

*Phil Todd discusses issues regarding the environment.*

- 1 In his work, *Pan's Travail*, Donald Hughes examines the environmental history of the classical period and argues that the decline of ancient civilisations resulted in part from their exploitation of the natural world. Looking at the current state of the environment, one cannot help but wonder if tragedy will recur, for the catastrophic events of today seem to be harbingers of doom that befell our ancestors. Humanity seems helpless to overcome the problems created in the face of rampantly expanding populations and rapidly declining biodiversity, leading to worsening environmental conditions. Well-meaning initiatives to save the environment multiply with each passing day, but these initiatives typically flounder against the unthinkable prospect that we might actually change our fundamental behaviour. Today, our dying world is in danger, and asks us to take seriously this vision of a world in which humans and other species might live together peacefully, united by a sense of kinship and community. 5 10
- 2 It could be safely assumed that nobody understands the connection all living creatures have with Mother Earth better than the people who depend on nature for survival. Severing the umbilical cord humans have with Nature may lead to disastrous consequences. Since ancient times, natives of the land such as the Aboriginal peoples have seen themselves not as masters of nature, but as stewards: to practise reverence, humility and reciprocity towards nature. Everything taken from the environment – securing food through hunting, gathering and fishing – is used with the understanding that only what is needed is taken and great care is taken to ensure that future generations will not be put in peril. Sadly, today, modern people seek to subdue the environment – rich pickings for the strong – to be used at will without any thought of generations to come. 15 20
- 3 The Industrial Revolution, which marked a major turning point in the Earth's ecology and human's relationship with their environment, did not become an all-consuming juggernaut overnight – nor was it a uniform phenomenon in all countries – but it was essentially characterised by machinery replacing manual labour. This slow revolution affected all basic human needs. People who wished to share in the promised prosperity of work in urban centres left behind their rural lifestyles and the process of urbanisation – people clustering in specific geographical areas – began. At the time no thought was given to what the effects these colossal changes might have on the environment. Nature was thought of as robust and bountiful enough to be managed, tamed, and exploited as humans wished. There was a strong but, as would ultimately be realised, unsustainable confidence in the regenerating capacity of nature. 25 30
- 4 This self-healing property of nature was an assumption that would prove itself, in time, to be totally false. The Industrial Revolution brought enormous advances in productivity but at steep environmental costs. Governments pushed for the consumption of immense quantities of coal and other fossil fuels that surreptitiously gave rise to unprecedented air pollution that, in turn, brought about respiratory diseases on a scale that had never been known before. Toxins and the health effects that are now known to people abounded. Governments stood by as outbreaks of diseases, such as cholera and typhoid, spread by untreated human waste became a major environmental hazard. People, especially the poor and working class, were suffering, but for a time the authorities were 'oblivious' to these consequences of industrialisation and took no action to address them. The problems became myriad. Demand for resources such as food, energy, land for housing and public forms of transport grew exponentially as populations exploded with the economic prosperity that the Industrial Revolution brought. This laid the foundation for environmental threats lurking, ready to take hold in the future. 35 40 45
- 5 It was not until the late twentieth century that people finally came to grips with the fact that they had, indeed, waged war on their very own survival. Many explanations account for this realisation and consequent revolution into a new era of environmental awareness. It began first with people witnessing environmental degradation first-hand. These problems were published on various news platforms and others took notice. Research established by prominent conservationists like Rachel Carson further alerted the world to the widespread use 50

of pestilent chemicals used in agriculture. Fear of what people were consuming became a prominent issue. This was the forerunner of a growing awareness of the diverse critical issues confronting the environment. In various societies, celebrities used their public prominence – from Oscar speeches to prime time interviews – to promote the message of environmental care. Activists resorted to radical actions to warn people about the perilous state of the environment. Diseases linked to environmental hazards further convinced people of the advantages of having an environment that would reduce the physical and mental health risks. People were no longer accepting of mistreatments of the environment. Even young people became an impetus for change with the introduction of environmental education to the classroom. Now, a greater variety of communication channels empowered individuals to spread environmental awareness.

- 6 However, this quest for a new approach to the environment did not come without challenges. Some denied that the environment was headed towards a crisis and some resisted change because of the inconvenience brought about by such changes. In more affluent countries, some people were blind to their waste of resources. Some had the illusion of sufficiency. People believed water running from our taps, the abundance of fossil fuels and all of the bounty of the environment that had, until now, been the foundation of their affluence was there for their infinite use. Also, strongly against environmental change were those who were addicted to a consumerist culture which demanded the products of manufacturing processes that polluted air, destroyed the ozone layer and triggered global warming. A further challenge was the misguided belief that, while the environment was suffering, we could continue our wasteful lifestyles because new innovations would be the panacea. Furthermore, corporations continued to retain the cheapest and most environmentally damaging methods of production. In addition, the media often presented the position of environment advocates as illogical. Governments pursuing goals of economic expansion ignored the signs of the damage they were causing. And, of course those wanting environmental change could also be their own worst enemy, having divisive attitudes as to how the environment should be improved.
- 7 Notwithstanding the challenges, there remains a glimmer of hope. Through recent environmental conferences, governments, private corporations and even individuals have shown a new resolve: the need to make environmental protection one of our top priorities. Countries have been nudged to upgrade their promises for cutting emissions and act beyond merely subsidising green technologies. Corporations have become the drivers of research and innovation in environmental technologies. Amongst all these positive changes, the biggest encouragement lies in the fact that there has been a discernible shift in people's opinion towards an increased acceptance of the gravity of climate change. Citizens are changing their lifestyles and are increasingly taking the initiative to protect their planet.
- 8 The challenge of the twenty-first century will be to figure out how to design a sustainable global society that maintains the benefits of industrialisation indefinitely into the future, and still preserve environmental quality and biodiversity. While it is true that over the course of their time on this planet, humans have had many significant negative effects on the environment, it is evident that humanity does possess a collective power that enables us to reverse these regrettable effects. For this to happen, we must pay more attention to our actions so we may gain a sustainable and mutually respectful relationship with the natural world and its many species. After all, for better or worse, we can be sure of one thing: we will get the nature we deserve.