STATEMENT BY

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on the occasion of

WORLD MIGRATORY BIRD DAY

"Protect Birds: Be the Solution to Plastic Pollution!"

Migratory birds are a critical link in the global web of life, that not only capture our imagination but connect different ecosystems and species. Their health and survival not only have an enormous and incalculable intrinsic value, but they are also important guarantors of biodiversity for many ecosystems and species. Yet their survival is under threat. Of the 11,000 bird species on this planet, more than 40 per cent have declining populations.[1] Migratory birds are proverbial canaries in the coalmine, and their decline ought to send yet another critical warning to human society about the importance of nature and biodiversity, and serve as a clarion call for action.

This year's World Migratory Bird Day theme, "Protect birds, be the solution to plastic pollution," highlights an issue that not only has severe ramifications for migratory species but is also one of the most pressing issues impacting our environment. The images of birds, with their stomachs full of plastic, or entangled and smothered by plastic rings and nets, are some of the very real consequences of the terrible toll that plastic pollution takes on our wildlife, and ultimately on entire ecosystems.

Our addiction to single-use or disposable plastic poses severe environmental consequences for our entire planet. Only 9 per cent of plastic waste ever produced has been recycled. And while about 12 per cent of this has been incinerated, the rest, approximately 79 per cent, has accumulated in landfills, dumps or the natural environment.

[1] BirdLife International: 2018 State of the World's Birds Report

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With an annual production of more than 300 million tons, plastic is one of the most widely used materials in the world. Worldwide, for instance, approximately one million plastic drinking bottles are bought every minute, while up to 5 trillion single-use bags are used globally every year. The discarded pieces are then easily transported into ecosystems causing serious threats to migratory species around the world.

Most worryingly, half of all plastic produced globally is designed to be used only once before being thrown away. This cannot continue, especially when we consider that plastic bags and containers made of Styrofoam can take thousands of years to decompose, contaminating both soil and water in the process.

Plastic trash not only poses a severe risk to birds and other species, it causes serious health problems to human beings when it leaks into the environment. Toxic chemicals used to manufacture plastic, for example, can be transferred to animal tissue, thereby entering the human food chain, while Styrofoam products containing carcinogenic chemicals like styrene and benzene, are highly toxic if ingested, potentially damaging the nervous system, lungs and reproductive organs.

There is also a steep economic price to pay for plastic pollution. Plastic litter in the Asia-Pacific region alone costs its tourism, fishing and shipping industries some $1.3 billion per year. In Europe, cleaning plastic waste from coasts and beaches costs about €630 million per year. Studies suggest that the total economic damage to the world's marine ecosystem caused by plastic amounts to at least $13 billion per year. The economic, health and environmental reasons to act are clear.

Fortunately, the problem of plastic pollution is rapidly attracting worldwide attention. And governments are starting to act. In the last decade alone, dozens of national and local governments have adopted policies to reduce the use of disposable plastic. In Africa, for example, most countries have adopted a total ban on the production and use of plastic bags. And of the 25 countries that banned the bags, over half have done so in the last four years. Also, India has pledged to eliminate all single-use plastic by 2020 and 60 countries have presently signed up to the UN Environment Clean Seas campaign, the largest global compact for fighting marine litter.

Business also have a pivotal role to play. Together with phasing out single-use plastics, making use of alternative and more sustainable materials in their packaging and working on more effective recycling and upscaling, biodiversity must be embedded into the decision-making process. For this reason businesses must ensure that they make every effort to greening their supply chain and take the initiative in raising awareness about biodiversity among their employees and external stakeholders, invest in Nature Based Solutions such as natural infrastructure, adopt measures to ensure sustainable use of natural resources and adhere to international, regional and national rules that relate to biodiversity and incorporate into strategies.

We as individuals can also make a difference. We can reduce, reuse and recycle - limit our use of plastic materials and replace them with eco-friendly alternatives, as well as use and dispose of plastics sustainably. We can join or organize clean-up activities where we live, for example at beaches or rivers. We can avoid using plastic straws. We can choose packages wrapped in natural materials, such as glass, wood or cotton, and avoid products in excessive plastic packaging. We can go shopping using reusable containers or shopping bags.

We can also help spread the word, not only about the dangerous consequences of plastic pollution, but about the broader framework and key actions that can be taken by all stakeholders to help humanity live in harmony with nature. In 2020, the Parties to the UN Convention on Biological Diversity will develop a

new Global Biodiversity Framework designed to protect all ecosystems and species, including migratory birds, and ensure a more sustainable, equitable, and inclusive future for human society. We look forward to working with the global community of birdwatchers, bird-lovers, and the many others who care about these beautiful species and their important role in the web of life.
