

**Asia and Pacific Alliance of YMCAs  
FORUM ON GLOBAL CITIZESHIP  
CASE STORY**

**The Values and Concepts of Sustainable Human Development, Resources & Environment  
Preservation, and Securing Peace towards the Mekong Sub-Region \*\***

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## **1. Introduction**

This keynote presentation is a “key” to open our hearts and minds. As humans, we all have the same hearts, minds and understanding. For all people in the Mekong Region the word “*Mae*” or “*Me*” stands for *Mother* – which also means the mother of the world and the mother of all the new generation to come. In this context, we should try to keep our “*Mae*” or ***mother earth*** healthy, so that she will always look young, fresh and energetic.

## **2. What is the “Sustainable Development” ?**

In this presentation we are going to share our understanding of the values and the concepts of sustainable human development, resources and environmental preservation and securing peace towards our communities in the Mekong region. I went to Laos last year and what I saw very impressive were green mountains with clean and clear water running free in the rivers without any man-made obstructions. I no longer have good impression of Thailand’s beautiful mountains, rivers and development projects as I used to. Now, in Thailand we have remained with very few free-flowing rivers.

Let us look up into our galaxy. The earth is so well designed and created. The sun is at the centre of our solar system. We now know that the earth is the only planet which sustains all life forms. Our Earth is like a life boat since 3/4 of the earth’s surface is covered with water. The North and South poles are covered with ice which is water in its solid form. We have water as a liquid in the ocean, with running water in rivers and streams. This liquid runs from the high mountains down to the lowest part which is the ocean. There is also water as vapour or as gas everywhere. As well as land and water, there is about 80km thickness of air atmosphere around the earth. The air which we constantly breathe covers the whole earth. Are we aware that we have air surrounding us? *Are we aware that we are breathing in and out?* Are we are aware that we have water in our bodies? All of this sustains our life. We need to be thankful for this. **This is our mother earth.** We have to remember that ***the earth does not belong to us, but we belong to the earth.*** However, many leaders, engineers, and scientists believe that we can conquer the earth, its rivers, atmosphere and space. Albert Einstein once said we have to surrender to the earth since it is too complex to ever understand.

Which is the first form of life on earth? - Plants. Plants use nutrients from the soil, water, air, oxygen, carbon-dioxide, and the energy from the sun to produce seeds, flowers and fruits. Plants have mechanisms which can convert solar energy, water, soil, air, gases and nutrients from the soil to reproduce themselves. Many species of plants form the basis of other lives. The next forms of life to appear are land and aquatic animals - not human beings. Animals need water, sun, elements, soil and plants to live as well as the diverse species of animals and insects. We have to preserve them because they are facing extinction by human beings. We may not understand them, but there are reasons for them to exist and come to this earth. This does not give us the right to lead them to extinction. We can use animals, but only with respect. They form a very complex base for human beings too. Water, air and soil need to be sustained for all living things and their necessities. If they do not exist, we also will not exist.

Professor Miller G Tyler Jr. said, ***“Our survival, life quality, and economics are totally dependent on the sun and the Earth”***. Without human beings, animals and plants can still exist. We have to change our attitudes and minds because we cannot get along without the earth. We may have different flags and names to represent our countries, but looking from space we are a **“One-nation earth”**. If we destroy our earth lifeboat, we will sink in the ocean of death. Therefore, we have to do justice to nature for the present and future generations.

There are 3 pillars of sustainable development of justice. Since we are all dependent on nature, we have to care for it. We are borrowing resources from

our future generations. Unless we achieve a greater accuracy of justice amongst peoples living in this generation, it is unlikely we can preserve nature and sustainability for future generations.

