

# TIME CAPSULES WITH A DIFFERENCE

In general, time capsules record a particular time and place for posterity, and are buried without any future date for opening. These that were buried in June 1994 were different. The concept came to me through that well-known saying... "*We have not inherited the earth from our grandparents, we have borrowed it from our grandchildren*". I reflected on how angry they are likely to be if we continue to live as we do today. With 25 years as the usually accepted average generation, our 'grandchildren' meant people living 50 years ahead. So this project was addressed to the people of 2044. It was linked to the United Nations World Environment Day, in the designated Year of the Family and comprised an Apology, a Pledge, a competition for school children, a Media event and a Family Party.

The time capsules contained environmentally relevant items buried with explanations and letters of apology at significant sites around the world. In the UK these were the Royal Botanic Gardens, Kew and Ness Botanic Gardens, South Wirral. Over the same week-end similar time capsules were buried in Mexico, (Fundidora Park – Monterrey, and two other sites) and in the botanical gardens at Pietermaritzburg South Africa, the Seychelles and Mount Annan, NSW, Australia.

As the prime stakeholders for a decent sustainable future, children are central to this project. In 1994 they were invited to enter two competitions, one for the best brief letter or poem addressed to the Finder in 2044; the other for the most striking and original ideas for the appropriate artifacts to go into the capsules. There is a complete list on pages 44/45 of the items that were buried at Ness. At Kew, the selected objects included: sealed capsules of the cleanest air available then, also water and garden loam (for comparison in 2044); an apple, with the significance explained by Peter Harrison on page 8; and a petrol cap, labelled as one of our most environmentally damaging items. My own choice for sustainability symbols were a bicycle pump and a packet of contraceptive pills.

As emphasised in the two letters of apology on pages 2 & 3, contraceptives are really the ultimate in

eco-friendly devices. They have the potential to allow millions of people worldwide to choose, at will, to have no more children than they can properly provide for; or than *can in the long term arrive without imperilling all the other species with which we share the planet*. Human overpopulation is not the sole cause of loss of the planet's biodiversity and other environmental threats, but it is unequivocally the *great multiplier* of most of them.

We felt it was essential to apologise. But more significant at that time and since was the PLEDGE: to do all we could to save the planet by individual and united action 'according to our talents and opportunities'; influencing those in power and changing as necessary our own lifestyles – with the goal that the finders of each time capsule in the year 2044 will wonder why we apologised!

Since 1994 there have been regular gatherings at the time capsules on or about World Environment day and annually at Ness Botanic Gardens. Over the years we have had the enthusiastic support of many distinguished people including Sir Crispin Tickell (formerly UK Ambassador to the UN), Susan Hampshire, David Bellamy, Sir David Attenborough and the Conservation Foundation. The project is ongoing ([www.ecotimecapsule.com](http://www.ecotimecapsule.com)).

Other countries and other groups, or concerned individuals, are cordially invited to join in any year, to organise a similar time capsule ceremony, still to be addressed to the people of 2044 and containing the same 'main' Letters of Apology (see pages 2-3), translated as necessary.

Reader join us! At least come if you can to Kew or to Ness and read the above-ground inscriptions as shown on pages 40 and 41. Today we still need to face up to our over-consumption of limited natural resources; over-production of greenhouse gases; mismanagement of other waste and pollution; global poverty and injustice; as well as the under-funding of sexual and reproductive health as a human right for all. As we campaign together, on these interconnected issues, it may well be that apologies to our grandchildren may become truly superfluous.

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