



Secretariat of the
Convention on Biological Diversity



INTERNATIONAL
DAY FOR BIOLOGICAL
DIVERSITY
22 May 2008
**BIODIVERSITY
AND AGRICULTURE**

Statement by the Executive Secretary

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at the

28th meeting of the Standing Committee of the Bern Convention

*Strasbourg, France
24 November 2008*



ONE NATURE · ONE WORLD · OUR FUTURE
COP 9 MOP 4 Bonn Germany 2008



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Ladies and Gentlemen,

On 10 December, in just over two weeks time, we will be celebrating the 60th anniversary of the adoption by the General Assembly of the United Nations of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Since the adoption of the Declaration, the countries of the world have made tremendous advances in protecting and upholding the principles expressed within it—in ensuring that, among other things, every human being “has the right to a standard of living adequate for the health and well-being of himself and of his family, including food, clothing, housing and medical care.” And yet, despite the progress made to date, these fundamental rights are increasingly threatened in this new millennium by a crisis that past generations did not fully understand: the rapid depletion of the world’s biodiversity.

Life on Earth is under siege everywhere. Because of human activities, some 20 per cent of the world’s coral reefs have been effectively destroyed, and approximately 24 per cent of remaining reefs are under imminent risk of collapse. A third of all assessed freshwater species are threatened with extinction, with overall population levels having declined by 30 per cent. Over the last 25 years, 3.6 million hectares of mangroves, about 20 per cent of the total extent found in 1980, have disappeared worldwide. Forests have completely disappeared in 25 countries, and another 29 countries have lost more than 90 per cent of their forest cover. The list goes on: approximately 60 per cent of the Earth’s ecosystem services have been degraded in the last 50 years, with human impacts being the root cause.

This unprecedented loss of biodiversity means that our natural resource base is becoming ever narrower, putting at risk the long-term well-being and security of populations across the globe. Poorer nations, struggling to acquire the standards of living enjoyed in the developed world, are going to be affected first. Nearly 60 per cent of the poorest people inhabit fragile vulnerable landscapes and directly depend on natural resources for their survival. For these people, the goods and services provided by ecosystems serve as social safety nets, insuring their families against absolute poverty and starvation. But the loss of biodiversity will also affect developed nations. If current levels of fishing continue, fish populations will be reduced to the point where the global collapse of most world fisheries is possible by the second half of the century. Our agricultural food supply is also becoming increasingly unstable: an estimated $\frac{3}{4}$ of the planet’s crop agricultural diversity has already been destroyed, making widespread failure in our handful of remaining major crops due to disease or pest outbreaks an ever more ominous possibility.

The basic needs of people around the world will continue to be threatened by species extinction unless there is effective response. And indeed, the human costs of biodiversity loss are being increasingly recognized by policymakers. At the Warsaw Summit in 2005, the Council of Europe outlined a plan of action that promoted sustainable development as essential to improving the quality of life and overall security of European citizens. At the ninth Conference of the Parties to the CBD in Bonn this past May, a high-level panel was convened on Biodiversity for Development and Poverty Alleviation, which saw the official launching of the new Biodiversity for Development Initiative, established by the CBD Secretariat with the support of the French and German governments. This initiative recognizes and actively promotes biodiversity conservation as an essential part of achieving the Millennium Development Goals, and therefore as an indispensable aid to poverty reduction strategies.

Meeting the unprecedented challenges of the loss of biodiversity compounded by climate change calls for enhanced partnership. It is for this reason that an enhanced memorandum of cooperation between the secretariats of the CBD and the Bern Convention was also signed at COP9. This Memorandum has great significance, as our two Conventions are critical tools in the fight to preserve the world’s natural resources. The Bern Convention is amongst the earliest, legally binding legislation on biodiversity protection, while the CBD is the premier international instrument allowing all nations of the world to come together in the sustainable use of biodiversity. Continuing to coordinate our efforts will allow Europe, its neighbours and the greater international community to work more effectively in our communal attempt to pass on a biologically diverse and stable world to the next generation.

Close cooperation will be especially important in light of the challenges that lie ahead. 2010, now around the corner, has been declared the International Year of Biodiversity by the United Nations. It is by this date that the Parties to the CBD have resolved to significantly slow the rate of biodiversity loss worldwide. The European Union has gone even further, resolving to halt biodiversity loss in Europe. And yet, at the World Conservation Congress in Barcelona last month, the general consensus was that we are not on track to meet these targets. The Mediterranean basin, for example, is a biodiversity hotspot, containing 15,000 to 25,000 floral species, 60 per cent of which are unique to the region. Yet according to the IUCN Red List for 2008, almost 20 per cent of all species in this region remain under threat of extinction. The 2008 Red List further reveals that 38 per cent of all recorded species worldwide are at risk of extinction. More worrying still, of the 223 species that experienced a change in their Red List status between 2007 and 2008, 82 per cent became more threatened, while only 18 per cent became less threatened.

This is not to say that conservation efforts are not having any impact. A study published in 2007 in the journal *Science* showed that the European Birds Directive, formulated in response to the Bern Convention, has had a beneficial effect on threatened bird species. Species on the Annex I list – that is, species that are vulnerable, rare or require special conservation measures – have seen their population sizes increase significantly over time, resulting directly from the designation of special areas for their protection. Moreover, this year’s Red List, despite its generally pessimistic numbers, also revealed 37 improvements in the status of mammal species worldwide as a result of conservation programmes, and 16 bird species that have been kept from extinction during the past 15 years.

The problem is not that our conservation efforts are not having an impact, but that our efforts have not yet been able to meet the scale of the crisis. Now, with the 2010 target looming, is a good time to renew our focus. We need to expand the scope of our initiatives, to make both the public and policymakers more keenly aware that our quality of life is inextricably dependent on the richness of the biological world. A recent milestone in this direction was the publication at COP9 of Phase I of the European Commission’s “The Economics of Ecosystems and Biodiversity” (TEEB) report, which makes the case for the economic benefits of preserving biodiversity. With financial and food crises dominating the world’s stage, we need to follow the lead of the TEEB and begin to incorporate the protection of biodiversity into every sector of modern society, to ingrain it into the general consciousness.

Albert Schweitzer, the physician, philosopher, Nobel Laureate, and one-time resident of Strasbourg, once said that “a man is ethical only when life, as such, is sacred to him, that of plants and animals as that of his fellow men, and when he devotes himself helpfully to all life that is in need of help.” In tackling the biodiversity crisis, we need to make people realize that it is *we* who are in need of help – that the relentless extermination of flora and fauna across the planet, on top of being a tragedy in its own right, is a gross infringement on our own fundamental rights.

Thank you for your kind attention.
