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CONFERENCE OF THE PARTIES TO THE  
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**FORESTS AND BIOLOGICAL DIVERSITY  
CONSERVATION AND SUSTAINABLE USE**

Note by the Secretariat

**I. INTRODUCTION**

1. Pursuant to decision I/7 taken by the Conference of the Parties at its first meeting, the Subsidiary Body on Scientific, Technical and Technological Advice (SBSTTA) met in Paris from 1 to 5 May 1995. While considering "alternative ways and means in which the Conference of the Parties could start the process of examining the components of biological diversity particularly those under threat and the identification of action which could be taken under the Convention", the meeting recalled that forest biological diversity as being lost at an unprecedented rate and noted that an Intergovernmental Panel on Forests had been established by the Commission for Sustainable Development.

2. The meeting recognized the importance of forests for the conservation and sustainable use of biological diversity and, therefore, recommended that the Conference of the Parties consider whether an input to the work of the Intergovernmental Panel on Forests would be desirable.

3. In this context, the meeting suggested that the following main elements could be considered in such an input:

"(i) The urgent need to identify the main causes that lead to the decline of forest biological diversity, develop and promote the use of methods for the management, conservation and sustainable use of

forests, based on the identification and targeting of ecological processes and the multiple roles and functions of forest ecosystems, including ecological landscape planning and environmental impact assessment;

(ii) The development and application of ways and means to ensure fair and equitable sharing of benefits derived from the use of forest genetic resources that would provide a major incentive for efforts to maintain forest biological diversity;

(iii) The protection and promotion of the knowledge, innovations and practices of indigenous and local communities embodying traditional lifestyles, and compensation through the equitable sharing of the benefits arising from the use of such knowledge, innovations and practices, in accordance with Article 8(j) of the Convention on Biological Diversity, in order to improve conservation and sustainable use of forest biological diversity."

4. The purpose of this information note is:

(i) to highlight the importance of all types of forests in the maintenance of biological diversity;

(ii) to assess briefly the status and trends forests and forest biological diversity, and outline the main driving forces determining these factors; and

(iii) to survey the major on-going international initiatives, with a focus on those initiatives closely related to both the Convention on Biological Diversity and the Intergovernmental Panel on Forests.

## II. IMPORTANCE OF FORESTS FOR BIOLOGICAL DIVERSITY

5. Forests represent one of the most important components of biological diversity in the world. Tropical, temperate, boreal and mangrove forests occupy about 30% of the world's ice-free land surface. They provide the most diverse sets of habitats for plants, animals and micro-organisms. This diversity reflects the combined influences of evolution, biology, the physical environment and people.

6. At least 50% of the world terrestrial species are found in tropical forests. The moist tropical forests are also known to contain 14 of the 18 areas on Earth with unusually high degrees of endemism. Temperate forests are dominated by deciduous and, to a lesser extent, evergreen broad-leaf and needle-leaf trees. Recent studies show they contain a considerable diversity of soil and humus living species, and that some temperate forests are important storehouses of endemic species. The boreal forests generally have low species richness. Many of these species are used by humans in different ways. Functional diversity is therefore high in boreal forests, but each functional group is represented by only a few species. Mangrove forests supply important habitats for over 2000 species of fish, invertebrates and plants.

7. On a global level forests play a key role in global climate dynamics and ecological cycles. They constitute one of the most important carbon sinks. They also enhance and protect our landscapes and contribute to the quality and richness of our environment. At the regional, national and local levels, forests are intimately linked to the conservation of soil and water resources, and their biological components, mainly through the couplings between tree species, foodweb structure, nutrient cycling, and the atmosphere. Forests provide thousands of jobs worldwide in activities such as the timber industry, pharmaceuticals, forest products and recreation. The ecological services provided by forests assist the conservation of biological diversity well beyond their boundaries. Forests are also important for their cultural and religious value.

