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NEWS RELEASE

GEF Funds Support Use of Protected Areas to Conserve Nature and Promote Sustainable Livelihoods

Washington, D.C., September 8, 2003 – This week, the future of protected areas—areas of land or sea that are dedicated to the protection and maintenance of biological diversity and cultural treasures—is being shaped as hundreds of scientists and government officials gather in Durban, South Africa, at a major international forum, the World Parks Congress.

The Global Environment Facility (GEF), as the world's largest international financial supporter of protected areas, is funding innovative ways of improving the long-term management of protected areas so that human societies can be sustained. Since 1991, GEF has provided \$1.1 billion and leveraged \$2.5 billion more for approximately 200 projects spanning 86 countries and 11 regions. These projects protect more than 1,000 sites covering 226 million hectares—just over one-fourth of the total protected area in the world.

“Parks and protected areas are critical to biodiversity and a sustainable global future,” said Len Good, CEO and Chairman of the Global Environment Facility. “The GEF is working with its partners, including stakeholders in local communities, to make protected areas more socially, economically, and ecologically sustainable. Through ecotourism, investments in community-initiated, environmentally-friendly micro-enterprises, the creation of conservation trust funds, and projects that improve the management of protected area systems, countries and local communities are using GEF resources to protect their natural heritage while creating opportunities for sustainable livelihoods.”

The World Parks Congress, sponsored by the World Conservation Union (IUCN), meets every 10 years to set the agenda for protected areas. This year's event is scheduled for September 8-15. Actions and agreements that result from this event could have a major

impact, given that roughly 10 percent of the earth's land area has been designated for protection.

At stake is far more than simply nature for nature's sake. As wildlife, plants, and even entire ecosystems disappear, the many ecological services and the wealth the natural world provides for people are diminished. The greatest impact is upon the poor in developing countries—the people most dependent on natural resources for food, shelter, medicine, income and employment. Protected areas are a critical component of the effort to stem the loss of these natural resources. GEF projects safeguard and improve the effectiveness of protected areas by promoting innovative and practical solutions such as community-based management, conservation training and education, databases and information systems, policies, laws, and public-private partnerships.

In South Africa, for example, the GEF has contributed more than \$25 million to three projects that facilitate a government-supported effort to protect the Cape Floristic Region, which harbors more than 9,000 plant species, 70 percent of which are found nowhere else. People depend on many of these species, particularly the wild flowers, for their livelihoods.

One of the three projects, the Agulhas Biodiversity Initiative, will be launched on September 9 at the World Parks Congress. The project seeks to establish an innovative mosaic of protected areas on public and private lands in the Cape Floristic Region. Project officials will work with local communities to promote sustainable harvesting of species of wild fynbos, the region's characteristic type of vegetation. In addition, local communities will be engaged in implementing an ecologically responsible tourism strategy that contributes to sustainable livelihoods.

Looking beyond the World Parks Congress, GEF will promote effective public-private partnerships and innovative financial mechanisms to help make protected areas in developing countries more sustainable. In addition, the GEF will continue to increase its assistance to expand biodiversity conservation efforts beyond protected areas into rural landscapes.

About the GEF

The Global Environment Facility is an international financial organization with 175 member countries that acts as a major catalyst for improving the global environment. GEF's mandate is to finance projects that benefit the global environment, focusing on the areas of biodiversity, climate change, the ozone layer, international waters, land degradation, and persistent organic pollutants.

Since its creation in 1991, the GEF has allocated \$4.5 billion in grants to support more than 1,200 projects in 140 developing nations and countries with economies in transition. In addition, GEF has committed approximately US \$117.35 million in small grants to NGOs and community groups in developing countries, directly involving them in addressing global environmental problems.

A recent assessment by an independent panel of experts finds that the GEF has been a “catalyst for innovative programs” and has produced “significant results” to improve the global environment.

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