

of high-seas fisheries.

On the other hand, any initiative that might compromise our perceived international trading position is avoided. The problem is that the Ministry of External Relations and Trade is leading most of the delegations and controlling our input into the agenda while the Ministry for the Environment is the junior partner. MERT seems more interested in seeing the Earth Summit as a trade opportunity rather than a place to address the environmental crisis.

Also at Rio will be an alternative UNCED, organised by non-government organisations. They will discuss the need for an international tribunal that is not based on individual states, and an environmental Security Council.

If the Earth Summit is to work it will have to make hard decisions. As Maurice Strong says, it is "the lifestyles of the rich who make up such a small part of the global population that are one of the major risks to our common future – they are simply not sustainable". The summit, of course, will not be a solution itself. It is the processes which it will hopefully set in train which will be the test of whether human beings can confront the environmental nightmares we have created.

Ian Close

Ozone blues

A MEETING of scientists from 25 countries has concluded that the ozone layer will continue to decline at least as fast in the 1990s as in the previous decade. The UN-sponsored meeting held earlier this year in Switzerland was reviewing the first complete study of the ozone layer since 1986. The report found that:

- the ozone layer is declining in all latitudes outside the tropics; and
- the overall decline between the latitudes of 65° north and 65° south – most of the inhabited world – was 2.5 percent over the past decade.

The scientists opposed the use of hydro-chlorofluorocarbons (HCFCs), now being introduced as substitutes for CFCs. While only about one-tenth as dangerous as CFCs, HCFCs still pose a considerable threat to the ozone layer.

Then, in March, NASA scientists discovered the beginning of an ozone hole at high northern latitudes. The immediate culprit is thought to be the eruption last year of

The Pinatubo particles will also gradually make their way into the southern stratosphere. Dr Tom Clarkson from the New Zealand Meteorological Service says that the ozone depletion rate over New Zealand will accelerate over the next two years from 0.5 percent to perhaps 4 percent a year before dropping back again as the volcanic particles fall out of the sky.

The threats of increased ultra-violet radiation from a depleted ozone layer are not restricted to melanomas and cataracts in humans. Ultra-violet also damages plant DNA. Early spring, when ozone is at its most depleted and when plants are putting on new growth, is when they



MARK ROMAN

Mount Pinatubo in the Philippines. The eruption produced a high-altitude cloud of dust and acid droplets circulating in the northern hemisphere. This cloud is capable of accelerating the depletion of the ozone layer already burdened with synthetic compounds such as CFCs. Even cautious estimates suggest that a quarter to 40 percent of the ozone layer over Europe will be lost before it begins to repair itself with the onset of summer in June. This would be almost as bad as the 50 percent ozone loss now regularly recorded over Antarctica.

are at their most vulnerable. Studies on Antarctic plankton suggest that because UV radiation harms some species more than others the balance within ecosystems may be changed.

The US and European governments have now brought forward their phase-out dates for CFCs to 1995. New Zealand Environment Minister Rob Storey says that New Zealand will re-examine its timetable. No decisions have been made, however, to accelerate the phase out of HCFCs which, under the Montreal Protocol, can continue to be made until 2040.

Mexican headache

IN MEXICO CITY they don't count the number of high air-pollution days. Instead, they count those days when pollution levels are considered safe. Last year there were only 11.

On every other day of 1991 the 20 million inhabitants of the world's largest city breathed air considered dangerous by the World Health Organisation. Pollution is worst in the winter when thermal inversions trap toxic emissions, and the incidence of burning eyes, headaches and respiratory ailments sky-rockets.

The government of President Carlos Salinas has now embarked on an anti-pollution drive. The prospect of a North American free-trade agreement with the United States and Canada has given the government the political leverage to crack down on polluters. The largest oil refinery in the city and numerous other factories have been shut down for breaching emission standards. Public vehicles will be converted to natural gas and every vehicle will be kept off the streets for one day a week.

However, environmentalists fear that it is too little too late. Every day 2,000 people continue to move to a city where there are already over three million vehicles and 33,000 factories. These critics fear that once the free-trade agreement is in place the government will resume its cosy relationship with industry, and long-term plans to reduce Mexico City's horrendous pollution problems will be ignored. ♦



Forest and Bird is a member of the International Council for Bird Preservation and is the ICBP's delegate in the South Pacific.