### 3. What is happening to our “Mother Earth” ?

From the very creative cartoon in a newspaper can give us the ideas about our behavior for the earth : *“the earth says, “I gave you life. You gave me acid rain, nuclear waste, toxic waste, and ozone layer depletion. You gave me destroyed rain forests, mountains and wildlife and created a greenhouse effect. You gave me polluted oceans, rivers, lakes and streams. Is this anyway to treat your mother?”*

The sun gives us energy, water, rain, soil, air and growing trees with fruits for humans and animals to enjoy. Human’s greediness has given us disastrous problems. We chop down trees and use mechanical equipment to dig and blow up the earth to build dams, rivers and tunnels. We pollute the air **but** at the same time we also strive to get fresh air to breathe.

Many people go to Chiang Mai to get fresh air. However, Chiang Mai is also suffering from air pollution from various development projects. We used to have the cleanest air in Thailand. Our consuming attitude blocks out the truth that no one wants to hear since it is against our wants. All these things are the inconvenient truths which most people do not accept!!

In the past 20-100 years, we have been consuming more energy, oil, and gases which produced the greenhouse effect. The level of CO<sub>2</sub> goes up with our consumption, warming up the earth and

increasing the world's temperature. All the gases from our development projects have produced a hole in the ozone layer. The upper atmosphere has been torn away making it very dangerous since ultra-violet rays get into the earth causing diseases and problems. Climate change, change in weather, wind patterns and storms are some of the effects of this. For example, Japan used to have 5 typhoons a year. Now they have more than 10! The ice is melting in the north pole, and on the high mountains. They are all man-induced disasters.

#### 4. The Future for our Mekong Region

The problems of overpopulation, resource shortage, poverty, premature death, inadequate health care, economic instability, political unrest, despair and loss of hope are all interconnected. All this is happening despite the advanced technologies we have. **This is a crisis created by human beings.** We cannot only rely on the government because we are all members of the earth. **We have duties and responsibilities to create a consciousness within our networks, individually, locally, nationally and globally.** By thinking globally and acting locally, we can understand global problems. This is the future for our Mekong region.

##### 4.1 Water for Life

The Mekong River connects and unites us with China, Myanmar, Laos, Cambodia, Vietnam, and Thailand. Nature has designed it to begin in the mountains of China and Tibet in high altitudes as snow which eventually melts. To counteract the changes the river is currently experiencing activities which are

being run by international and local organizations such as the ADB, ASEAN, the Mekong River Commission, etc. We should not have to wait to be invited by these organizations. We could start our own actions and prepare to work together with them.

In the rainy season, the Tonle Sap Great Lake in Cambodia grows up to 5 times the size. The lake shrinks in the summer and expands in the rainy season. **This is how nature is working to sustain life.** But we are trying to stop it expand because we want to reclaim the land. This is a mistake! If it floods, it has to be allowed to flood. Floods are not always bad. *We use a lot of money to stop the natural mechanism of the earth.* We clear the forests and burn them down. Fish are disappearing. We do not have regulations to control the catching of fish in their mating season. These fish could go into extinction.

Water is needed in all aspects of life. Water is used in spiritual, environmental, ecological and commercial functions. Do we have enough water in the world? Just because the river is running all the time, does it mean that we have a lot of water? No. Water keeps recycling. Only 3% of the world's water is fresh water with most of it in a solid state. If there was 100L of water on earth, fresh running water liquid would make up 0.003L. The Mekong river may look very big, but it is tiny compared to all the water on the earth. If you put all the big rivers of the world together, they all combine to create only half a teaspoon. The demand for water in the world is increasing since the population is growing with our standard of living rising, along with climate change.

When I was young, I only used about 10 liters of

water to clean myself everyday. Now with a shower and modern bath tub I need almost 80 liters. People in Bangkok take 3 showers a day and use about 200 liters of water per person a day. Thailand is already facing a water crisis. In the dry season there are conflicts over water. Sometimes there is massive flash-flooding. We have never had it before but for the past 10 years it has become a normal event.

