

development of slide presentations geared to the senior crowd, and membership in provincial, national, and international organizations—such as the Conservation Council of Ontario, the Canadian Coalition on Acid Rain, and the International Union for Conservation of Nature and Natural Resources (IUCN).

Recent polls in Canada have placed protection of the environment as the *number one priority* of a majority of Canadians. This receptive atmosphere should help the Federation of Ontario Naturalists to continue gathering support for its ongoing efforts to ensure that resources are used wisely and the environment is protected for the pre-

sent and future generations. Further information may be obtained from the undersigned.

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UNEP Honours the Calcutta Social Project

The people and groups selected by UNEP for the first batch of their Roll of Honour of the Global 500 this year*, included some well-known world figures in environmental work (although some others were conspicuously absent) and some groups 'working at the grassroots' who have received little attention locally or internationally to date. Among the latter is the Calcutta Social Project (CSP), a small NGO in Calcutta that is devoted to working among the poorest of the poor in that City. CSP was created in the 1970s by Kalyani and G.V. Karlekar—a couple now in their seventies, who were convinced of the need for a 'grassroots group' to help development (as opposed to charity) among Calcutta's poor.

The symbol of the CSP is two hands interlocked with thumbs up, signifying working together with determination, and the slogan—'a community builds itself'—reinforces the goal of self-reliance. The Karlekars chose to work with hitherto completely neglected groups—at first, some small and crowded slums in the south of Calcutta. Later they became aware of the desperate plight of the 'fringe dwellers' who live by picking the dregs of the City's garbage at the large dump in the wetlands on the eastern fringe of the City. These, members of India's 'scheduled castes', and often refugees from political disorder and war, can find very little in the refuse that reaches the dump, as it has been extensively picked-over for recyclables before it reaches that end-point. Most of what they can find consists of fragments of wood and coal cinders. They grind up the cinders and mix them with animal dung to make a small briquet that is the chief fuel of Calcutta's poor communities.

The Karlekars have worked tirelessly under appalling conditions for the betterment of those Dhapa pickers†. It has meant many a dusty and hazardous journey in their 20-years-old car or the CSP jeep out to the dump-site. There they found an abandoned municipal shed which they cleaned out and began to use as a schoolhouse. There voluntary helpers of the CSP have established an elementary non-formal programme for basic literacy, health education, and some vocational skills such as woodworking and sewing. For years the shed was dark and dank, and the supplies available were most elementary; but in the last two or three years, aided by support from Oxfam, UNICEF, and Kissho Kisei Kai (a Japanese Buddhist group devoted to social action), the CSP has been able to make improvements in the Dhapa school. The shed has been painted, a water-pump supplies water, and a simple latrine

has been built. Each year on Environment Day the children learn about environmental improvement by tree planting, and these shrubs in time will change the grim surroundings of the old refuse (the shed itself is built on the dumping-ground).

The programme has furthermore been extended significantly: the medical aid is more extensive, with pregnant and lactating women getting nutritional supplements and advice on prenatal and neonatal care. A creche and day-care are run so that parents can be free to attend the school. Those attending are paid small sums as a compensation for work foregone and an incentive to continue in school. Those who cannot attend even then may go to part-time classes. 'Graduates' of the school are aided to enter formal education. A club of Dhapa students and 'graduates' organizes cultural events and recreation, such as the periodical sports-day.

This attention to the needs of the garbage-pickers is part of a wider consciousness in the CSP of the significance of the eastern Calcutta wetlands—the most extensive wetland area adjacent to a large city anywhere in the world—and the fringe communities which live there. The wetland area is highly productive, harbouring extensive fishponds that use the City's sewage as a nutrient resource, and supporting the main vegetable farms for the metropolis (the vegetables being planted directly on the mature refuse in what may well be the world's most significant 'garbage farm').

Another recent project of the CSP is a refuge for battered and abused women and abandoned or neglected children. It began when the Karlekars took into their own home an 11-years'-old country girl who was badly abused by the household that had offered to be her guardians in an attempt to obtain a free, and captive, servant girl.

In spite of the help from international organizations and the interest shown in their work by a few individuals from Canada and Australia, the CSP's Dhapa project has only a precarious status. The Corporation of Calcutta has never recognized what to them is an invasion of the garbage dump and squatter possession of the abandoned shed, although the Karlekars have made frequent requests for their work to be legitimized. Now one can only hope that, as the UNEP award to the Karlekars becomes known more widely, they will receive greater support in Calcutta itself, and the City corporation will be induced to cooperate and aid their efforts at the Dhapa dump. The address of CSP is: 1-2-3 Rashbehari Avenue, Calcutta 700 029, India.

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* See John Shaw's account on page 179 of our Summer issue.—Ed.

† Namely the people who pick over the garbage-dump of Dhapa—see also the paper entitled 'Ecological History of Calcutta's Wetland Conversion', by Dr Dhruvajyoti Ghosh & Susmita Sen, published on pp. 219-26 of this issue.—Ed.