Speech by Dr Balaji Sadasivan, Minister of State for Health and the Environment, at the Launching of a Book entitled “Capacity Building for Environmental Law in the Asian and Pacific Region: Approaches and Resources” held at the Raffles Town Club on Friday, 3 May 2002 at 6 pm

Dr Parvez Hassan, former Chairman of the World Conservation Union Commission on Environmental Law, and Co-Chairman of APCEL Advisory Committee

Associate Professor Tan Cheng Han, Dean, Faculty of Law, National University of Singapore

Mr. John Boyd, former Principal Sector Specialist, Asian Development Bank

Prof Koh Kheng-Lian, Director, APCEL

Distinguished guests

Ladies and gentlemen

1. It is indeed an honour for me to be here today at this launch of the book entitled “Capacity Building for Environmental Law in the Asian and Pacific Region: Approaches and Resources”.

2. Perhaps it is fitting that Singapore be chosen as one of the locations for the book launch. As a city-state, Singapore presents a unique case study in environmental management and sustainable development. We are highly urbanized and densely populated. We have limited natural resources. Since independence, the constant challenge that Singapore faces has been to ensure a fine balance between economic development and environmental protection.

3. Over the last 3 decades, we have implemented a wide range of policies and programmes to ensure that people living on this island, be they Singaporeans, or visitors, enjoy a clean, green and pleasant living environment. To achieve this, we have invested heavily on the infrastructure needed for comprehensive waste management. We have spared little effort in introducing pollution
control measures that are needed to safeguard our air and water quality despite an ever-growing industrial sector. Stringent air and water quality standards have also been set and enforced diligently. Such measures improve our standard of public health and thus successfully keep communicable diseases, such as vector-, water- or food-borne diseases at bay.

4. In Singapore, our emphasis has been to take a preventive approach in managing the environment. We stress on good forward planning and the timely provision of waste management infrastructure that keeps pace with development. However, we also recognize that spending a large amount of money on modern infrastructure or technology alone would not be good enough. This is especially so if environmental legislation had not been in place, or for that matter, had not been effective. Indeed we believe in having effective environmental laws. By that, I mean laws that are practical and enforceable, and laws that are adequately reviewed and readily improved upon in keeping with changing circumstances.

5. In that context, I am glad to be here today at this book launch. I am told that this book is a culmination of hard work by many environmental law experts over the last 5 years, and that contributions to this book have come from many countries in the region. The book includes many examples of good practices and case studies in environmental law in the region and elsewhere. Indeed, special credit must go to the editors, Professors Donna Craig, Nicholas Robinson and Koh Kheng-Lian. They are the people who have been instrumental in piecing together all the great works, and presenting them in one comprehensive compilation.

6. I am also glad to know that the book has devoted an entire section dealing specifically with Singapore’s experience in the development of environmental law. It presents the various lessons that Singapore has learnt and the gradual evolution of its environmental policy in the course of its own industrialization and urbanization process. It is my hope that others reading this section of the book would find Singapore’s experience as a city-state relevant. Likewise, I believe that there is also much that
fellow Singaporeans can benefit by studying the experiences of others as presented in this book.

7. It is precisely on the premise of promoting greater information exchange that APCEL and my Ministry had, for several years, been working together in the field of environmental law. In the area of training, APCEL and ENV had jointly conducted several courses for senior ENV officials to enhance their understanding on environmental law issues. In the context of regional co-operation, I believe that there is scope for APCEL and ENV to do more together. We should explore the possibility of sharing our experience and joint programmes on environmental law with overseas participants. Expertise for such programmes could also come from outside Singapore. I am confident that APCEL and ENV, through their respective networks, would be in a good position to interest regional agencies and institutions to initiate more capacity building projects on environmental law within our region.

8. Back in 1992, the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development (UNCED) adopted Agenda 21. It represented the blueprint for the global community to work towards sustainable development. Capacity building is an important means of improving national capabilities on sustainable development. To this end, Agenda 21 called upon nations to set up training networks for sustainable development law. Ten years later, this is still an important dimension in a nation’s pursuit of sustainable development. In meetings leading to the forthcoming World Summit on Sustainable Development (WSSD) to be held in Johannesburg, South Africa in September this year, the issue of training and capacity building in developing countries is likely to again take center-stage. In this regard, I wish to underline Singapore’s readiness to work with others on regional capacity building projects.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

9. In conclusion, I wish to commend the Asian Development Bank (ADB), the International Union for the Conservation of Nature
(IUCN), the United Nations Environment Program (UNEP) and the Asia-Pacific Centre for Environmental Law (APCEL) for their excellent joint effort and strong partnership in producing this book. International organizations such as ADB, IUCN and UNEP have been important partners in global as well as regional capacity building efforts, and Singapore has had the opportunity of working with these organisations in this area. This book that you, together with APCEL, have produced would certainly be a trend- and standards-setter in environmental law and practices in the Asia and Pacific region. You have created a new platform for information exchange on environmental law. And I congratulate you on this important achievement. On that note, it now gives me great pleasure to declare the Book on “Capacity Building for Environmental Law in the Asian and Pacific Region: Approaches and Resources” officially launched.

10. Thank you.