A VIEW FROM THE SUMMIT

BY PAUL G. IRWIN

After more than two years of preparation, the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development (UNCED), or Earth Summit, took place June 3-14 in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil. One hundred seventy countries were officially represented at the biggest event ever sponsored by the United Nations. One hundred eighteen heads of state attended the meeting, whose goal was to create a new framework (the Earth Charter), comprehensive agenda (Agenda 21), and series of agreements that would protect the environment while at the same time provide the means for human beings to develop fully.

For those of us who work to protect animals through changing international policies, UNCED was a unique opportunity. Never before had the world's political leaders seriously considered a declaration that would recognize the intrinsic value of animals and nature, as well as agendas and treaties that would implement so life-affirming an ethic. We were hopeful that the United Nations would take significant steps to protect animals and the Earth, following the lead of its own recent statements and those of other international groups.

Unfortunately, however, concern for the life and beauty of our planet did not prevail in the deliberations. The Earth Charter, formally titled the Rio Declaration on Environment and Development, opens with the assertion that "human beings are at the center of concerns for sustainable development." In Agenda 21 and various treaties, opportunities for protecting species or habitats were bypassed or ignored. Both the reality and the rhetoric of caring for animals and the Earth were edited out of final versions, as northern, developed countries and southern, developing countries tried to cut deals that would give each the maximum share of natural resources.

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Amidst representatives of indigenous peoples, Sen. Albert Gore speaks in Rio. The HSUS sponsored the IPMC on behalf of CRLE, EarthKind, and HSI.

Despite the disregard for animals demonstrated at UNCED, the meeting represented a giant step forward in creating a global framework to protect animals and the environment. One of the most significant accomplishments of this new framework of international relations, the 500 pages of Agenda 21 lay out major issues that will complete the framework; the document addresses climate change and the atmosphere, high seas fisheries, technology safety and transfer, institutional arrangements, poverty and consumption, and financial resources.

Even though the habits and economics of cruelty and exploitation run deep and are slow to change, the stage is set for making respect for each creature and the integrity of nature a cornerstone of international relations. Many politicians are reluctant to acknowledge that nonhuman animals are more than resources, things whose status and value can be measured and that can be made of them. But scientific discoveries — and a growing moral sensitivity — have given us a clearer picture of animals' range of feeling and the complexity of their relationships and communication. Increasingly, professional, scientific, and religious organizations recognize the new reality. Government policies must as well. We must resist the temptation to make animals the servants of human needs as well as ecological soundness, social justice, and economic viability, are components of any definition of sustainability.

The Global Humane Family at Rio

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