

TVE Asia Pacific

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Introducing *The Greenbelt Reports*

Message from Nalaka Gunawardene, Director/CEO of TVE Asia Pacific,

Writer and Executive Producer of *The Greenbelt Reports*

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Your Excellencies,
Distinguished guests,
Ladies and gentlemen.

It is a pleasure and privilege for me to send greetings this afternoon to all of you -- Friends of the Planet, and friends of Asia -- who are assembled in Athens.

I was quite looking forward to joining you in person. I am sorry that I have had to cancel my travel due to a sudden family medical emergency. I have no doubt that your event will be a resounding success under the visionary leadership of Dr Agni Vlavianos-Arvanitis, President and Founder of the Biopolitics International Organisation.

Agni and I are part of a select group of environmental educators and communicators from all over the world who meet once a year in Rome at the Greenaccord International Forum on the Protection of Nature. At the last Greenaccord Forum, held in October 2006, I made a presentation about the new television series we were then finalising, called *The Greenbelt Reports*. That was the first time our work in progress was shared with anyone, and I was very encouraged by the enthusiastic and supportive feedback of over 60 participants who had come from more than 40 countries.

And I was especially delighted when the Biopolitics International Organisation offered to organise the European launch of the new series. In doing so, Agni and her colleagues recognised that the conservation messages we are trying to communicate are relevant not just to the Asia Pacific region, but also to Europe and the rest of the world.

Please allow me to briefly tell you what *The Greenbelt Reports* is about.

The Greenbelt Reports is a multi-media, Asia-wide educational project launched in 2005 by my organization, TVE Asia Pacific. The project aims to journalistically document our region's efforts to balance conservation needs of coastal ecosystems with the socio-economic needs of coastal communities.

As a regionally operating, non-profit media foundation, TVE Asia Pacific has been telling stories about Asia's quest for sustainable development for over a decade. We use television, video and the web for our story telling - our slogan is: 'Moving images, moving people'.

I am sure all of you remember the very moving and sometimes harrowing images that appeared on your TV screens a little over two years ago, when the Indian Ocean Tsunami of December 2004 devastated many coastal areas of South and Southeast Asia.

In a sense, *The Greenbelt Reports* was a by-product of the Tsunami. As environmentally-conscious communicators, we were interested in its environmental lessons and implications.

Shortly after the disaster, we heard reports from almost all Tsunami-affected countries of how coral reefs, mangroves or sand dunes had helped protect some villages and communities. It turned out that these ecosystems had acted as 'natural barriers' buffering the impact of the Tsunami waves, saving many lives and reducing property damage.

This didn't come as a surprise to scientists and environmentalists. Many knew about this phenomenon, now called the 'greenbelt effect'. Mangroves, coral reefs and sand dunes all fall into the category of coastal greenbelts - they may not fully block out tsunamis or cyclones, but they can reduce the impact of these natural disasters.

Although it captured the popular imagination only recently, the phenomenon has been known to scientists for many years. For example, it was noticed when a super-cyclone hit India's eastern coastal state of Orissa in October 1999.

But sadly, *the lessons of Orissa were not heeded*. That's why only a few coastal locations were naturally protected by a greenbelt when the Tsunami arrived five years later. As conservation organizations noted, many more lives could have been saved if we in Asia had taken better care of our coastal greenbelts.

Instead, we have allowed our mangroves, coral reefs and sand dunes to be degraded or destroyed. This has happened due to a combination of factors, including population pressures, poverty and economic development activities. For example, mangroves have been cleared on many Asian coasts to set up shrimp farms or tourist resorts.

The socio-economic reality in developing countries in Asia is such that we cannot fence and guard all the remaining coastal greenbelts, declaring them as protected areas. Tens of millions of people, many of them very poor, depend on these ecosystems for their jobs and sustenance.

The Greenbelt Reports uses a dozen case studies to show that the only way to save Asia's remaining coastal greenbelts is by balancing ecosystem conservation with survival needs of local people.

As journalists, we investigated if this is feasible. We looked for evidence of where this is already happening, even on a small scale.

In the researching, filming and producing this regional TV series, we did several things:

- We visited over a dozen coastal areas in the four countries that were hardest hit by the Tsunami - that is, India, Indonesia, Sri Lanka and Thailand.
- We looked at three types of ecosystems -- mangroves, sand dunes and coral reefs - and probed how they protect and sustain life.
- We asked how the local people, in turn, can play a part in saving, restoring or managing these vital ecosystems.
- We interviewed a cross-section of officials, scientists, activists and local community groups in all these places.

Based on what we found, we are pleased to report some good news: *there is hope yet for saving our region's remaining coastal greenbelts*. It is a big challenge, but the knowledge, skill and enthusiasm for rising to that challenge are now available.

Across Asia, dedicated individuals and groups are trying out various methods to save, strengthen or bring back coastal greenbelts. They work against many odds, and their efforts are not widely known. But their collective experience shows that it's indeed possible to have the greenbelts and use them too. We just need to know how.

