



Message by Klaus Toepfer, Executive Director of the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP), to mark the UN International Day for Biological Diversity

It Also Welcomes Launch of the Millennium Ecosystem Assessment's "Ecosystems and Human Well Being: the Biodiversity Synthesis Report"

19 May 2005 –The International Day for Biological Diversity, celebrated annually on 22 May, is always an important event.

But this year it takes on new meaning, new significance and new urgency.

In a matter of a few months, Heads of State gather in New York to debate reform of the United Nations and to take stock of the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs).

The Goals cover everything from poverty eradication, the supply of safe and sufficient quantities of drinking water to the empowerment of women and reversing the spread of diseases.

In 2000, the year 2015 was set as the target date for the world to reach these important aims.

In this quest, the environment and the planet's ecosystems are emerging as one of the central pillars upon which the Goals and likely to stand or fall.

"In Larger Freedom", the Secretary-General's report to the Summit-level meeting, says: "We fundamentally depend on natural systems and resources for our existence and development".

"Our efforts to defeat poverty and pursue sustainable development will be in vain if environmental degradation and natural resource depletion continue unabated," he adds.

This conclusion is further underlined in the reports of the UN Millennium Project, a collection of expert task forces who have presented route maps for achieving the Goals.

The one on Goal 7, "Ensuring Environmental Sustainability," argues that the environment is the red ribbon running around all the others.

So what is the condition of this ribbon. Is it shiny and strong?

Sadly it is not. The ribbon is fading and frayed.

This is made clear in the Millennium Ecosystem Assessment and the series of reports emerging from this daunting endeavor, another important one of which is also launched today.

This new study, rightly entitled “Ecosystems and Human Well Being”, says that world fish stocks are down by an astonishing 90 per cent since the dawn on industrialized fishing.

It adds that a third of all amphibians, over a fifth of mammals and a quarter of coniferous trees are threatened with extinction.

The report, the output of more than 1,300 scientists from more than 90 countries, also underlines that, rather than exercising the brake, the world continues to choose the accelerator putting us all on a collision course towards a grim destiny.

Changes in biodiversity as a result of human activities were more rapid in the past 50 years than at any time in human history, it says.

The overall assessment, launched in March, further states that 60 per cent of the services provided by the world’s ecosystems that support human well being are now either degraded or heading that way.

These include nature’s ability to regulate climate, cleanse air and water, keep pests in check and buffer disasters.

If the wetlands, forests, rivers and coral reefs were factories and other ecosystems providing these services were art galleries, universities and the like, it would be considered gross vandalism or arson to damage them in the way we do.

Our recklessness goes further than this. It is also economic madness. The Assessment points out that, for example, an intact hectare of mangroves in a country like Thailand is worth more than \$1,000.

Converted into intensive farming, the value drops to an estimated \$200 a hectare.

Similar economic cases are made for wetlands and other ecosystems.

The economic and life-saving value of intact and healthy ecosystems was also underlined in the aftermath of last year’s Indian Ocean tsunami.

So ecosystems are not only about beauty and sources of spiritual well being, they are, as this latest report headlines, about human well being.

This is especially relevant for the poor of this world who rely upon them for their livelihoods, for natural medicines, for food and for a variety of important materials.

Therefore degradation of ecosystems represents a formidable obstacle to meeting the MDGs.

The Millennium Ecosystem Assessment—a broad partnership including UNEP, UNEP's World Conservation Monitoring Centre, other multilateral organizations, the biologically-related conventions like the Convention on Biological Diversity, non-governmental bodies and private sector institutions, has now come to an end.

But our work in this field cannot.

We need more understanding of the impacts and consequences of our actions on the Earth's life support systems.

We also know that we cannot wait for every last drop of knowledge and every last shred of evidence.

Not if we are to realize the MDGs and the World Summit on Sustainable Development's target of reversing the rate of loss of biodiversity by 2010.

Confronted with the question of global warming, UNEP and the World Meteorological Organization established the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change in 1988.

It has become a vital bridge between the scientific and political communities leading to concrete action on this most quintessential of global threats.

I believe that the time has come, indeed is now overdue, for a similar action with respect to biodiversity.

We need to act on a higher level. We need to engage with a new urgency that brings the fields of science closer to the field of politics.

UNEP is developing Environment Watch, a system for improved monitoring of the globe's environment which will also strengthen links between researchers and policy-makers.

But we may need to go further and urgently consider a bridge between scientists and politicians echoing and comparable to the one we have for climate change.

The scale of the problem is so huge, the rate of loss so fast, and the risks to human well being so manifest that we should consider nothing less

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