



**MESSAGE OF THE EXECUTIVE SECRETARY OF THE  
CONVENTION ON BIOLOGICAL DIVERSITY**

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**on the occasion of**

**WORLD HEALTH DAY**

**7 April 2017**

*“Depression: Let’s Talk”*

Today on World Health Day, the world is focusing on the issue of depression, which has emerged as a major health problem, affecting over 300 million people every year.

We now know that mental health is affected by a range of biological, socioeconomic and environmental factors. Increasing people’s engagement with nature and biodiversity can contribute to addressing this illness.

American non-fiction author and journalist Richard Louv’s *Last Child in the Woods*, released over a decade ago, gave us a compelling account of the rise of “nature deficit disorder” among children, resulting from decreased exposure to the outdoors.

More recent studies have shown that contact with nature can have a wide variety of beneficial effects on humans. These include positive effects on cognitive abilities and mental restoration from stress and health.

For example, a study on the effectiveness of nature-based rehabilitation in Sweden aimed at individuals recovering from stress-related mental disorders and/or depression showed that regular exposure to nature, or simply being in a garden, can have beneficial health effects. One year after rehabilitation, the costs for primary care had dropped by 28 per cent for these individuals, and reduced their days in hospital by 64 per cent.

But how do we take advantage of these benefits and bring people into contact with nature? We need to create, restore and maintain green spaces, and find ways to connect people of all ages with these healthy settings. Actions can range from the creation of urban parks, preserving or restoring green spaces in residential areas, promoting hands-on engagement with nature through home gardens or horticultural therapy, and ensuring that communities at all socio-economic levels can enjoy access to natural areas.



As the World Health Organization notes, “there is no health, without mental health.” Depression alone accounts for 4.3 per cent of the global burden of disease and is among the largest single causes of disability worldwide, particularly for women. A joint report, *Connecting Global Priorities: Biodiversity and Human Health*<sup>1</sup>, released in 2015 by the Convention on Biological Diversity and the World Health Organization, confirmed that contact with nature may be associated with positive mental health benefits. Importantly, mental health was included among the targets of the Sustainable Development Goals, adopted by world leaders in 2015, providing an impetus to ensuring a greater focus on this issue globally.

At the UN Biodiversity Conference<sup>2</sup> in Cancun, Mexico in December 2016, Parties to the Convention on Biological Diversity discussed the intersection of biodiversity and human health. Governments recognized the need to promote opportunities for interactions between people and nature, notably including women, children, and vulnerable groups, as a means to supporting mental health and cultural well-being, and the need to encourage physical activity in green and biodiverse spaces, including in urban areas.

The Convention on Biological Diversity is committed to working with the World Health Organization to supporting this imperative. By working together we can ensure that the promotion, protection and restoration of mental health can be addressed as a vital sustainable development priority for individuals, communities and societies.

William Bird, a general physician, said that “the natural environment is the great outpatient department where we can go for healing.” On this World Health Day, let us think about how we can take steps to strengthen the connection of people with nature. Now, it’s time to get outside!

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<sup>1</sup> *Connecting Global Priorities: Biodiversity and Human Health*. [www.cbd.int/health/SOK-biodiversity-en.pdf](http://www.cbd.int/health/SOK-biodiversity-en.pdf).

<sup>2</sup> Thirteenth meeting of the Conference of the Parties to the Convention on Biological Diversity, Eighth meeting of the Conference of the Parties serving as the meeting of the Parties to the Cartagena Protocol on Biosafety, Second meeting of the Conference of the Parties serving as the meeting of the Parties to the Nagoya Protocol on Access and Benefit-sharing, held 2 – 17 December, 2016 in Cancun , Mexico.