### III. TRENDS IN FOREST ECOSYSTEMS AND THEIR BIOLOGICAL DIVERSITY COMPONENTS

8. In recent years, forests are being degraded and their biological diversity is being lost at an unprecedented and accelerating rate mainly through extensive conversion to pastures and agricultural lands, shifting cultivation and forestry plantations, selective harvesting of various products such as trees for timber and pharmaceutical industries, mushrooms and game animals, and through air and water pollution, and development projects such as the construction of dams and urbanization.

9. The rate of loss of tropical forests is particularly high, estimated at about 110.5 million ha per year. Other types of forests have also been adversely affected by intensive human activities including increased atmospheric loadings of active gases, with consequent warming of the climate, and logging. It is generally accepted that if current rates of conversion and destruction of forests continue, ecosystems, species inhabiting these forests, populations, and of genetic diversity within populations will be eroded and lost massively in the coming years at both local and landscape scales. Only a few of the many forest species can survive in the croplands, pastures or secondary forests.

10. The ecosystem consequences of such perturbations are poorly known including impacts on productive capacity, biomass, decomposition and nutrient cycling; soil structure and nutrient pools, water distribution, balance and quality; feedbacks to atmospheric properties, landscape and waterscape structure, biotic linkages/species interactions; and microbial activities. Forest biological diversity is to a great extent the result of ecological processes. Biological diversity gives forests the resilience that is needed to endure impacts and disturbances over thousands and even millions of years. It is through its biological diversity that forest ecosystems have accumulated a store of adaptations at the level of the individual species, population, and the ecosystem, as a way of maintaining themselves over such long time horizons. There are a number of relevant processes that link forest ecosystems to socio-economic activities. A process-based approach can provide an appropriate methodological framework for identifying these processes and in this way address the conservation and sustainable use of forest biological diversity and its components. A process-based approach allows managers to engage in a participatory decision-making process that can explicitly incorporate the multiple functions of forests.

11. Whilst the net effect of human impact on forests has been overwhelmingly negative, it is important to note that not all impacts have been adverse, particularly in the case of forest-dwelling or forest-dependent peoples. Forest biological diversity is often paralleled by a diversity of indigenous societies, who have inhabited and coexisted with forest ecosystems - sometimes for millennia, sometimes only recently or transiently. The knowledge of the indigenous people includes a wealth of traditional ecological knowledge, relating to the conservation and sustainable use of the forest environment. This knowledge includes a rather different way of understanding the forest ecosystem from the formal scientific approach. It has obviously great empirical value, because in a sense this knowledge has been tested over many generations. It might include systems of classification, sets of empirical observations and practices about the local environment and its use, and local management systems. In the case of forest biological diversity, such traditional knowledge also describes that of rural communities with respect to the management and use of forest genetic resources, particularly those of plants in farming systems and for health care. Hence, as emphasised by the SBSTTA in its recommendation I/3, paragraph 8(iii) (UNEP/CBD/COP/2/5) the need to promote the protection of the knowledge, innovations and practices of indigenous and local communities embodying traditional lifestyles, and compensation through the equitable sharing of the benefits arising from the use of such knowledge, innovations and practices, in accordance with Article 8 (j) of the Convention on Biological Diversity, in order to improve conservation and sustainable use of forest biological diversity.

12. Traditional knowledge of forest biological diversity both contributes to and can be used in the context of modern scientific knowledge. Indigenous knowledge of forest biological diversity is increasingly being used to define sustainable management regimes and identify and characterize genetic resources of value to other societies. An appreciation of the importance of traditional knowledge emphasises both the history and importance of human influences on forest biological diversity, and the potential role of indigenous people in its conservation and sustainable development.

#### IV. ON-GOING INTERNATIONAL INITIATIVES OF RELEVANCE TO FORESTS

13. Alarmed by the rapid erosion and loss of forests and their biological components, the world's nations have developed a number of agreements and initiatives directly or indirectly aimed at the conservation and sustainable use of forest products. Some of these agreements and initiatives are listed below.

