



Section E

Planning for the Future

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From an environmentalist's point of view, the story of the Sudbury area is one of both bitter and sweet irony. It is certainly embittering to reflect that this southerly outcropping of the ancient Canadian Shield, an ecosystem created and preserved by nature over hundreds of millions of years, was converted to a barren wasteland in less than a century by the human hand. But at the risk of making a virtue of a necessity, it is sweet to contemplate that this devastated pocket of planet earth may yet become a global model of determined, if belated, environmental enlightenment and a case history of ecological rejuvenation.

At the conclusion of the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development at Rio de Janeiro in June 1992, I said that our task was now to "move down from the Summit and into the trenches" to the level of practical action and meaningful decisions that will be needed to fulfil the vision of Rio and to implement the agreements reached there. As the Earth Summit concluded, the people of the Sudbury community had already been toiling in the ecological trenches for nearly two decades, working to restore their blighted patch of earth to a condition that would again resemble a functioning ecosystem.

One of the happiest and most proud moments of the entire Earth Summit, for me as a Canadian, came when the Sudbury community was given the 1992 United Nations Local Government Honours Award for its work to reverse the process of environmental degradation.

Sudbury was one of the earliest regions to feel the baneful brunt of unsustainable industrial practices. It was also one of the first to recognize that, no matter how afflicted their environment was, it was not beyond repair. And so the people of Sudbury, through their local and provincial governments, and with guidance and assistance from the academic and industrial sectors, set out to show the world how it is done.

Unfortunately, such enlightenment is not yet universal, despite the heightened awareness of global environmental issues created by the Rio Earth Summit and its predecessors. In the 20 years between the first World Conference on the Human Environment in Stockholm in 1972 and the Rio Summit, much progress was made in some areas, including our understanding of the complex system of interaction through which human activities have an effect on the environment and resources of the planet. A host of new institutions were established at various levels to deal with the policy, regulatory, scientific, economic, and other dimensions of these issues. Virtually every nation, including developing countries, established national ministries or agencies with responsibility for environmental policies and regulations.

The initiatives were accompanied by some significant progress in addressing several substantive environmental concerns, notably the "close-in" problems of air, water, and land pollution in industrialized countries.

But despite this progress, it became evident by the mid-1980s that, overall, the conditions of the earth's environment and some of its most vital ecosystems had continued to deteriorate and some of the primary risks such as global warming and ozone depletion had become more acute and menacing than they appeared at Stockholm. At the same time, developing countries were experiencing problems of pollution and environmental degradation rapidly approaching the levels of the more industrialized countries while lacking the resources to cope with them. It was also becoming increasingly evident that there was a direct and inextricable link between economic development and its environmental impacts.

Against this background, the United Nations General Assembly decided in December 1983 to establish the World Commission on Environment and Development to examine the condition of and prospects for the economy and the environment in the perspective of the year 2000 and beyond. The commission, under the leadership of Norwegian Prime Minister Gro Harlem Brundtland, in its landmark report released in 1987, "Our Common Future," made a compelling case for sustainable development as the only viable pathway to a secure and promising future for the human community and produced a set of recommendations for achieving it.

This report provided the basis for the UN General Assembly's decision to convene, on the twentieth anniversary of the Stockholm conference, the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development. Studies made in preparation for Rio made it starkly clear that fundamental changes in economic behavior offer the only real prospect of effecting a transition to a secure and sustainable future as we move toward the twenty-first century. And the impressive case history of Sudbury shows that it can be done.

The desolation of the Sudbury area is not an isolated case. With the demise of the communist regimes of eastern Europe and the

Soviet Union, we are only beginning to see the full extent of the massive environmental devastation they produced. Closer to home, in the Atlantic provinces and New England states, an entire industry and a way of life are threatened by profligate and exploitative fishing practices.

But Sudbury's immense achievement is a beacon of encouragement. It holds out the prospect that even the most resolute ravaging by humankind can be reversed if action is taken early enough. Beyond that broad object lesson, the Sudbury case also demonstrates that economic benefits can flow from good environmental practices. As is pointed out elsewhere in this book, the reclamation project has provided short-term jobs for more than 3000 persons over the past 15 years. The improved landscape is also serving to assist in attracting prospective businesses, as well as tourists.

This is a novel and welcome twist on one of the main themes of the Earth Summit—that good environmental performance is fully compatible with positive economic performance. Japan and other countries have demonstrated this in terms of converting a large and dynamic economy to sustainable principles. Now, Sudbury is proving the point with an impressive remedial project.