



THE SECRETARY-GENERAL

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**REMARKS AT EVENT TO LAUNCH INTERNATIONAL BIODIVERSITY YEAR AT AMERICAN
MUSEUM OF NATURAL HISTORY
New York, 10 February 2009**

Ms. Ellen V. Futter, President of the American Museum of Natural History,
Mr. Ahmed Djoghlaif, Executive Secretary, Convention on Biological Diversity,
Excellencies,
Distinguished partners and panellists,
Distinguished guests,
Ladies and gentlemen,

I am pleased to be here with you in this spectacular monument to some of Earth's most magnificent species.

Sadly many -- such as the blue whale which dominates this hall -- are endangered to the point of extinction.

The reason is simple: human activities. Yours, mine, everyone's.

Just as nature is a web of life, we too are bound up in that same web. Our consumption, our development, our global trade are having a profound impact on the world around us. We have become enmeshed in a web of death.

Science tells us that our actions have pushed extinctions to 1,000 times beyond the natural background rate.

Too many of us still fail to grasp the implications of this loss. They fail to see why we need to act to preserve an obscure amphibian here, and endangered owl there.

Many still think the Earth is ours to use as we like -- that we can discard species at will.

This argument betrays a woeful ignorance of the complex interactions of diverse life forms in functioning ecosystems -- the importance of life on Earth to our well-being and even survival as a species.

Pause a moment to consider why we have museums like this one, zoos and natural parks -- why documentaries such as 'Life', which we will see previewed tonight, are so popular.

We have a cultural and spiritual connection to the natural world.

Of course, some may scoff at such philosophical arguments for protecting biodiversity and ecosystems. But there can be no skepticism about the economic case for protecting biodiversity and ecosystems.

Ecosystem services are directly linked to the bottom line -- for CEOs, mayors and heads of government. They are our natural capital.

Let me give you an example.

California almond growers depend on honey bees to pollinate their billion-dollar crop. Each year - at great expense -- they ship tens of billions of bees across the country -- and import them from overseas -- because honey bees can no longer thrive locally. This free service formerly provided by nature is no longer available because the plants that the bees depended on have been removed.

We too often take such ecosystem services for granted, and regard them as free. As a result, we fail to give them a value, and fail to protect them. Often we only notice their importance when they fail us.

When Hurricane Katrina devastated New Orleans, people woke up – too late -- to the role that had historically been played by healthy wetlands to minimize the impact of such storm surges.

When environmentalists try to prevent habitat destruction – often in the name of an endangered species – they are held up for ridicule or branded as extremists.

Too often environmental protection is seen as conflicting with economic protection. In fact they are two sides of the same coin.

For example, here in New York City water is cheap and clean. Why? Because the city wisely chose to invest in protecting the Catskills watershed.

Instead of spending up to 8 billion dollars on extra treatment infrastructure, less than a billion dollars has bought an environmental solution to water purification.

All over the world, ecosystem services represent a massive undervalued subsidy provided by the environment ... coral reefs and mangroves which protect coastlines and keep fisheries healthy ... forests which protect water supplies or keep hillsides intact.

We depend on these things yet we treat them as if they were free. When we lose them through mismanagement crops fail, profits drop, economies suffer, entire cities are flooded.

Think of the human cost of deforestation in countries such as Ethiopia, or the history of the dustbowl in this country in the 1930s.

A UN-backed study estimates that loss of natural capital due to deforestation and land degradation alone stands at between \$2 trillion and \$4.5 trillion each year.

Last year's financial crisis was a wake-up call to governments on the perils of failing to oversee and regulate complex relationships that affect us all.

The biodiversity crisis is no different. We are bankrupting our natural economy. We need to fashion a rescue package before it is too late.

This year is not only the International Year of Biodiversity – it is the deadline by which the world had pledged to substantially reduce the rate of biodiversity loss.

That target, which was integrated into the Millennium Development Goals, will not be met. In fact, the global decline in biodiversity is accelerating.

The main causes include deforestation, changes in habitat and land degradation. The growing impact of climate change is compounding the problem.

As with most emergencies, those hardest hit are the poor.

In this International Year of Biodiversity we must refocus attention. We need to demonstrate the link between biodiversity and human well-being.

We must demonstrate the concrete benefits for communities, governments and business in investing in our natural capital.

We need to show that protecting ecosystems can help us achieve the Millennium Development Goals and build resilience to climate change.

We are helped in such work by programmes such as the UNDP Equator Initiative, and the Global Environment Facility Small Grants Programme, which has given more than 6,800 small grants to communities working to safeguard natural resources.

Today's event marks the first public call for nominations for the 2010 Equator Prize, which rewards efforts to reduce poverty through the sustainable use of biodiversity. I urge you to nominate qualified local and indigenous communities for the Equator Prize 2010.

And I urge you to draw inspiration from past prize winners ... the Indonesian communities who have restored fish stocks and raised incomes ... the Brazilian women who are benefiting from the sustainable extraction of exotic forest plants for use in natural medicines and cosmetics ... the African farmers who have seen crop yields jump five-fold and diversified their income opportunities through agro-forestry. .

These communities are showing how protecting nature benefits people.

Excellencies, ladies and gentlemen,

I also urge you to look ahead.

Later this year the UN General Assembly will hold a high level segment on biodiversity. We will also hold an MDG Summit. We must use this International Year to reinforce the links between natural capital and development.

And we must send a clear message to the Biodiversity summit in Nagoya, Japan this October that we need a renewed global commitment for conserving Earth's biological diversity for the benefit of all.

Thank you.