



Secretariat of the Convention on Biological Diversity



MESSAGE
from
AHMED DJOGHLAF,
EXECUTIVE SECRETARY,
on the occasion of
WORLD HEALTH DAY
7 April 2008

In recent years, there have been increasing reports of disasters attributed to climate change. Extreme weather events, such as hurricanes, heat waves and prolonged periods of drought, have resulted in the loss of many lives and affected many people. These events have washed away crops, contaminated water and spread infectious diseases. There is general agreement that the impacts of climate change will continue to intensify. Climate change greatly impacts human health by affecting the capacity of ecosystems to provide essential goods and services.

World Health Day, which this year focuses on protecting health from climate change, provides a timely opportunity to reflect upon the importance of biodiversity and ecosystem services to human well-being. Biodiversity, encompassing all the plants, animals and microorganisms found on Earth and the ecosystems of which they are part, provides the goods and important for life on Earth. Climate change is one of the main drivers of biodiversity loss. This loss diminishes the ability of ecosystems to continue providing the services upon which the whole of humanity depends, including those that support our health.

Biodiversity is the source of the food we eat and the medicines we rely upon. It contributes to the sustained supply of the water we drink and provides for many other basic human needs. Biodiversity also contributes to our emotional health by supporting our cultural and religious traditions and by providing us with opportunities for recreation. However, the continued global loss of biodiversity should force us to examine the extent to which our planet can continue to support us.

Already the Millennium Ecosystem Assessment has concluded that 60% of the major ecosystem services provided by biodiversity are in a state of decline. The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, in its Fourth Assessment Report, noted that the resilience of biodiversity and ecosystems, which has so far cushioned us from the impacts of our excesses, will be undermined by climate change, an observation echoed in the Stern Review on the economic impacts of climate change.

The world's poor, those least responsible for producing the greenhouse gases that are driving climate change, are those most affected by biodiversity loss. For the 1 billion people who live a subsistence lifestyle, the loss of ecosystem productivity quickly results in deteriorating living conditions, leading to malnutrition and disease.



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While climate change poses a serious threat to global health, biodiversity may hold the key to addressing emerging health concerns. Biodiversity is the major source of both traditional and modern medicines. For example, the World Health Organization reports that in several African countries many children suffering from high fevers are treated at home with herbal medicines. Similarly, the fourth edition of the Global Environment Outlook notes that in 2002-2003, 80% of the new drugs introduced were either derived from or inspired by natural products, while estimates suggest that up to 21,000 plants are used for medicinal purposes worldwide. The majority of these plants are found in the world's remaining biodiversity hotspots.

Biodiversity, and in particular genetic diversity, is the basis for the development of new varieties of agricultural plants that are more resistant to extreme climatic conditions and thereby improve food security. While biodiversity loss, for example from the draining of wetlands and the clearing of forests and mangroves, can significantly increase greenhouse gas emissions, biodiversity can also help reduce climate change by sequestering carbon within restored or conserved ecosystems.

At the same time that the world community agreed to the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change, the Convention on Biological Diversity was adopted to help protect the world's biological diversity and promote the sustainable use its components as well as the fair and equitable sharing of the benefits arising out of the utilization of genetic resources. In 2002, the Parties to the Convention on Biological Diversity committed themselves to achieve by 2010 a significant reduction of the current rate of biodiversity loss at the global, regional and national levels, a commitment that has since been enshrined in the Millennium Development Goals. The Convention on Biological Diversity has subsequently paid serious attention to climate change and has responded by, for example, identifying the linkages between biodiversity and climate change and by indentifying key biodiversity and ecosystem-based mitigation and adaption responses. The issue of climate change centres not just on how biodiversity will be impacted by climate change, but on how biodiversity can help us cope with the serious problems that climate change is causing. The Convention on Biological Diversity, with its emphasis on an ecosystem approach to biodiversity and the maintenance of healthy ecosystems, provides an important framework for addressing many of the problems related to climate change and human health.

Healthy ecosystems are a necessity for a healthy human society. Therefore, actions to mitigate and adapt to climate change, by maintaining a healthy and safe environment, can protect human health. On this World Health Day, I would like to express my unwavering commitment to ensuring that biodiversity continues to provide the ecosystem services essential for maintaining human health in the face of global change.

Montreal, 7 April 2008