

Charge of the green warrior

Climate proof everything is Cleo Paskal's mantra for protecting the planet

Positive energy Cleo Paskal

Cleo Paskal is a green warrior. And she is engaged in a fight against a new enemy, strange and alien to our planet, menacing and marching, threatening to wipe us all out.

She uses the army analogy as she talks with intensity about the changing climate patterns and its geopolitical fallout. A lackadaisical attitude towards this new enemy will soon leave us with warring nations, homeless, starving, uprooted and dead people, she believes.

But Cleo is not alone in her fight. She is impressed with the bright students of SCMS Cochin who are into exciting environmental projects that can tackle these pressing and frightening issues.

In the city as visiting faculty to the college, Cleo had earlier dabbled in films, the most well-known being the Oscar nominated 'Lies My Father Told Me' (1975). She has had a fascinating career in journalism, adventure travel writing and reporting from war zones. With it came hosting of radio and television shows but Cleo has distilled from the colourful life what is most exciting and close to her heart now: environment and geopolitical analysis.

Kerala's challenge

Kerala is one of her centres of concern. "Kerala has a big challenge because its development is right on the coast. It is severely affected by rising sea levels, rising temperatures and changing rain patterns including monsoon. This in turn will affect its tourism and crops: coir and plantations." But there are solutions here, she says. Soil erosion that is threatening river banks across the world can be handled the way Kerala has done here in the past, the use of coir matting to protect river beds. "That should be exported globally to places where there is erosion."

Another solution that was traditionally used was the prediction of monsoon by tracking the movement of birds. With climate change birds move to a new area, where their language will not be understood. "Traditional knowledge is becoming obsolete. We are entering a period where limiting loss is important as promoting growth," she states.

Kerala's wet lands, which acted as sponge and storage for water have been built on, which is of concern. "Now with rains there is flooding and less ground water, during dry season. This affects everybody. Monsoon is the heart beat of the region but its rhythm is changing."

Better decisions

Then is it a panic situation? "It is a situation that is out of control. It needs to be understood so that we can make better decisions, like what crops to plant, where to build and place

infrastructure and what kind of energy resource to use. “If renewable energy resources are local like solar and wind power it is easier to handle, easier to calculate.”

And on the general doubt that research, projects, talks remain mere words, Cleo believes that it needs a political will, of course, but very simple solutions. “It is not a single problem but a million problems with a million solutions. I try to get the business community involved. In India the business community is pretty good in making things happen, especially in their own sector. They will help build the defence,” she says continuing her military terms to explain the ongoing battle.

And away from all melting snows, the changing river beds, the sudden shift in the earth’s surface, forest fires and the swallowing waters, Cleo recalls her travel writing days and her fondness for small countries. From acting in films, which she did as a child, she moved away and ahead into real issues. “It is fine to read the book but I wanted to talk to the author,” she says and took to academics and research at Chatham House, where she is Associate Fellow Energy, Environment and Development Programme.

Her unequivocal message to all is: We need to climate proof everything-business, infrastructure and economy. That to her is our arsenal.

Green jobs

The world is going to need green collar jobs, according to Cleo Paskal. The entire industry that will open up around issues related to mitigating and adapting to environmental change will need persons to do environmental impact assessment or carbon trading, which is a financial sector job. This will be the next big thing in job recruitment.

PRIYADERSHINI S.

© Copyright 2000 - 2008 The Hindu