##### 4.1 International legal instruments

(i) The International Tropical Timber Agreement is currently the only globally binding treaty on forests, focusing on tropical timber;

(ii) The Convention on Biological Diversity, encompasses the forests issues without being limited to forests;

(iii) The United Nations Convention to Combat Desertification in Those Countries Experiencing Serious Drought and/or Desertification, particularly in Africa, the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change, the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora (CITES) address some aspects of the forests issue;

(iv) A number of regional treaties have an impact on forests; and

(v) "soft law" in particular the Forests Principles and Chapter 11 "Combating deforestation" in Agenda 21 entitled.

##### 4.2 Major post-Rio international initiatives that led to the establishment of the Intergovernmental Panel on Forests

14. The most significant outcome of the Earth Summit held in Rio de Janeiro in 1992 of relevance to the global forest conservation was the consensus reached on a "non-legally binding authoritative statement of principles on the management, conservation and sustainable development of all types of forests" also referred to as "Forests Principles". A number of activities were initiated subsequently in relation to the conservation and sustainable use of forests. They include *inter alia*:

(i) the Ministerial Conference for the protection of forests in Europe (Helsinki Process) in June 1993. This conference set down guidelines and criteria for sustainable management of forests;

(ii) a workshop on sustainable management of temperate and boreal forests, convened by the Conference on Security and Cooperation in Europe ("Montreal Process") in October 1993. This workshop was followed by similar other meetings at Kuala Lumpur (April 1994), Geneva (June 1994), New Dehli (July 1994) and Santiago (February 1995);

(iii) the Intergovernmental Working Group on Forests set up in 1994 by Malaysia and Canada to identify common ground regarding forests and facilitate the 1995 CSD session (Canada/Malaysia Initiative);

(iv) a workshop convened by India and the UK to draw up a harmonized framework for reporting on forestry-related issues to CSD;

(v) the Forest Stewardship Council, a non-governmental effort to establish an international framework supportive of sustainable forest management.

15. The United Nations Food and Agriculture Organization hosted a meeting of Ministers responsible for forestry on 16-17 March 1995 to consider options for the follow-up of the Forests Principles. The outcome was the "Rome Statement on Forestry", which underlines the need for achieving UNCED's objectives in the shortest amount of time possible. The Ministers identified some key areas where action is required.

#### **4.3 The Intergovernmental Panel on Forests**

16. Subsequent to the adoption of the Forests Principles and Agenda 21 at the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development in Rio de Janeiro in June 1992, the CSD was established *inter alia* to review progress achieved in the implementation of decisions and commitments made at UNCED. At its third session, held in New York from 11 to 28 April 1995, the Commission reviewed progress achieved in the implementation of the Forests Principles and Chapter 11 of Agenda 21.

17. In its recommendations and based on the recommendations of the meeting of the Ministers of Forests held at the FAO, the Commission established an open-ended Intergovernmental Panel on Forests" to pursue consensus and coordinated proposals for action to support the management, conservation and sustainable development of forests". The programme of work of the Panel contained in the document E/CN.17/IPF/1995/2 of the Economic and Social Council is focussed on 11 issues clustered into five interrelated categories.

18. The work of the Panel can benefit from a number of activities planned in the medium-term programmes of work of the COP and the SBSTTA, in particular the UNCED decisions related to forests, and the institutional linkages emanating therefrom, in order to identify any gaps, and areas requiring enhancement, as well as any areas of duplication".

19. The Panel is expected to submit a progress report to the Commission at its fourth session, in 1996, as well as formulate final conclusions and policy recommendations at its fifth session, in 1997.

#### **V. CONCLUSION**

20. In line with the SBSTTA recommendation (see document UNEP/CBD/COP/2/5, Recommendation I/3 paragraph 9),

"Parties, other signatories and observers at the CBD meetings should be encouraged to submit their view on the scientific, technical and technological dimensions of the conservation and sustainable use of forest biological diversity to the Secretariat of the Convention on Biological Diversity. These will be compiled and submitted to the Conference of the Parties".

21. The Secretariat has not as yet received any views probably in view of the short time period that has elapsed since the meeting of the SBSTTA last September. The Secretariat would therefore like to remind the Parties and observers to submit their views at their earliest convenience.

