Foreword

There is an all-too-easy, aesthetic quality to environmentalism as commonly practiced in the United States. We worry about pandas; we recycle Perrier bottles; we eat an ice cream named Rainforest Crunch. Environmentalism tends to become a lifestyle issue, a matter of what you choose to eat or buy or do on your vacation. It is a sign both of the success of environmentalism and of its failure that it has been so readily absorbed by the upper-middle class, but largely as a matter of gesture and taste. In the conventional stereotype, a concern with the environment is almost a defining feature of affluence—i.e., of the absence of more pressing concerns.

But if environmentalism can be trivialized, commodified, and tamed, this is no longer true of the root concerns that motivate the movement. What may once have seemed to be merely aesthetic worries have grown into a generalized, well-justified dread. Every week brings us horrifying new glimpses of a planet in torment—buckling under the load of its human freight, littered with garbage, overheated, gasping for air. Just as the central issue of the last four decades was the Cold War and the threat of nuclear annihilation, the central challenge of the “New World Order” is the preservation of our habitat and of earthly life itself. Good intentions, individual gestures, and politically correct ice creams will no longer suffice.

Fortunately, a new kind of environmentalism is beginning to emerge from the people who might least be expected to embrace it—the literal wretched of the earth. In the United States, the starting point is the unequal distribution of waste. Studies have shown what many communities had long suspected: toxic wastes

tend to end up in localities where incomes are low and skin colors dark. In the southeastern states, for example, three-quarters of all toxic-waste landfills are located in low-income, black neighborhoods. Nationwide, more than half of all African and Latino Americans live in communities that contain at least one toxic-waste site.

Globally, the inequities are even sharper. From the vantage point of the industrial North, the South is often viewed as a vacationland, where even poverty is brightened by sunshine and readily available fish and fruit. But such postcard images are further from the truth than they ever were. The Third World, home of most of the world's poor, is also the site of the most life-threatening environmental damage. One reason is that northern countries have exploited the Third World's economic vulnerability by using the South as a dumping ground, a run-off site for toxic wastes and equally toxic industries. At the same time, population pressures force many of the Third World peasantry to squeeze still more from their depleted fields and fisheries and their remaining forests. And then there is the effect of sheer plunder, as local elites and multinational corporations scramble to extract what is left of the Third World's great natural wealth.

Plundering Paradise is one of the first, and certainly one of the most engaging, books to chronicle both the environmental devastation of the Third World and the ongoing movement of resistance. In the Philippines, environmentalism is not a matter of opting to recycle or to conserve bits of nature for recreational purposes. The "scenery" all turns out to be functional: rainforests that provide fuel and keep a group on the fertile soil, coral reefs that sustain fish and shelter coastal villages from tidal waves, mangrove forests that nourish water birds and fish. All of this "paradise" is being ravaged at a furious pace by mining companies, logging companies, and agribusiness—backed up by one of the most callous and corrupt military establishments on earth.

The story of the destruction of this island nation as a human habitat would be unbearable without the counterpoint of another story, one of human resistance and hope. In their often frightening, sometimes funny, travels throughout the Philippines, Broad and Cavanagh met dozens of activists—not always literate and probably unaware, in most cases, of environmentalism as a cause for the affluent. For these peasant environmentalists, saving the land, the trees, the fish, is a matter of personal and community survival.

It is also infinitely more dangerous than, say, deciding to recycle one's newspapers. American readers will be disturbed to learn how little the rule of law prevails in Cory Aquino's (and her successor's) Philippines, where the military make little distinction between Communist insurgents and nonviolent community-based organizations. Peasants who block logging trucks or protest toxic mining operations face arrest, detention, or even "salvaging"—the peculiar local term for being "disappeared" or extralegally killed. One such activist you will meet in these pages is Ely de la Rosa, a forty-three-year-old father of five and a leader of a fishers' organization. For his efforts to democratize marine resources and halt the destruction of coastal mangrove trees, he was assassinated in January of 1990.

In this desperate context, Broad and Cavanagh's prescription for ecological reform makes perfect sense: Ordinary people—farmers and fishers—need to regain control over the land and other resources. To the corporate plunderers, the land and its wealth are mere "factors of production," entirely instrumental to the bottom line. The Third World peasantry sees things differently: They know that their children have no future unless the land and the forests and the seas can be preserved for them.

An American cannot travel along with Broad and Cavanagh, even vicariously, without wanting to reach out and exchange addresses with the brave, indigenous environmentalists to whom they introduce us. Somehow the link must be forged between First World concern and Third World activism, between those who are still only worried and those who are already living at the very margins of a sustainable habitat. Knowing that *their* rainforests affect *our* air, that *our* wastes and *our* consumption affect *their* farms and homes, makes a new global environmental alliance both natural and urgently necessary.

To quote someone who spoke in a very different context, an American cattle rancher threatened by industrial wastes: "I was one of those guys who used to think that what happens on the other side of the fence is no concern to me and what happens on my side is no concern to them. But when it's coming over the fence and under the fence, I decided to do something about it." In the world as a whole, there are no longer any fences that hold.

Barbara Ehrenreich