Convention on Biological Diversity

Secretariat

PRESS RELEASE

Concrete actions to preserve world's forest ecosystems should be accelerated

Montreal, 8 November 2001 – Experts from the 182 Parties to the Convention on Biological Diversity are meeting in Montreal from 12 to 16 November to assess the threats facing the world's forests and to identify practical solutions.

"Despite their importance, forests across many parts of the globe and in particular in developing countries continue to be felled and cleared at an alarming rate. It is my sincere hope that humankind can tackle the root causes of this, which, in many countries, lie in poverty and the desperate circumstances that billions of people across the globe find themselves in, " said Klaus Töpfer, Executive Director of the United Nations Environment Programme.

"Natural forests harbour the greatest variety of animal, microbial and plant species of any terrestrial ecosystem. They provide us with a vast array of goods and services. They are the cornerstone of sustainable development," said Hamdallah Zedan, the Convention's Executive Secretary. "Conserving and sustainably using these invaluable ecosystems is a major goal of the Convention's work programme. Research is still needed, but it is now time to accelerate concrete action to preserve the world's forests."

The role of the seventh meeting of the Convention's Subsidiary Body on Scientific, Technical and Technological Advice (SBSTTA) is to provide expert advice to the ministers and diplomats attending the sixth session of the Conference of the Parties to the Convention, which takes place in The Hague from 8 to 26 April next year.

Drawing on the work of an Ad-Hoc Technical Expert Group on Forest Biological Diversity set up by the Conference of the Parties in May 2000, the SBSTTA will consider the current status of forest biodiversity and major trends and threats. It will identify practical solutions that could be implemented locally, nationally, or globally. The SBSTTA will address in particular the need to widen the focus of the Convention's current forests work programme from research to practical action.

The Montreal meeting will also discuss three specific threats to forest biological diversity: climate change, human-induced uncontrolled forest fires, and the impact of unsustainable harvesting of non-timber forest resources, including in particular bushmeat and living biological resources. Delegates will try to identify how to manage and reduce these threats.

Other biodiversity issues, such as the loss of pollinators in agricultural lands, plant conservation strategy, including possible time-bound quantifiable targets for meeting the objectives of the Convention with regard to plant conservation, incentive measures, impact assessment, will also be addressed by the meeting.

***Note to journalists**: The meeting will be held at the ICAO building in Montreal (999, University Street). For more information please contact Cristina Stricker, Information Officer, tel. during the conference only (12-16 November): +1-514-868-1581, permanent tel.: +1-514-287-7031, fax: +1-514-288-6588, e-mail: cristina.stricker@biodiv.org*

United Nations Environment Programme
UNEP
Tel.: (1-514) 288-2220
Fax: (1-514) 288-6588
website: www.biodiv.org
e-mail: secretariat@biodiv.org
World Trade Centre Building
393 Saint-Jacques Street, Suite 300
Montréal, Québec, Canada H2Y 1N9

PRESS BACKGROUNDER
Forest biodiversity in danger

Why are forests important?

Forests provide a wide range of goods and services, including timber, fuel-wood, food, medicine, soil and watershed protection, and climate stabilization. Preserving forests is therefore crucial for human well-being. Forests also play a vital role in culture and religion and inspire artists and thinkers around the world. At the same time, forests contain a major share of global biodiversity: at least half of the world's terrestrial species live in tropical primary forests.

How much forest is left?

From 50% some 8,000 years ago, forests now occupy about 27% of the Earth's ice-free surface. Primary forests comprise less than half the remaining forest, with the rest being secondary, degraded or plantation forests. The main causes of destruction are the housing and infrastructure development, desertification and land degradation, and hundreds of years of large-scale conversion to agriculture and rangelands.

According to data from the UN's Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO), 3,869 million hectares of global forest remained in 2000. Forest area has declined by around 9.4 million hectares per year since 1990, an annual rate of 0.22 %. Most of the decline takes place in natural forests in the tropics. Preliminary estimates show that net deforestation rates have increased somewhat recently in tropical Africa, remained constant in Central America, and declined slightly in tropical Asia and South America. Although the establishment of plantation forests and reforestation activities in temperate and boreal forests and tropical areas is increasing, these plantations cannot fully compensate for deforestation of primary forest in terms of biological diversity.

