

World in Our Hands



2004 TUNZA International Children's Conference on the Environment

sponsored by the Mashantucket Pequot Tribal Nation



On 19 July 2004, more than 450 youth ambassadors from countries as varied as Colombia, Ireland, Lebanon and Ghana streamed into the US town of New London, Connecticut, for the 2004 TUNZA International Children's Conference on the Environment. At the opening ceremony – after the delegates had been greeted with vibrant dances and music – the famous primate researcher Jane Goodall told her audience: 'Not only can you change the world – you are changing the world.'

The ambassadors – all between the ages of 10 and 13 – represented 50 nations from six continents. The conference gave them many opportunities to discuss what they could do to protect their planet and preserve natural resources for future generations. They agreed that one of the most important things they could do was talk to their friends and family. 'I want everyone to know that it's important that they think about the environment,' said Ritsuya Kishida, a 13-year-old boy from Tokyo, Japan, who led a project to clear away litter in his home town.

In between field trips, workshops and artistic performances by hip-hop singers and hoop dancers, the delegates buckled down to serious work, discussing current environmental issues and proposing viable solutions. Based on their findings, they passed a series of commitments and challenges aimed at taking better care of the earth and its resources, including respect and fair treatment for indigenous peoples everywhere.

Michael Van Leesten, chairman of the International Coalition for Children and the Environment, said the conference set a good example for adults. 'It's actual proof that what's going on in the world now is curable if we can develop a whole new group of leaders to take over the world,' he added. 'It's as simple as that.'

By the conference's end, the delegates were proud of what they had accomplished together. Thirteen-year-old Lauren Kirk from Central Queensland, Australia, summed up: 'It is the little things that count. Think locally – act globally. It is my belief that the children of the world can unite, make a difference and help lighten our environmental footprint.'

The 2004 Commitments and Challenges

We, the delegates at the 2004 TUNZA International Children's Conference on the Environment, commit to do our best:

- To respect, support, share and celebrate indigenous peoples' cultures and knowledge.
- To not harm any plants or animals, especially endangered species.
- To establish or help at a local shelter for animals, either for domestic animals or for endangered species if available.
- To raise awareness about the importance of biodiversity.
- To use our water, energy and other resources wisely.
- To collect and reuse rain water.
- To educate ourselves and others about the value of water and the problem of pollution.
- To participate in local stream or coastal clean-ups.
- To buy and use energy-efficient products and to conserve energy whenever possible.
- To plant trees, native plants and rare species in our home communities.
- To eat foods not grown with polluting chemicals.
- To write letters and petitions to our governments and community leaders to take action, citing the following challenges:





We're Sorry!
 We're lucky to have a planet suitable for living,
 With Mother Earth always giving.
 But, what's given is taken,
 and the thought of returning kindness with kindness is forsaken.
 So here we are, to say sorry today,
 Try to save the earth as we may,
 But for every action there's a reaction?
 So this makes people like us a very small fraction.

Medha, Kenya



'You may not realize it, but you are part of a significant part of history. We are deciding whether Mother Earth is saved or murdered. We are the future of the Mother Earth... All I'm asking you to do is teach what you know about the environment to other people, then, thanks to 450 caring people, the world will be a better place.'

Victoria Gardo, USA

We, the Delegates at the 2004 TUNZA International Children's Conference on the Environment, challenge world leaders to support our committed action by:

- Treating indigenous peoples fairly and respecting their rights, including them in decision making and giving back artefacts that were taken from them.
- Protecting cultures and assisting indigenous peoples to conserve their traditions through festivals and holidays.
- Stopping the appropriation of land from indigenous peoples and looking for ways to fairly repay them for their land if it is not possible to give it back.
- Protecting the natural biodiversity in their regions and setting up nature preserves in sensitive areas.
- Providing alternative sources of food and employment for the people who currently depend on exploiting endangered species.
- Treating water as a global resource and sharing the resource.
- Enforcing laws that stop the dumping of waste into waterways. Ensuring that fines are significant enough to make companies stop polluting.
- Educating the public, using the media, school curricula and any other available methods, reminding them to use water, energy and other resources wisely.
- Supporting and investing in agricultural practices that don't use polluting chemicals.
- Investing in alternative energy sources, making green energy affordable to everyone.
- Supporting local environmental groups.

Conference pictures: UNEP

'Each one of us is responsible for the current state of the environment in the country and we cannot wait for someone else to solve it!'

Ishita Kaur, India

Our common goal

During the conference, everyone had a chance to share their culture. We may not all speak the same language, but we care about similar things. Humankind's treatment of the environment affects us all, no matter where we are from. We all have a stake in what happens to the earth, since, after all, it is our shared home. We will have to start working together to solve major problems like pollution and to conserve precious resources if we are to protect the natural world for ourselves and our future children.

Alex Lin and Christine Kong, two of the delegates, summed up: 'The world is at peace here, all religions working together, laughing together, having fun together. All with a common goal: to help the environment and the rest of the world. Now, we delegates are doing something that many adults in the world cannot do: working together in peace. If the entire world was like this, there would have to be no more wars.'

photo: Mashantucket Pequot Tribal Nation



Thank You So Much! Our deepest gratitude to our founding sponsors, the Mashantucket Pequot Tribal Nation, without whom this incredible event would not have been possible. We would also like to thank all the people and financial supporters who helped us stage the conference, as well as the International Coalition for Children and the Environment, the United Nations Environment Programme and Connecticut College.

Michael Thomas
 Chairman, Mashantucket Pequot Tribal Nation