economy and lifestyle, the battle can still be won. The window is, however, closing rapidly.

The conclusion of this stocktake is a mixed one. The ideological battle between the developed and developing countries has been resolved. The magic word is sustainability. On biodiversity, we are faced with a possible sixth mass extinction. On climate change, the battle to limit the rise of global temperature to below 1.5 deg C has not been lost but the window is rapidly closing. I urge all Singaporeans to support the Government's Green Plan.

• Professor Tommy Koh was the chairman of the preparatory committee for the Earth Summit in 1992, as well as the chairman of its main committee during the meeting in Rio de Janeiro, in Brazil. He was named a Champion of the Earth, the UN's highest environmental honour, in 2006. In the same year, he was also one of three recipients of the inaugural Singapore President's Award for the Environment.