Between 1980 and 1990, the annual rate of deforestation for developing countries is estimated at 15.5 million hectares per year. As a result, more than 200 million hectares of forest have been lost in the past 15 years. According to IUCN, this is equal to twice the size of South Africa, four times the territory of Spain, or seven times that of Malaysia.

What are the major threats?

Direct causes of deforestation and forest degradation include improper and wasteful forest management and logging practices, changing land-use patterns, over-exploitation, invasive alien species, and pollution. In the near future, climate change will also be added to this list.

Indirect, or underlying, causes include the lack of political power of local and indigenous communities, bad governance and the mistaken belief that forests and their resources are infinite. The constantly increasing global demand for wood, fuel, paper, and other forest products is also to blame. In the longer term, a lack of awareness about the multiple environmental and economic values of forests may loom as the largest threat.

What can be done?

An effective forest conservation strategy requires that an ecologically viable acreage of all forest ecosystem types be preserved through a network of protected areas. More forest restoration programmes need to be developed. At the same time, sustainable management practices need to be implemented on the basis of the ecosystem approach. These should include new forest-related national regulations, strategies and plans.

Decision-making on forest management should involve indigenous peoples and local communities in order to ensure that their legitimate needs are taken into consideration. This approach will also ensure that local expertise is tapped and that forest management becomes more effective and sustainable.

Education and public awareness also need to be strengthened, for example via campaigns promoting sustainable production and consumption patterns. In particular, people need to be informed about the wide range of forest services and products.

The role of the Convention

The Convention on Biological Diversity was opened for signature at the Rio Earth Summit in June 1992. It is the first global agreement to cover all aspects of biological diversity – genetic resources, species and ecosystems – and the first to recognize that the conservation of biological diversity is "a common concern of humankind" and an integral part of efforts to achieve sustainable development. The Convention fosters scientific and technical cooperation and the equitable sharing of the benefits from the use of genetic resources, and the widespread use of environmentally sound technologies.

The Convention's Subsidiary Body on Scientific, Technical and Technological Advice (SBSTTA) advises the Conference of the Parties – the Convention's top decision-making body. It also promotes international cooperation on biodiversity science, technical matters, and technology. It addresses a broad range of issues, including the natural and social sciences, data management, modern information technology, models, scientific assessments, the development of biodiversity indicators, and monitoring. In this way, the SBSTTA provides an agreed factual basis so that policymakers can take informed political decisions about the cross-cutting issues and thematic areas addressed under the Convention.

The Convention addresses forests directly through its work programme on forest biological diversity. This programme emphasizes the ecosystem approach, socio-economic considerations, conservation and sustainable use. It promotes scientific analyses of how human activities and forest practices influence biodiversity and how to minimize the resulting damages. The work programme is currently being strengthened and expanded.

The forest work programme is implemented together with partners such as the United Nations Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO), the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP), the Global Environment Facility (GEF), the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC), the UN Forum on Forests (UNFF) and the Center for International Forestry Research (CIFOR).

Key definitions

Primary forests are forests that have never been directly disturbed by humans. Whatever their age, they have developed following a natural disturbance and according to natural processes. Forests that are used by indigenous and local communities with traditional lifestyles consistent with the conservation and sustainable use of biological diversity are included in this category.

Secondary forests have been directly disturbed by humans but have recovered, whether naturally or artificially. They do not necessary provide the same level of products and services as a primary forest would in the same location.

Old growth forests can be primary or secondary forests. They have reached an age at which the structures and species normally associated with old primary forests of that type have accumulated sufficiently to create a forest ecosystem distinct from any younger age class.

Planted forests or forest plantations are forest stands established by planting or seeding in the process of afforestation or reforestation. They are either of introduced species (all planted stands), or intensively managed stands of indigenous species.

Tropical forests are located near the equator. They have the greatest diversity of species (many still undiscovered) and are the most vulnerable land-based ecosystem in the world. They have only two seasons – rainy and dry – and receive about 12 hours of daylight year round.

Temperate forests are characteristic of North America, north-eastern Asia, and western and central Europe. They thrive in moderate climates with well-defined seasons and a growing season of 140 to 200 days during four to six frost-free months.