#### **4.2 The Misuse of Nature**

Flash floods in the Mekong Region are caused by our misuse of fire, water, and land. We want to produce more cash crops by encroaching more forests. In the monsoon season, water runs down the hills and makes flashfloods. ***If we do not understand nature and ecology, we can create more problems instead of prosperity, peace and security.*** In Israel, they have to catch every drop of water for their existence. We call this “rain harvesting”. We need rain to let water seep into the ground, raising the level of ground water for the dry season to prevent droughts. If we have too much concrete from development, no water is allowed to seep into the ground. It runs off quickly from the pavement and creates flooding in the lowlands. We have to dig deeper and deeper to get water. Many communities in Chiang Mai filled up all the small lakes and swamps under the name of development or land reclamations and now we are suffering from water shortage in the dry season. We are suffering in the rainy season too because there is no place to store water. Now we have to go back to nature and dig to create lakes and wetlands again.

#### **4.3 Our Responsibilities**

The grass-roots people have to fight for the earth through eco-activism. Earth education, voluntary simplicity, the peace movement and social and environmental justice must be covered to maintain the earth.

The modern 10 commandments for all of us and our generation should be as follows:-

- *Love and honor the earth*
- *Enjoy the turning of its seasons. (Instead of “Buying more air conditioners”)*
- *Don’t drive creatures to extinction*
- *Give thanks for food to the creatures and plants*
- *Limit how many children you have*
- *Do not kill or waste the earth’s riches on weapons of war*
- *Don’t make a profit at the earth’s expense*
- *Heal the mistakes you have made to the earth*
- *Do not steal from future generations*
- *Consume material goods in moderation.*

I would like to quote some inspiring sayings from famous leaders of our time as follows:-

*“I do not want to talk about what you understand about this world. I want to know what you will do about it. I do not want to know what you hope. I want to know what you will work for. I do not want your sympathy for the needs of humanity, I want your muscle”, -by Robert Fulgham*

*“The main ingredients of an **environmental ethic** are caring about the planet and all of its inhabitants, allowing unselfishness to control the immediate self – the interest that harms others, and living each day so as to leave the lightest possible*

*footprints on the planet.” (Every footprints cause damage. Be gentle and kind to the earth.)*

*“A new responsibility for ourselves and the earth. We must recognize the earth’s limited capacity to provide for us. Don’t take everything. We must recognize the **earth’s fragility**. No longer allow it to be ravaged by our actions. This ethic must motivate a great movement, convincing reluctant leaders and reluctant governments and reluctant people themselves to effect the needed changes.”*

**(We all may be reluctant but we have to become motivated and work together)**

Rev. Jesse Jackson said – *“We need to come together and choose a new direction. We need to transform our society into one in which **people live in true harmony** – harmony among nations, harmony among the races of humankind, and harmony with nature... We will either reduce, reuse, recycle and restore – or we will perish.”*

## **5. Concluding Remarks**

### **5.1 What we must do:-**

- 1) Bring environmentally damaging activities under control to restore and protect the integrity of the Earth’s systems we depend on
- 2) Manage resources crucial to human welfare more effectively
- 3) Stabilize population
- 4) Reduce and eventually eliminate poverty

### **5.2 We need helps:-**

We require the help of all sectors in the Mekong Region:-

- engineers and scientists (natural, social, economic, political, ecological, biological, architectural, etc)
- business and industrial leaders
- religious leaders
- communities’s leaders
- academic leaders
- all people

### **5.3 Individuals matter:-**

I would like to end with the saying of Margaret Mead’s **“Individuals matter”** : *“Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed citizens can change the world. Indeed it is the only thing that ever has.”*

I do strongly believe that even though we are only a small group of citizens representing the countries in the Mekong region gathering here in this conference room, still we can contribute or make a big change to our Mekong’s communities. We can act as **the change agents** or as **the nucleus of change** for happiness, sustainability, peace, and prosperity of our Mekong region.

## **6. References**

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- 3) Miller, G.Tyler. Jr. Environmental Science: *Working with the Earth*, Wadsworth, Inc (1995).