This is knowledge-based, grassroots-level conservation that pools the efforts of governments, private sector, civil society groups, researchers and local communities. We show in our series how each party has a key role to play.

Here are some of our many examples featured in this series:

- **In India**, scientists from the M S Swaminathan Research Foundation are advising and encouraging many Indian coastal villages on building or strengthening 'bio-shields' of mangroves, other plants or sand dunes.
- **In Thailand**, the people in Tuntaset village have found a decades-old law that allows local communities to manage their mangroves. Taking advantage of this, they have transformed a coastal area once devastated by charcoal and shrimp industries.
- The village of Paanama on **Sri Lanka's** east coast was miraculously saved from the tsunami by a sand dune and mangrove forest. The local people have now come together to conserve both these greenbelts.
- And **in Indonesia**, the people of Jaring Halus on Sumatra island had managed their mangrove forest for many years using traditional methods. Now the government has asked them to co-manage mangroves in a nearby wildlife sanctuary - which is a first for Indonesia.

These and other stories are packaged in our series in two different formats:

- First, we have produced a dozen short video films, each a self contained story in five minutes, giving highlights of a case study or example.
- Second, we have also made a half hour documentary that offers a regional overview of the state of greenbelts in Asia, and the strategies for conserving them.

These have all been produced to international broadcast standards with original English narration. Interviews, in half a dozen Asian languages, are sub-titled in English. All these stories were filmed by locally-based, internationally credentialed TV professionals under TVE Asia Pacific's direction. It is entirely an Asian effort.

In researching and filming the series, we collaborated with a number of local, national, regional or global conservation organizations and research institutes. To name but a few, these included:

- IUCN - The World Conservation Union;
- Mangrove Action Project;
- M S Swaminathan Research Foundation in India;
- Wetlands International; and
- the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP).

I also want to acknowledge with gratitude the financial support we received from development donors, media companies and others. These included:

- Japan Fund for Global Environment;
- TVE Japan;
- Green Coast Project financed by Oxfam Novib in the Netherlands; and
- Nation Broadcasting Corporation of Thailand.

Finally, I want to say a word about the distribution and outreach of this public education material.

We released the TV series last month, and it has been very well received. It was broadcast on several Asian TV channels in late December, to coincide with the Tsunami's second anniversary. More broadcasts are being scheduled shortly.

These programmes have a 'shelf-life' of at least two to three years, and in that time, we would like to see them used far and wide for broadcast, educational, training, advocacy and awareness raising purposes. Already, a number of scientific, activist or educational conferences have screened some or all programmes. Scientists, environmentalists and others have told us they find it a useful, engaging product.

In keeping with our policy, this material is available free of license fee or royalty charges to anyone, anywhere in the world interested in using them. We don't sell our content - we supply them only at the cost of duplication and dispatch. For more information on ordering *The Greenbelt Reports* and our other scientific and environmental content, please visit our website at www.tveap.org.

I would like to leave you with the words of a remarkable young woman we interviewed. She is Jureerat Pechsai, known by her nickname Deun. She belongs to the Moken people, an indigenous group who lives in southern Thailand. Their home on the Pra Thong island was hammered by the Tsunami, and now Deun and her community are engaged in restoring the mangroves to guard against future disasters. But they are struggling with outsiders coming on to their island to grab the remaining mangroves for short-term benefit. Reflecting on this, she says: ***"It takes many years for the trees to grow, but it takes only one day to destroy it."***

It is by listening to people like Deun that we will find effective and practical ways to achieve sustainable development. Your discussions today, and your action everyday, can help create a sustainable future for all of us.

Thank you very much.

Background information (not part of the message)

About TVE Asia Pacific

Television for Education - Asia Pacific, trading as TVE Asia Pacific, is a regional not-for-profit organisation that uses television, video and Internet for public communication of development issues. Governed by an international Board of Directors and headquartered in Sri Lanka, it both produces and distributes editorially independent TV programming, which are regularly carried by over 50 public and private TV channels across the Asia Pacific. For more information, visit: www.tveap.org

TVE Asia Pacific also carried out the Children of Tsunami media project during 2005, which tracked on video the recovery stories of eight ordinary families affected by the disaster in India, Indonesia, Sri Lanka and Thailand. Material archived at: www.childrenoftsunami.info

How to obtain *The Greenbelt Reports*

The Greenbelt Reports first series (12 x 5 mins, totaling 60 mins of viewing) is available as a single compilation on VHS Video and DVD. The half hour documentary, *The Greenbelt Reports: Armed by Nature* is separately available, also on VHS video and DVD. Copies of both can be ordered at the cost of duplication and dispatch from TVE Asia Pacific's e-shop online at: <http://www.tveap.org/shopping/search.php>

- For obtaining broadcast masters, please contact TVE Asia Pacific's Distribution Division: Phone: + 94 11 4412 195; Fax: + 94 11 4403 443; Email: <sales@tveap.org>
- For media queries and interview requests, please contact the series writer and Executive Producer, Nalaka Gunawardene, at email: <gbr@tveap.org>