

His All Holiness Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew I, the Archbishop of Constantinople, was named a UNEP Champion of the Earth in 2005. The award is given annually to seven outstanding environmental leaders who have significantly influenced the protection and sustainable management of the planet's environment.

Each issue of Our Planet features the views of one of UNEP's Champions. For more information on the UNEP Champions of the Earth award see <http://www.unep.org/champions/>.



# in the sand

by His All Holiness Ecumen



# me boat

## ical Patriarch Bartholomew

For more than a decade, the Ecumenical Patriarchate, one of the oldest religious institutions in the world, has been labouring to draw attention to the deep existential crisis facing the modern world as a result of reckless human activities. While the world faces many grave environmental challenges, the overwhelming emphasis of our activities has been on the condition of the waters of the Earth: oceans, lakes, rivers and the entire biosphere in which water plays such a central role.

During seven floating symposia, attended by distinguished scientists, environmentalists and religious leaders, we have drawn global attention to the particular problems faced by certain ecologically sensitive stretches of water: the Aegean, the Black Sea, the Danube, the Adriatic, the Baltic Sea, the Amazon river and the Arctic Ocean. All these symposia have taken place on ships, making voyages through these beautiful but fragile places, and thus highlighting a simple truth. Regardless of our race, religion or economic class, we are “all in the same boat” in the sense that nobody can escape the consequences of a general environmental catastrophe, and nobody can avoid moral responsibility for avoiding it. Humanity will either sail onwards, or it will sink as a result of its own reckless abuse of God’s providential gifts.

People sometimes ask us why the Patriarchate has laid such heavy stress on the water in its ecological activities and pronouncements. Perhaps the first and simplest answer is that an understanding of the primordial importance of water as a constituent of life is deeply engrained in our spiritual and liturgical tradition. That is true of all the Abrahamic faiths, which have their roots in a part of the world where water is scarce, and where it is natural to describe the human soul’s longing for God as a desperate “thirst” for the thing it most needs. Every single evening, Orthodox Christians begin their worship by reciting the glorious Psalm of Creation (Psalm 104 in the western numbering) which — just like the Creation story in the book of Genesis — seems to express the profound insight that maritime life preceded and made possible the life that later emerged on dry land. “O Lord, how manifold are Thy works! In wisdom hast Thou made them all: the earth is full of thy riches. So is this great and wide sea, wherein are things innumerable, both small and great beasts.....”

The story of Our Lord Jesus Christ’s encounter at Jacob’s Well with a Samaritan woman is also very dear to Orthodox Christian hearts. Breaking the mould of sectarian division between Samaritans and Jews, Christ asks the woman to give him some water from this ancient source — and then proceeds to offer her the “living water” of perfect communion with God, the sort of water which eternally quenches all thirst. Through stories like this, we come to realize a deep truth: the acute need for water which all human beings experience is,

from the Christian viewpoint, merely a pointer to an even deeper need — to live as our Creator intended. The nature of life in communion with God is a mystery that has been pondered and exemplified by holy men and women over many generations. One thing we know for certain is that God did not intend us to treat the earth’s resources, or its waters, as something to be used exclusively for short-term economic gain, without regard for other forms of life on earth or for future generations. During last year’s symposium in the Amazon region, and during our visit to Greenland this year, we had the humbling experience of encountering indigenous cultures where the need to consider future generations — and to respect the integrity of ecological systems — is much better understood than it is in prosperous countries that are supposedly heirs of “Christian civilization”.

The primordial importance of water, and the fact all of it (from the oceans to the clouds to tiny streams and oases) forms a single system, has been intuitively understood by traditional cultures, just as it was by the writers of our Scriptures and liturgical texts. In one of the loveliest hymns of the Orthodox Church, a woman devoted to Christ proclaims the words: “Receive the spring of my tears, You who draw water from the clouds...” There can hardly be a more beautiful expression of the truth that every molecule of water on earth, from the mightiest torrent to the tiniest tear drop, forms a marvelous, integral system.

In modern times, scientists have given more precise content to this intuitive understanding. They have told us, for example, that about 70 per cent of the human body consists of water — and that almost exactly the same percentage of the Earth’s surface is covered by it. They have explained how water vapour in the atmosphere is one of the factors that keeps the temperature on Earth relatively stable. They have explained in ever greater detail the way water moves perpetually around a biosphere formed by sea, land and air, through evaporation and precipitation.

Both the ancient wisdom of our Scriptures and the modern insights of science point to a single truth: whenever there is disorder in the waters of the Earth — through rising sea levels, a shortage of fresh water, or extreme events like hurricanes and floods — that is a profoundly troubling sign for life on earth as a whole. The Ecumenical Patriarchate is ever more concerned about these signs, and the spiritual disorders which they highlight. But the Patriarchate will not lose faith in God’s covenant with mankind, expressed in the story of righteous Noah who survived a terrible flood. Man may do his best to destroy the effects of God’s covenant through his reckless and selfish abuse of the earth’s waters and other resources; but God’s offer of “living waters” — of human life in perfect harmony and synergy with the Creator — will never be withdrawn. 