

Breakthrough in International Year of Biodiversity as Governments Give Green Light to New ‘Gold Standard’ Science Policy Body

Bridging the Gap between Research and Urgent Need for Responses to Biodiversity and Ecosystem Service Losses

Busan/Nairobi, 11 June 2010-History was made today in the South Korean port city of Busan, when governments gave the green light to an Intergovernmental Science Policy Platform on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services (IPBES).

The independent platform will in many ways mirror the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) which has assisted in catalyzing world-wide understanding and governmental action on global warming.

The new body will bridge the gulf between the wealth of scientific knowledge-- documenting accelerating declines and degradation of the natural world-- and the decisive government action required to reverse these damaging trends.

Its various roles will include carrying out high quality peer reviews of the wealth of science on biodiversity and ecosystem services emerging from research institutes across the globe in order to provide ‘gold standard’ reports to governments.

These reports will not only cover the state, status and trends of biodiversity and ecosystems, but outline transformational policy options and responses to bring about real change in their fortunes.

An IPBES will achieve this in part by prioritizing, making sense of and bringing consistency to the welter of reports and assessments conducted by United Nations bodies; research centres, universities and others as they relate to biodiversity and ecosystem services.

Achim Steiner, UN Under-Secretary General and UN Environment Programme (UNEP) which has coordinated this week’s meeting, said: “The dream of many scientists in both developed and developing countries has been made reality. Indeed, IPBES represents a major breakthrough in terms of organizing a global response to the loss of living organisms and forests, freshwaters, coral reefs and other ecosystems that generate multi-trillion dollar services that underpin all life—including economic life—on Earth”.

“It is also an important day for multilateralism in this, the UN’s International Year of Biodiversity. There remained disagreements between governments as they entered this week’s third and final meeting. These centred on financing for the platform up to its scope and role in building scientific assessment capacity in developing economies,” he added.

“But nations put aside the smaller differences that divided them in favour of the far

bigger areas of consensus that finally united them—namely the urgent need for an IPBES as a key building block towards restoring, repairing and more intelligently managing the planet’s nature-based assets,” said Mr. Steiner.

“I would applaud all governments for their determination and vision in writing a small-- but what might one day prove a significant-- new chapter in humanity’s relationship with the natural world,” he concluded.

Chan-Woo Kim, Director General of the Ministry of Environment, Republic of Korea who chaired the third meeting this week, said: “In the 21st century faced with many environmental challenges, the vision of ‘Green Growth’ should be shared in the international community. The essence of this vision is to ensure environmental sustainability while pursuing development. For this to be realized, it is crucial to have a credible, legitimate, and policy-relevant understanding on biodiversity and ecosystem services.”

“Today, and in this International Year of Biodiversity which we commemorate, we finally reached an agreement to establish an Intergovernmental science-policy Platform for Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services. This historic agreement will lay the foundation for us to have full scientific assessment for appropriate policy responses for human well-being on the Planet,” said Mr. Kim.

“Busan, one of the most beautiful cities in Korea, will be remembered in the international environmental community for making a huge step forward for the establishment of the IPBES,” he concluded.

Mr. Kim added: "Here I would also like to thank UNEP for its role in this important breakthrough after having diligently and professionally steered and facilitated the process towards establishing an IPBES since the first meeting in Malaysia some 18 months ago".

Today’s green light, given by delegates from close to 90 countries, is now expected to be sent to the 65th session of the UN General Assembly, which opens in September, for its consideration to be formally established.

It will then be presented for endorsement by environment minister attending the UNEP Governing Council/Global Ministerial at its next session scheduled for Nairobi, Kenya in February 2011.

IPBES—what is it likely to do?

This week’s meeting in Busan heard that there are now a myriad of global, regional and national assessments being carried out from time to time that relate to biodiversity and ecosystem services.

These include the Millennium Ecosystem Assessment; the International Assessment of Agricultural Science and Technology for Development; UNEP’s Global Environment Outlook; the Global Biodiversity Outlook and the Global Forest Resources Assessment.

Others include the State of the World's Animal Genetic Resources for Food and Agriculture; the Economics of Ecosystems and Biodiversity and the IUCN Red List of threatened and endangered species.

While many, if not all are important, many of the findings are failing to translate into meaningful and decisive action by governments on the ground and in global and national planning.

This is in part due to different methodologies and standards operating across such assessments.

An IPBES can bring greater rigour to such assessments while bringing together their findings in order to provide governments with greater clarity and confidence on the conclusions in order to act.

Other areas include bringing to the attention of governments 'new topics' identified by science, outlining what is known and also aspects where more research is needed.

Some scientists, for example, claim that evidence that deoxygenated dead zones in the world's oceans took too long time to migrate from scientific circles into the domain and in-trays of policy-makers.

A similar argument is made concerning the pros and cons of biofuels. An IPBES could provide better early warning of such new topics to governments before decisions are taken.

While an IPBES will support some capacity building in developing countries, its main role will be to catalyze funding to assist developing country scientists and developing country assessments through, for example, harnessing funding via UN agencies; foundations and other sources.

Unraveling the precise role of animals, plants, insects and even microbes within ecosystems and their functions in terms of the services generated—from water purification to soil fertility—could also be a major thrust.

Some experts are convinced that many scientific discoveries, from the identification of new lower life forms to the fast disappearance of others, can often remain within the corridors of research institutes and universities for many years before they reach the wider world.

By that time it may be too late to act to either conserve or protect the species concerned whereas early warning might have put the species on the political radar giving it a better chance.

Notes to Editors

For more details including the history of a proposed IPBES www.ipbes.net

For More Information Please Contact:

Nick Nuttall, UNEP Spokesperson/ Head of Media, on Mobile +254 (0)733632755, local mobile 010 8659 6410 or E-mail: nick.nuttall@unep.org

Ji-hyun MIN (Program Officer, Ministry of Environment of the Republic of Korea) on Tel: +82-2-509-7910/Mobile: +82-10-9213-2974, E-mail: no1bride@korea.kr