

Commonwealth Day Message, 10 March 2008: from Her Majesty the Queen, Head of the Commonwealth

Last year, Commonwealth Heads of Government met in Uganda on the edge of Lake Victoria and agreed to an Action Plan for tackling climate change. It was an appropriate place to do so: from there, the waters of the River Nile begin a three-month journey to the Mediterranean.

The Nile, throughout history, has served humankind in many ways. But for all its impressive size and importance, this river is a fragile eco-system; and its vulnerability grows with the number of people dependant upon it, so that a single incident of pollution upstream may affect the lives of countless numbers downstream.

The example of the Nile illustrates many of the challenges facing the global environment as a whole which cannot alone sustain our lives as once it did. The competition for fresh water by a growing population is itself becoming a source of potential conflict. Our own attitudes to the environment, and the use we put it to, may have consequences for people on every continent and for every ocean and sea.

The impact of pollution falls unequally: it is often those who pollute the least – notably in the world's least-developed nations – who are closest to the razor's edge: most affected by the impact of climate change and least equipped to cope with it.

And it is important to remember that the environmental choices available in some countries may not be an option for others. In some parts of the world, for example, fossil fuels can be used more sparingly and buildings can be made of more efficient, sustainable materials; but it is far harder to expect someone to adapt if he or she relies on the trees of a local forest for fuel, shelter and livelihood. If we recognise the interests and needs of the people who are most affected, we can work with them to bring about lasting change. Happily, this approach has always been a strength of the Commonwealth, and awareness of environmental issues is now widespread, with a determination that future generations should enjoy clean air, sufficient fresh water and energy without risking damage to the planet. Few are more aware or energetic in confronting climate change than young people, and we should support them.

In the Commonwealth, governments, businesses, communities and individuals should each strive to match words and good intentions with deeds. Every contribution has its part to play. Whatever we do, wherever we live, our actions in defence of the environment can have a real and positive effect upon the lives of others, today and into the future.