



CONVENTION ON BIOLOGICAL DIVERSITY

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PRESS RELEASE

First-ever global guidelines adopted on genetic resources Biodiversity conference also acts on forests and invasive species

The Hague, 19 April 2002 – Ministers leave The Hague today after charting a course for global action on biological diversity through the end of the decade. In addition to this strategic plan, the two-week meeting on the Convention on Biological Diversity is to adopt detailed guidelines on access to genetic resources and benefit-sharing, an international work programme on forests, and guiding principles on combating alien invasive species.

“This conference marks a major turning point for the Convention and has helped move us from policy development to implementation, from dialogue to action,” said Geke Faber, President of the meeting and Vice Minister of Agriculture, Nature Management and Fisheries of The Netherlands.

In their Declaration Ministers resolved “to strengthen our efforts to put in place measures to halt biodiversity loss, which is taking place at an alarming rate, at the global, regional, sub-regional and national levels by the year 2010”.

The Guidelines on genetic resources promise to improve the way foreign companies, collectors, researchers and other users gain access to valuable genetic resources in return for sharing the benefits with the countries of origin and with local and indigenous communities.

They advise governments on how to set fair and practical conditions for users seeking genetic resources (such as plants that can be used to produce new pharmaceuticals or fragrances). In return, these users must offer benefits such as profits, royalties, scientific collaboration, or training.

The guidelines were developed in response to growing concerns in many developing countries that the commercial and scientific gains realized from their genetic resources were being reaped only by bio-prospectors based in foreign countries.

“Although voluntary, these new Guidelines establish generally accepted norms that promise a fairer, more collaborative approach to access and benefit-sharing as regards genetic resources,” said Klaus Toepfer, Executive Director of the United Nations Environment Programme, under whose auspices the Convention was adopted.

“Contracts based on the guidelines will give biodiversity-rich countries additional incentives to conserve and sustainably use their resources. They will offer local and indigenous communities with traditional knowledge fair compensation. And they will ensure a good deal for seed companies, plant breeders, and industries seeking genetic resources,” said Hamdallah Zedan, Executive Secretary of the Convention.

A well-known example of an access and benefit-sharing contract was agreed between Diversa Corporation and the Costa Rican National Biodiversity Institute (INBio) in 1995 and renewed in 1998. The two partners are collecting samples of microorganisms associated with larger organisms such as insects from mangrove swamps, coral reefs, forest soils and other locations. Diversa is looking for enzymes and structural proteins that can be used for biotechnology, crop protection and pharmaceuticals.

Under the terms of the agreements, INBio collects samples using both its own techniques and proprietary technology provided by Diversa. INBio guarantees that it will not use this technology for collecting and processing samples for other companies. All DNA sequences that INBio isolates for Diversa become Diversa's property. All microorganisms isolated from the sites remain the property of Costa Rica.

Diversa pays the salary and overheads of at least one INBio staff member. It also pays undisclosed royalties to INBio in the event that Diversa licenses a product to a client company based on samples obtained from INBio. INBio receives access to technology, equipment, and capacity building and has access to Diversa's high-throughput DNA sequencing facility. (See www.biodiv.org/programmes/socio-eco/benefit/case-studies.asp for more examples.)

Similar arrangements are promoted by the Bonn Guidelines on Access to Genetic Resources and Fair and Equitable Sharing of the Benefits Arising out of their Utilization, which offer guidance on the roles and responsibilities of the various parties and describe each of the steps involved in the process of obtaining access to genetic resources and sharing the benefits. A Working Group is being tasked with continuing the discussions on how to further advance the access and benefit-sharing debate.

The meeting is also expected to adopt Fifteen Guiding Principles on how to develop effective strategies to minimize the spread and impact of invasive alien species.

"Invasive alien species have caused untold damage to natural ecosystems and human economies alike over the past few centuries. Globalization is accelerating the destruction, as expanding tourism and trade offer more and more opportunities for unwanted species to hitchhike to new homes," said Mr. Zedan.

The first guiding principle invokes the precautionary approach, whereby the lack of full scientific certainty does not justify inaction in the face of a potentially serious or irreversible threat. Other principles advocate and describe the three-step hierarchy of 1) prevention (least expensive and most effective), 2) eradication, and 3) containment. Specific measures are recommended, including border controls, quarantine measures, information exchange, and capacity building.

In addition, recipient governments should have the opportunity to provide prior authorization before the first-time intentional introduction of a potentially invasive species. (See www.biodiv.org/programmes/cross-cutting/alien/default.asp.)

The meeting will also adopt an international work programme on forests. The programme sets out 12 goals each with a range of objectives and activities, with priorities to be set at the national level. Goals range from promoting the sustainable use of forest biodiversity and improving the understanding of ecosystem functioning and the role of biodiversity to enhancing the institutional enabling environment and addressing socio-economic distortions.

The Sixth Meeting of the Conference of the Parties to the Convention on Biological Diversity (COP 6) was attended by some 120 ministers and vice ministers and a total of almost 2,000 governmental and non-governmental officials from 166 countries. The next meeting of the COP will take place in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia in the first quarter of 2004.

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