Boreal forests are the most wide-spread forest type of all. They inhabit the regions between 50 and 60 degrees north latitudes – Eurasia, North America, Siberia, Scandinavia, Alaska, and Canada. Seasons are divided into short, moist, and moderately warm summers and long, cold, and dry winters. The growing season is some 130 days.

Where to find more information on forests

Secretariat of the Convention on Biological Diversity
United Nations Environment Programme
393 St. Jacques St., Suite 300
Montreal, Quebec, Canada H2Y 1N9
Tel. (+1-514) 288-2220
Fax: (+1-514) 288-6588
E-mail: secretariat@biodiv.org
www.biodiv.org

United Nations Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO)
Viale delle Terme di Caracalla
Forestry Department
I-00100 Rome, Italy
Tel: (+39-06) 570-54047
Fax: (+39-06) 570-52151
http://www.fao.org/forestry/Forestry.asp

United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP)
PO Box 30552
Gigiri, Nairobi, Kenya
Tel: (+254-2) 621234
Fax: (+254-2) 624489/90

www.unep.org

Global Environment Facility (GEF)
1818 H Street, NW
Washington, DC 20433, USA
Telephone: (+1-202) 473-0508
Fax: (+1-202) 522-3240/3245
E-mail: secretariatofgef@worldbank.org

UN Forum on Forests (UNFF)
2, UN Plaza, 22th Floor
New York, NY 10017, USA
Tel.: +1-212-963-3401/9875
Fax: +1-212-963-4260
E-mail: UNFF@un.org
www.un.org/esa/sustdev/forests.htm

Center for International Forestry Research (CIFOR)
P.O. BOX 6596, JKPWB
Jakarta 10065, Indonesia
Tel: (+62-251) 622-622
Fax: (+62-251) 622-100
E-mail: cifor@cgiar.org
www.cifor.cgiar.org

United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC)
P.O. Box 260124
D-53153 Bonn, Germany
Tel.: (+49-228) 815-1000
Fax: (+49-228) 815-1999
E-mail: secretariat@unfccc.int
www.unfccc.int

World Bank
1818 H Street, N.W.
Washington DC 20433, USA
Tel.: + 1 202 473-1053
Fax: + 1 202 500-7122
www.worldbank.int

UN Division for Sustainable Development/DESA
Two UN Plaza, DC2-2220
United Nations
New York, NY 10017, USA
Tel.: + 1 212 963-0902
Fax: + 1 212 963-4260

ITTO, International Organizations Center
5th Floor, Pacifico-Yokohama
1-1-1, Minato-Mirai, Nishi-ku
Yokohama 220-0012, Japan
Tel.: + 81 45 223-1110
Fax: + 81 45 223-1111
E-mail: itto@itto.or.jp

United Nations Development Programme (UNDP)
Global Program for Food Security And Agriculture
SEED
304 East 45th Street, Room FF-10118
New York, NY 10017, USA
Tel.: + 1 212 906-6408
Fax: + 1 212 906- 6973
www.undp.org

United Nations Secretariat of the Convention to Combat Desertification (UNCCD)
Haus Carstanjen, P.O. Box 260129
Martin-Luther-King Str. 8
D-53175 Bonn, Germany
Tel.: (49-228) 815-2800
Fax: (49-228) 815-2898/99
E-Mail: secretariat@unccd.int
www.unccd.int

The World Conservation Union (IUCN)
28 rue Mauverney
CH-1196 Gland, Switzerland
Tel.: (+41-22) 999-0001
Fax : (+41-22) 999-0025
www.iucn.org

WWF International
Avenue du Mont Blanc 27
CH-1196 Gland, Switzerland
Tel. (+41-22) 364 9111 or 364 9299
Fax (+41-22) 364 5468
www.panda.org

World Resources Institute
10 G Street, NE (Suite 800)
Washington, DC 20002 USA
Phone: (+1-202) 729-7600
Fax: (+1-202) 729-7610
www.wri.org/wri

Environment Canada
351 St. Joseph Boulevard
Hull, Quebec, K1A 0H3
Tel.: (+1-819) 997-2800 or (+1-800) 668-6767
Fax: (+1-819) 953-2225
E-mail:enviroinfo@ec.gc.ca

www.ec.gc.ca/envhome.html