

Becoming Environmentally Global

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A diplomat from New Zealand once told me that the main difference in the environmental perception between Koreans and New Zealanders is that while we regard air and water pollution as the most serious environmental problems, they are more concerned with the destruction of rain forest and whaling. The idea of global environmental concern appears not to have hit Koreans.

It is not that New Zealand is without pollution. When I was there recently, it was not difficult to notice littering along the shorelines and people smoking virtually everywhere. While there are only 3.4 million people in the exotic island country, there are an average of more than two cars per household.

So, what in actuality is the difference between Korea and New Zealand? For one thing, industrialization has yet to set in there and the manufacturing industry is only just beginning. Most cars in New Zealand continue to be second-hand imports from Japan. Perhaps with rapid development, New Zealand may come to face the problems that Korea does.

But not likely. The unfortunate thing for countries like Korea and other developing nations, is that industrialization took place when there was generally little regard for environmental preservation. Naturally, when scarcity overflowed from food to most consumer products, development took precedence over preservation.

Having done that, the work of reversing the environmental damage is upon us, if it at all possible. To be sure, the Korea government is making the efforts, but the question always is, "It is enough?" To what extent are we responsible for the predicament that we are in? As it is commonly debated, shouldn't developed countries, which caused much of the damage to begin with, bear more of the burden?

The answers to these questions, unfortunately, not readily available. On the part of the Korean government, it has signed on to a number of international treaties and conventions, including the Montreal Protocol and the Vienna Convention, both designed to reduce the use and production of CFCs(chlorofluorocarbons) which have been scientifically proven to deplete the ozone layer which protects earth from the harmful ultraviolet rays of the sun.

However, another move Korean representatives to these conventions have been fighting to gain classification as a developing country which would mean that Korea will be exempted from abiding by the CFC reduction timetable with other member countries. How does this make sense when Korea, meanwhile, is preparing to submit its application to join the OECD(Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development) to be recognized as a developed nation? The conflict of interest simply is not doing any good in terms of image-building in the international community and becoming a more responsible member of the global community. There is an immediate need for globalization at all levels.

On the part of the government, it seems that there is a need for tougher policymaking. A case in point is the selection of Kurop-do as the final repository for low and intermediate-level radioactive nuclear waste. Owing

mainly to strong protests from residents, the government was forced to go to a remote location instead of selecting a more appropriate site, say Yongil, Kyongsang-pukto.

Not only would the selection of an inland location safer, at least comparatively, it can contribute significantly to regional development. After all, what is an island of 10 people going to do with about a fund worth 50 billion won, provided by the government for agreeing to facilitate the repository, for communal projects. It would have been much more worthwhile had it been a place with higher population density. In a word, for globalization to be implemented effectively, it would appear that we need a stronger government which can plead its case to the people and win their support.

For individuals, the task of contributing to the globalization of Korea in terms of the environment would have to begin with the most negligible things and move forward from there, transcending personal interest and looking at the big picture where they constitute a small but vital role. Just as it is impossible for a country to prevent pollution in their portion of the airspace, it would be equally hard for anyone to keep just themselves uncontaminated.

Recently I noticed a housewife complaining about some neighbors who refuse to comply with the new volume-rate system for garbage disposal under which garbage that cannot be recycled must be disposed of in standard plastic bags. While she resigned to fact that there is no alternative but to deal with the garbage on behalf of the selfish neighbors, others insisted that it would only encourage them to continuing their ill practices. In the end, the garbage in non-standard bags remained sitting at the corner, giving off foul smell and damaging the environment of the entire apartment block. Indeed, everyone suffered.

While the concept of globalization is indeed beyond the grasp at any reasonable level, the single most important thing would be to understand that it all comes down to interdependence and coexistence. It would be when all members of the community realize that the big picture will never be complete without their sincere and honest contribution that the world will be one, and a cleaner and happier one at that.

우리는 환경 문제하면 수질, 대기오염 등을 먼저 떠올리지만, 호주의 경우를 보면, 자동차의 전량을 일본에서 수입하는 것처럼 초기 공업화단계에 있기 때문에 우리처럼 생산으로 인해 야기되는 오염문제를 생각하지 못한다. 향후 그들도 개발이 진전되면 우리와 같은 문제에 직면하게 될 것이다.

선진국과 개도국은 환경문제에 대해 서로 다른 개념을 갖고 있다. 국제회의가 개최되면 개도국은 선진국에게 핵문제 등을 들어 지구환경을 위협한다고 하지만, 한편으로는 선진국 대열에 서려고 각국의 노력을 한다.

그리고 일단 선진국이 되면 그들도 똑같은 행동을 취하게 되는 양면성을 갖고 있다.

우리 주변의 한 예로서도 쓰레기종량제에 불만을 가진 어떤 주부는 지정된 봉지에 담아 쓰레기를 버리지 않고 종전처럼 투기했다. 물론 그 쓰레기는 수거되지 않았다. 처음에 도와주던 이웃들도 그냥 버리는 악습을 방지하고자 그냥 두기로 결정했다.

그러나 방치된 쓰레기로 인해 인근에는 악취가 만연 모든 주민들이 불편을 겪게 되었다. 결국 환경 문제는 피해자와 가해자가 따로 존재하지 않음이 확인됐다. 환경문제는 공존공생하는 가운데 해결되는 것으로 인식하여 생활주변에서 작은 일부터 실천해야만이 지구적인 환경오염문제를 해결할 수 있다.

* 본고는 필자의 요청에 따라 영문으로 게재했으며, 이해를 돕기 위해 대의만 요약했습니다. (편집자주)