

REMARKS BY DOUGLAS ORANE, PATRON OF CHILD MONTH
AT THE LAUNCH OF CHILD MONTH
APRIL 7, 2009

Greetings

Time is going by so quickly that I am amazed by the fact that it is already a year since we launched Child Month 2008. As always it is my great pleasure to participate in the activities of Child Month and it is something that I eagerly anticipate each year.

Even as I marvel at how swiftly the last 12 months have passed, I recognize how appropriate the theme of Child Month 2009 is: "Preserve the Environment; Protect Our Children". In this regard it is clear that we must act quickly so as to ensure that we lessen, and where possible, stop the damage being done to our environment so you, the citizens of tomorrow, can have a safe place to live.

As I look at you this morning I can't help but think back to when I was a child. And, you know, it doesn't seem so long ago. Yet, in what seems so short a time to me, so much has happened to our environment. The Jamaica of my childhood was a very different place. Here in Kingston, where we are now hard put to find any green areas, there were large tracts of woodland or as we would say "bird bush" or "mango walk" where as boys we could go to pick mangoes and a variety of different fruits. There were no apartment buildings and townhouse complexes and all the houses had front and backyards. The further away you went from the city centre, the larger the spaces that individual houses occupied and all having wide expanses of lawn. That sight is getting very rare as most large lots have been converted into complexes with housing for several families.

There were very few houses on the hills of St Andrew, Today you can barely see any trees and any green areas on the hillsides, only houses and in the empty spaces the hillsides are bare.

Do any of you live in Portmore? Well, if you do, you are living in an area that was once a large swamp called Dawkins Pond which had a lot of birds and crabs. Now Portmore is home to tens of thousands of people. Ocho Rios and Negril were small villages with one or two hotels and guest houses and the beaches and the sea were unspoilt. We didn't have to worry about pollution. Today both are thriving resort areas with many large hotels catering to hundreds of thousands of visitors every year.

While we need houses to live in and hotels for our tourists who are very important to Jamaica, we have had to cut down a lot of trees to bring about this development. Trees help to protect our environment in many ways. They absorb a dangerous gas called carbon dioxide which is produced by motor vehicles and factories. They hold the soil together on our mountains so that when the rain falls the land does not slip away and the trees along our coastline, called mangroves, protect our beaches.

Trees also help to combat climate change by absorbing the carbon dioxide created by the emissions from factories, cars and other motor vehicles. And why is that important? A careful balance of what is called greenhouse gases, such as carbon dioxide, keeps the Earth warm enough for humans, animals and plants to survive. But today we are having problems keeping this balance, because we burn fossil fuels such as coal, oil or gas, to create much of the energy we use. So we are adding more greenhouse gases to the atmosphere, while cutting down the trees which help to absorb them and create the balance we need to be safe. That is causing global temperatures to rise making the earth a little warmer every year. It is a slow process, but a dangerous one. So, we all have to be aware that it is happening and of the problems that it causes.

You may say, "But, we are only children, we don't need to know about this because this is a problem for adults". It is true that the adults have created the problems but children are affected so you, too, need to be aware of ways in which to preserve our environment. In fact there are children, your own age, (10 to 13 years) from countries all over the globe who are actively engaged in working to protect the environment. They are working with the United Nations Environmental Programme (UNEP) in a programme called TUNZA. TUNZA is a word in Kiswahili (the common language of most East African

countries) that means to "treat with care". The aim of this programme is to ensure that children know about the problems of the environment and know what they can do to help.

They believe that "children of the world are the makers of tomorrow's future" and therefore need to behave in an environmentally responsible way by learning more about your planet. They point out that children the world over are very vulnerable to natural disasters caused by climate change. Their website tells us that:

- An estimated 650,000 people were affected by back-to-back hurricanes in Haiti in 2008. Three hundred thousand, almost half of the people affected, were children.
- Climate change children's ability to attend school. We in Jamaica are very aware of that. School buildings are used as hurricane shelters, and very often people remain in the schools, long after the hurricanes have passed, preventing children from returning to school. I am sure some of you have had this experience. Because of global warming, too, we are getting hurricanes more frequently and they are getting stronger and more dangerous
- Emissions released from vehicles and factories, significantly harm children's health. Deaths from asthma, which is the most common chronic disease among children, are expected to increase by nearly 20 per cent by the year 2016 unless urgent action is taken. Smoke in the home leads to the deaths of nearly 800,000 children each year across the world.

They share advice on some of the things children can do to help in protecting the environment. Some of these are.

- Plant Trees! Growing trees makes a difference. Be sure to choose the right kind for your area. And have a plan to keep the trees alive.
- Write on both sides of a sheet paper and those of you using computers should print only when necessary. That is because paper is made from trees and so when we waste paper we are causing more trees to be cut down.

- Walk. Bicycle or take a bus. Only drive in a car if you must. Cars add far more carbon per person to the air than public transport.
- Join an eco-club at your school. Together, club members can learn about the condition of the land in your region and practice ways to keep it healthy. I know that a number of schools in Jamaica have environmental clubs, so be sure to become a member of the club at your school. If your school does not have a club then perhaps you should start one. You could even try to start one in your neighbourhood.
- If you have a garden, try to grow your vegetables and flowers without chemicals, or use as little as you can. That's healthier for you and your family as well as the sea creatures. Environmental groups can advise you on how to control insects without lots of chemicals.
- When you visit the coast, be gentle. If there is a coral reef there, don't walk on it or break pieces off. Living coral can easily be killed.
- Invite your friends to participate in environmental activities and actions such as Clean-up the World on World Environment Day.

Very often, children are the ones who help to teach their parents about new things. The idea of having to protect the environment is fairly recent as we have only just become aware of how our way of life has been affecting the planet in the past couple of decades. Many people still refuse to take climate change seriously. So you will have to help to change that.

WE are blessed to live in one of the most beautiful countries of the world. We are blessed to have a reasonably good supply of water. Do you know that some countries right here in the Caribbean have to remove the salt from their sea water in order to have any water to live? We need to start now to preserve our environment so that your children and grandchildren will be able to enjoy what we enjoy today.

I am going to end by sharing the lyrics of the TUNZA song with you

Young people of the world
From every land
Today we come together
Sharing strong beliefs and plans

For nature's beauty
Gardens of Green
Under azure skies
Where the air is fresh and clean

We're sending our message, to nations near and far
It doesn't take a genius to see what's in our hearts

Now it's the time for action

I look forward to working with the Child Month Committee on Child Month 2009. May God bless you all and our activities as we try to preserve the wonderful gift he has given us in this island, Jamaica.