

Kids urge leaders to do more to protect Earth

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Participants in the 2009 UNEP Tunza International Children and Youth Conference pose for a photo with letters urging world leaders to take climate action during an event held in Daejeon Convention Center, last Thursday. [YONHAP]

Last week was unusually eventful for the tranquil city of Daejeon when it played host to a major event concerned with environmental issues.

The name of the event was the 2009 United Nations Environment Program Tunza International Children and Youth Conference. Tunza means “to treat with care of affection” in Swahili.

This annual event held by the UNEP brings together young people from around the globe to discuss matters related to conservation, pollution and climate change.

The conference focuses on youth one year and children the next, but this year for the first time the event embraced both groups, making it one of the largest conferences for young people on climate change ever held, according to organizers.

“Climate change will have a big impact on our children and young people who will be living on this earth about 30 years from now,” said Kim Jae-beom, the secretary general of the UNEP National Committee for the Republic of Korea. “This year’s event aims at developing children and youths

into talented people, equipping them with eco-leadership skills.”

Under the main theme “Climate Change: Our Challenge,” about 800 students aged 10 to 24 from over 100 countries joined workshops, group discussions and field trips from Aug. 17 to 23. Among the participants were “young green warriors” such as Felix Finkbeiner, a German elementary school student who co-founded the student initiative Plant-for-the-Planet aiming to plant 1 million trees in Germany.

UNEP Executive Director Achim Steiner, Korean government officials including Prime Minister Han Seung-soo and environmental activists like David de Rothschild participated in the Daejeon event.

The students, who had selected programs that they wanted to join before arriving in Daejeon, had a chance to learn in detail about how to protect the planet.

The Seoul Youth Factory for Alternative Culture, a?k?a the Haja Center, an educational and cultural facility for young people run by the Seoul Metropolitan Government and Yonsei University, held a workshop entitled “Global Warming and Endangered Species.” During the workshop, participants learned about plants and animals that are quickly disappearing. They watched video clips and drew pictures of the species they most wanted to protect.

“Most of the 16 students in our workshop were aged 10 to 14,” said Jang Ye-won, a Haja Center official in charge of the event. “They were from countries including Russia, Japan, Singapore, Togo, Kenya and so on. It was a lot of fun doing this with children from around the world.”

Other international groups like 350.org held a session titled “Creative Climate Action: 350.org and the International Children Climate Movement.” The group is named after 350 PPM, the amount of carbon dioxide in the atmosphere that scientists say is the safest upper limit for humanity. Through the session, the group introduced an online campaign for global action against climate change and taught participants how they can use their creativity to make a difference.

The climax of the event was the “Global Debate” on Thursday where young participants called on world leaders to take action on climate change. In a statement, the young delegates, representing the world’s 3 billion young people, expressed their “concern and frustration that their governments are not doing enough to combat climate change,” adding that “we now need more action and less talking.”

The participants also agreed upon a petition that will be developed online and delivered to world leaders who will “Seal a Meaningful Deal” at the United Nations climate change convention scheduled for December this year in Copenhagen, Denmark.

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