

Remarks to Welcome Participants to the Second Regional Environmental Forum
By Prof. Sanit Aksornkoae, Ph.D.
29 January, 2004, 9:00-9:10 a.m.
Novotel Lotus Bangkok, Soi Daeng Udom, Sukhumvit 33 Rd.

Your Excellency, Vice Minister Professor Dr. Prinya Nutalaya;
Distinguished Representatives of NGOs, Governmental Organizations, and
International Organizations;
Ladies and Gentlemen:

It is indeed my great pleasure to welcome, on behalf of the Thailand
Environment Institute, all of you to the second Regional Environmental Forum
for Mainland Southeast Asia.

This REF is a truly noteworthy occasion. Among us are accomplished
representatives of many of the most effective and forward-thinking
environmental organizations in our region. Together, we create a pool of
experiences drawn from eight different countries and many cultures. It is also
worth noting that this is a forum both created by and for civil society
organizations. Such an international CSO forum has been rare in the region,
although the potential effectiveness of our cooperation is great.

Not only is this forum notable for its diversity and origins, but also for the
participation, for the first time at a REF, of individuals who hold official
positions in their respective nations. This makes possible a higher level of
cooperation between the civil society and governmental sectors. My sincere
hope is that through their interactions and participation, these officials will work
with their colleagues to elevate the discussions we have here to the level of
official international agreement.

I would like to give a special welcome to our colleagues and friends who work
within international organizations. Many of these organizations are already
addressing issues of good governance and public participation in environmental
decision-making through their own programs. These organizations have a
much-needed catalytic role in this region. I appreciate their interest in the REF
and their willingness to join forces to tackle these issues of over-arching
importance.

This forum exists because it must. There are simply too many environmental problems crossing too many of our common borders for each of us to attempt to solve them alone.

I am an ecologist by profession and training, and I therefore prefer to look at things from the perspective of the interconnected whole. Just a few weeks ago, as I commenced my tenure as president of TEI, I told my colleagues that we must look at our own organization in an ecological way. The various parts of the organization must coordinate with each other to create a greater whole.

The same perspective may be applied to the Greater Mekong Subregion. We simply must view our region as an ecological whole, as an organism that will fail if robbed of any of its parts. From this perspective, it is easy to see that each of the countries in our region is only as healthy as the most environmentally-degraded one. An environmental chain is only as strong as its weakest link.

We are therefore fortunate to have this forum in which to share our concerns, our defeats, and our victories, and in which to harmonize our strategies. In short, this is an opportunity to devise solutions without boundaries to fit problems without boundaries.

The REF last met at the invitation of our very capable Cambodian hosts in November 2002. That first REF was a clear success. A group of 35 independent researchers and civil society advocates from Cambodia, China, Laos, Myanmar, Thailand, and Vietnam issued a consensus statement including specific recommendations to the organizations and governments of the region. These recommendations focused on improving environmental governance mechanisms to ensure the participation of all segments in society in environmental decision-making.

This REF will continue to develop these ideas. In this forum, we hope to go beyond calls for better governance and start considering ways to assess whether and to what extent civil society and local residents have a say in the outcome of official environmental decisions.

TEI has been involved from the onset in the development of indicators to measure public participation in environmental decision-making. Working within an international effort called The Access Initiative, we helped create these indicators and then pioneered the use of them in a national assessment in Thailand. We have found this assessment process to be effective in focusing national attention on the economic, social, and environmental benefits of public participation in environmental decision-making. In fact, we are hoping to conduct a second national assessment based on a second generation of indicators.

I am excited that we will have the opportunity to share these experiences and ideas with all of you in greater depth, and I am excited that all of you will have opportunities to share your suggestions and ideas in return.

Given the very substantive agenda for this REF and the expertise of the participants, I have no doubt but that this forum will be just as successful as the first. I hope that you find this two-day meeting productive, and I also hope that your work here leads to concrete outcomes in the future.

Lastly, I would like to thank the staff at WRI, in particular Frances, Tony, and Amy, and Dr. Somrudee, along with her staff in the Urbanization and Environment Program at TEI, for doing all of the hard work to make this REF a success.

Again, welcome. TEI is proud to be your host, and I also hope you will enjoy your pleasant stay in Bangkok. Thank you very much for your attention.