



STATEMENT BY

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Distinguished audience, Ladies and Gentlemen,

It is a great honour for me to address you at this session of the Cairo Climate Talks in this beautiful and historic city. I want to extend my sincere appreciation to the German Embassy in Cairo, the Ministry of Environment of Egypt, the German Society for International Cooperation and to the German Academic Exchange Service, for inviting me to address you this evening.

Indeed, these talks represent the kind of in-depth discussions and exchange of experiences that are needed to face the challenges presented by climate change.

You may be wondering why I, as the new Head of the UN Convention of Biological Diversity, have been invited to speak about climate change. Well, there are very strong linkages between these two critical challenges we are facing that may not be obvious or so well known to the general public and decision makers, and sometimes not even to those who are involved in defining and shaping these agendas, but each of them separately. The truth is, that we are way too used to break big problems into smaller pieces and then addressing them in silos, in order to find solutions. There is nothing wrong with that in certain domains; but certainly when we deal with nature and natural systems, such approaches are not very effective because in reality natural systems do not operate in silos! They operate in a complex web of systems that influence each other.

What I want to say is that biodiversity and climate change are artificially separated and treated by us, humans, as separate regimes. So, in my address to you today, I would like to focus on the linkages between the biodiversity and climate change agendas and emphasize that only if we approach these two global public challenges from a holistic, system perspective, could we identify solutions that are viable and sustainable in the long run.

Tonight, I will speak about three issues; firstly, I will briefly discuss impacts of climate change on biodiversity, secondly I will highlight how we can reduce the impacts of climate change on biodiversity, and thirdly I will discuss the role that biodiversity can play in responding to climate change.

Let me start by discussing the impacts of climate change on biodiversity, and why we need to be concerned about them.

The Millennium Ecosystem Assessment named climate change as one of the 5 global drivers of biodiversity loss and the fifth report of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change tells us that the impacts of climate change are felt the most in natural systems. Climate change will negatively impact biodiversity through increased extreme weather events, warming ocean temperatures, changing precipitation and melting snow/ ice, as well as changes in air temperature and seasonal patterns. These changes in turn will lead to drastic changes in biodiversity such as higher instances of wildfires, coral bleaching, sea level rise, changes in species distribution, and changes in the timing of lifecycle events in many species.

And Egypt is not immune to these impacts. It is especially vulnerable to sea-level rise which results in loss of territory, such as the sinking of the Rosetta Apex, coastal erosion and salt-water intrusion into underground reservoirs. Sea-level rise could result in significantly reduced fertility in the Nile Delta and I know that I don't have to emphasize how serious that would be for Egypt.

But why should what happens in the natural world matter to us? All these changes seem removed from the daily lives of ordinary Egyptians. Well, because we as humans are an intrinsic part of the natural world, and because we rely so greatly on the natural world – directly and indirectly – we need to be ready to take action to reduce potential impacts on biodiversity and ecosystems.

For example, coral bleaching and coastal erosion could result in dramatic economic changes in the Egypt's coastal regions. Firstly, they could result in a reduction in revenues from marine-based tourism.

Coral reefs are an important attraction in nature-based tourism and contribute a significant portion of Egypt's tourism dollars (the tourism sector contributes about 3.6% to total GDP). Secondly, many coastal Egyptian communities rely on these coastal habitats for food and for shoreline protection. As the TEEB report informed us, biodiversity and the ecosystem services it supports, are the GDP of the poor.

At this point you must all be getting pretty depressed. But let's stay on the positive side, and take action! While climate change will have major impacts on biodiversity, there is much we can do to reduce these impacts, and/ or their magnitude. The global community has already agreed on what needs to be done – whether it is in decisions under the Biodiversity Convention, in the Strategic Plan for Biodiversity 2011-2020 and its Aichi Biodiversity Targets, the Paris Climate Agreement, the Sendai Framework for Disaster Risk Reduction or the Sustainable Development Goals.

Let me now turn to the second point I want to discuss – how we can lend a helping hand to nature, to allow her to adapt to climate change.

You have heard the term “resilience” a lot these days – for example, building infrastructure that is climate resilient, helping communities to be more resilient to the effects of climate change. “Resilience” is a term that originates in complex systems science, and systems ecology, and in the context of climate change it means the ability of an ecosystem to bounce back from external shocks caused by climate-related events.

We can help biodiversity and ecosystems to be more resilient and adapt to climate change by reducing other human-related impacts on biodiversity; we have to halt ecosystem destruction and degradation, eliminate pollution, eradicate invasive alien species and sustainably utilise components of biodiversity. In addition we need to invest in ecosystem conservation and restoration.

Furthermore, we can help nature to adapt by continuously assessing which groups and ecosystems are vulnerable to climate change, and what threats climate change poses to them. We must also monitor actual impacts of climate change on biodiversity. Egypt is well placed in this regard because it has, within its National Biodiversity Strategy and Action Plan, identified a Strategic Goal to “Prepare for climate change and combat desertification” and a related Target: “By 2020, investigate and monitor all the effects of climate change on biodiversity and ecosystem services”.

Moreover, we help nature to adapt by ensuring that that whatever actions we take to mitigate and adapt to climate change do not have negative impacts on biodiversity – for example, biofuel expansion has the potential for large-scale habitat destruction. If implemented correctly environmental impact assessments, and strategic environmental assessments are great tools to ensure that impacts on biodiversity are minimised. I note that in its National Determined Contribution, Egypt has the aim to proactively protect coastal zones. I would like to urge caution in your approach, as some coastal zone protection schemes, such as sea walls, actually have negative impacts on biodiversity.

This brings me to the final point I wish to discuss this evening, which is the role that nature plays in responding to climate change. This is my favourite one.

The Biodiversity Convention published a report last year that highlights that terrestrial and coastal ecosystems store more than five times as much carbon as the atmosphere, whilst land cover change and ecosystem degradation are responsible for about 10% of the total yearly anthropogenic carbon emissions. Therefore sustainable management of ecosystems can lead to global and national mitigation goals through avoided emissions and increased carbon sequestration.

Ecosystem-based climate change adaptation or EbA for short, is a tool that can be used to maintain and increase the resilience and reduce the vulnerability of ecosystems and people to the impacts of climate change. When correctly implemented, EbA provides an affordable means to adapt to the impacts of climate change. For example, Egypt intends to protect the genetic diversity of livestock and crop species; this is an excellent example of using biodiversity to adapt to climate change.

We are now in the final four years of the Strategic Plan for Biodiversity. We need to turn those global agreements I mentioned earlier into national and local action. Implementation of actions to address climate change needs to be enhanced and scaled-up, and we need a stronger sense of urgency, because the loss of biodiversity, the extinction of species, and the loss of ecosystem services, are either impossible or very difficult, and costly, to reverse. And without maintaining biodiversity and healthy ecosystems that have the ability to absorb the shocks of climate change, we will not be able to adapt to climate change, and indeed survive and thrive on this Planet.

As we look ahead to 2018 and to Egypt hosting the 14th UN Conference on Biodiversity let us all remember the strong linkages between biodiversity and climate change, and that biodiversity is a key solution to climate change. I am confident that under the stewardship of Egypt and with the support of the Secretariat of the Biodiversity Convention and all critical partners we will make the important strides needed to better integrate these two agendas together.

Thank you.