

**Remarks by His Excellency Paul Kagame, President of the Republic of Rwanda on the occasion of the *First International Research Conference on Biodiversity Conservation and Sustainable Natural Resource Management***

**Kigali  
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I join the Rwandan community of environmental researchers, policymakers and activists to warmly welcome our international visitors to Kigali and to this Research Conference on Biodiversity and Sustainable Management of Natural Resources.

I congratulate the organizers of this meeting for bringing together an impressive cross-section of participants, presenters, and institutions from over twenty countries around the world.

It is fitting that this important meeting is taking place in Rwanda not only because we wholeheartedly embrace sustainable development, but also because of the fact that our country lies in one of the world's internationally designated "Biological Hotspots". This refers to ecological areas that are biologically rich but also highly endangered. Our geographical location in the heart of the Albertine Rift means that Rwanda is endowed with exceptional biodiversity, characterised by a wide range of indigenous animal and plant species.

This region has gained international visibility as the place where gorillas were first studied in the wild, in the VIRUNGA Volcanoes, which is actually the only place in the world where mountain gorillas can be seen in their natural habitat.

However, this is also a region in which global and regional pressures have taken a heavy toll – in the form of climate change, deforestation, regional conflicts, poverty, population growth, and the associated diminishing food and water resources.

The challenge before us, therefore, is to design and implement strategies to manage the delicate balance between conservation of biological diversity and human development needs. I am informed that this conference will address these competing demands by focusing on several related themes – including conservation, sustainable management of natural resources and economic development.

As you explore these very timely and pertinent subject matters, I trust that your discussions will generate practical solutions to address the biodiversity challenges that confront us. Ultimately, we need to find answers to a number of urgent questions:

What concrete and practical steps can a developing country, such as Rwanda, take to successfully to achieve its socioeconomic development vision while preserving ecological integrity?

Also, how can scientific conferences such this Kigali meeting, contribute optimally to the realization of this objective?

There can be no shortcut to the restoration of the equilibrium between the biodiversity imperative and ever increasing human needs - deliberate planning and determined pursuit of national and regional programs is required.

In my view, this quest includes the following key features:

As a matter of priority, it is necessary to raise awareness on a national level, of the message that “environmental protection is everybody’s business”. A shared purpose in this mission has to emerge, as part and parcel of the national development vision.

It is of fundamental importance to develop a cluster of policies that address biodiversity in a comprehensive manner. These may include, for example, policies and associated systems of unified administration of forest, wetlands, water systems, and other natural resources.

Land policies that ensure conservation, protection and economic viability are equally important.

Appropriate national legislation in all relevant areas, accompanied by strong enforcement capacity, is critical in the struggle to balance environmental protection and human demands.

We also require effective and efficient institutions, with the appropriate human and physical infrastructure, to provide a comprehensive inventory and associated mapping of national species, as basis for conserving, protecting and managing our national assets.

Another key imperative is the scientific and research capacities to continuously monitor, create new knowledge, as well as generate innovative solutions. This includes ways to transform available biological richness into commercial products. Experience shows us that the only sustainable way to guarantee the success of a biodiversity agenda, and indeed to conserve any country’s natural resources, is to ensure that policy actions as outlined, lead to socioeconomic transformation and improved quality of life.

Rwanda is taking steps to ensure that the protection of biological diversity is achieved in a manner that is compatible with national efforts to drive social and economic development. We are drawing from the many lessons around the world, particularly following the Convention on Biological Diversity, of which Rwanda is a signatory.

We have enacted environmental law, land law and established the corresponding implementing agencies. Further, we are currently revising our conservation law in line with new thinking on protection of biological diversity.

I am pleased to note that this is an area where we are already registering some modest achievements, most notably in gorilla conservation. Through the effective fostering of ecotourism, these unique primates are protected in their natural habitats – while ensuring a steady revenue stream for our country.

When we measure the gap between Rwanda's vision of sound environmental management and where we currently stand, it is evident that many challenges remain.

Key among these obstacles is the fact that most of our institutions in this field do not yet possess the required capacities. Serious weakness in scientific and research capabilities still exist, both in terms of human and institutional resources.

This limitation affects our ability to convert Rwanda's abundant natural assets into viable commodities and impedes efforts to accelerate socio-economic transformation. In an unfortunate cycle, this economic constraint has the effect of maintaining high poverty levels, which in turn conflict with and undermine mass acceptance of national conservation efforts.

It is therefore clear that dealing with the biodiversity challenges requires that we think afresh. We must abandon the old paradigm in which conservation was largely seen as a governmental responsibility, and as a matter of urgency, shift into a new mode of critical thinking and action, where the protection of biodiversity is viewed as a profitable business opportunity – for both mainstream enterprise and small business.

Our task, including deliberations at this Kigali Conference on Biodiversity, is to formulate win-win strategies. We need to develop business models that make sound use of available natural resources, to generate dividends for all levels of society – especially the economically vulnerable rural communities.

For example, fair trade and organic agriculture are alternative forms of specialty commerce and production that offer new opportunities for small-scale producers in different parts of the world. In Rwanda, we have experienced in recent years, some achievements in this respect, especially in the coffee industry.

As a country where the vast majority of the population derive their livelihood from agriculture, we must figure out how to move faster in this direction, in order to positively impact the economic well-being of rural communities. This is a guaranteed strategy of ensuring local ownership of the biodiversity agenda in Rwanda, and indeed in our region.

It is evident that in our efforts to protect the health of our planet, we are dealing with a complex situation that has bearings on millions of lives.

This is why we are counting on the experts gathered at this conference to gather collective wisdom and insights, and strategise on how to address biodiversity challenges at the national, regional and global levels. This occasion presents an opportunity to establish an international network of expertise and start to build a critical mass of national and regional scientists and researchers to address our common challenges.

As noted earlier, there is no doubt that research capacity is one of the missing links in our country's development. In light of this shortcoming, I encourage you to explore the possibility of establishing a centre of excellence in biodiversity and natural resources management for this region.

The prerequisite of creating this much-needed facility is human capital – and that is why a regional approach that pools resources supersedes individual national effort, in realising our respective objectives.

I am informed that this idea has already been discussed – and Rwanda would most certainly play its role in the establishment of such a research centre.

I trust that this conference, the first in a series of meetings to follow, is the beginning of a long-term commitment to international partnership to improve biodiversity and natural resources management in Rwanda and in our region – an initiative that we all applaud, strongly encourage and support.

Once again, it is my pleasure to welcome you to our country.

I now declare open this *First International Research Conference on Biodiversity Conservation and Sustainable Natural Resource Management*.

I THANK YOU FOR YOUR KIND ATTENTION.