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**ON THE OCCASION OF THE  
AFRICAN MINISTERIAL SUMMIT ON BIODIVERSITY**

**Land and ecosystem degradation and restoration: Priorities for increased investments in  
biodiversity and resilience in Africa**

**Sharm-El-Sheikh, Egypt, 13 November 2018**

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Thank you, Chairman Radwan, for that very kind introduction. It is a pleasure to be here with you – and together with all of my colleagues — here in Egypt and here in Sharm El-Sheikh. I am pleased to speak today on behalf not only of the Convention on Biological Diversity, but also on behalf of the other members of the Liaison Group of Biodiversity-related Conventions.

I want to also recognize her distinguished Excellency, Yasmine Fouad, the Minister of Environment of Egypt. Thank you, Yasmine, for your partnership and for your leadership.

As we all know well, for millenniums, Egypt has not only been at the forefront of human civilization, it has shown that nature and human progress can coexist harmoniously. From the banks of the Nile River to the shores of the Red Sea, including, right here, at this magnificent location, Egypt has long shown us that sustainable development and care for nature can not only go hand-in-hand, they ultimately depend upon each other. This is a lesson that our ancestors knew well — and it is one that we must respect and build upon both for our own times and for the sake of future generations.

My colleagues, we have important work to do together. For the next two weeks, we are holding the fourteenth meeting of the Conference of the Parties to the Convention on Biological Diversity.

This year marks the twenty-fifth anniversary of this milestone international convention that aims to safeguard the future of humanity and of all of our fellow species on this small planet — this one home — that we all share together.

The Convention on Biological Diversity came out of the landmark 1992 Rio Earth Summit, together with our sister Conventions: The United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change and the United Nations Convention to Combat Desertification. And I am so pleased to be joined here by my fellow executive secretaries.

Patricia and Monique, I know I speak for us all when I say that our presence here together is both a sign of the tremendous cooperation among us, and the interconnectedness between climate, biodiversity, and land management. We all recognize, and science supports, the fact that progress in these three critical areas of nature must go hand-in-hand.

And just as nature is interlinked, so are humanity and nature — a fact recognized and codified in the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals, in which progress on all areas, including health, water, food systems, and human security, is acknowledged to depend in no small part on the wise conservation and stewardship of nature.

We at the Secretariat are committed to working with you to achieve progress on shared targets and on all Sustainable Development Goals. This year's conference is a critical step forward in reaching the conservation and sustainable use targets that the Parties have already taken for the year 2020, and in designing new, bold commitments and contributions for 2030 and beyond. Our 2050 Vision is simple but profound: living in harmony with nature.

And it is no accident that we start this critical conference with a meeting of ministers of environment from Africa on land and ecosystem degradation and restoration and on priorities for increased investments in biodiversity and resilience in Africa.

No region of the world has a more important role to play in protecting the future of humanity and the future of the planet than Africa. The case for African leadership in conservation and sustainable development is clear — diplomatically, economically, environmentally and morally.

Let us all remember that, when humanity first emerged out of nature, it emerged on the continent of Africa. And when some of our common ancestors first came out of Africa to eventually travel to the farthest ends of the Earth, they first passed right through this very region — the Sinai Peninsula.

I hope that today's meeting and this conference can borrow from their spirit and chart a new path forward for all of humanity — to live in harmony with nature. I say this not only in the spirit of hope, but also because our safety and security and common progress as a species depends upon it.

Colleagues, let us not lose sight of the very difficult challenges that we face. As it now stands, we humans are rapidly destroying nature. We are destroying, the shared natural infrastructure and natural resources that support life on earth, human development and well-being.

As you all know well, today more than 77 per cent of land on Earth, excluding Antarctica, has been modified by humans, up from just 15 per cent a century ago. Vertebrate populations have declined by 60 per cent from their 1970 levels alone. Extinction rates are 1,000 times their natural — pre-industrial — rates.

Drivers of degradation continue to be fuelled by unsustainable agricultural and forestry practices expanding into natural habitats, climate change, invasive alien species, and pollution. In specific areas, urban expansion, infrastructure development, and the impacts of extractive industries are also taking a toll.

Land, freshwater and ocean degradation are also major contributors to climate change. Soon the Earth could switch from being a carbon sink to becoming a carbon emitter. This would hold cascading consequences for the planet's resilience.

And the costs are profound. Even if we just consider the economic costs, as the report from the Intergovernmental Science-Policy Platform on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services shows, ecosystem degradation costs more than 10 per cent of annual global gross product. The costs to health, food and water, human security and other critical priorities are likewise critical. Across the world, including in Africa, these losses hold populations back on their path to sustainable development.

But we have the knowledge and the skills to change this path!

The benefits to biodiversity from both land restoration and conservation are significant. Properly leveraged, the capacity of ecosystems to naturally regenerate can also multiply the impact of restoration interventions. Adequately considered, species and genetic diversity in the composition of restored ecosystems can ensure the resilience of restoration outcomes, especially in light of future climate change.

Restoration of freshwater and marine ecosystems can also yield critical benefits to biodiversity and to the health and well-being of all communities, including in Africa. Sustainable harvesting practices that minimize ecosystem impacts provide nutrition and livelihoods for coastal populations. Healthy oceans also are able to absorb even more than the roughly 25 per cent of all carbon storage they currently provide.

The inclusion of a quantitative global target for ecosystem restoration in the Strategic Plan for Biodiversity 2011-2020 (i.e. Aichi Biodiversity Target 15), despite the challenges to interpret and monitor it, have paved the way for further global policy commitments and initiatives on restoration.

And Africa, in particular, has shown that it can lead on conservation and restoration. Indeed, the African continent has shown that it can mobilize political commitments in support of the global restoration movement. With pledges by 27 African countries under the African Forest Landscape Restoration Initiative now surpassing 110 million hectares, it has placed itself at the centre of this agenda. Notably, this goes beyond governments, with many non-State actors also making pledges and sharing innovative approaches to restore the health and productivity of many ecosystems.

And I want you to know that the United Nations, including all seven of our biodiversity-related conventions, are here as your partner. We can work hand-in-hand with you to support the global restoration movement and increase investments in biodiversity and resilience in Africa.

The road ahead will not be easy: urgent and effective, multi-stakeholder action of great magnitude is needed to change the current trajectory of human life on Earth: from self-extinction, to survival and thriving together, with all the ecosystems and forms of life on Earth.

But it is a road that we can and must walk together: and we already see that the spirit of community and cooperation is beginning to gather here at this conference. Over the next two weeks, we will have representation from the 196 Parties to the Convention, and from our colleagues in the NGO community and the private sector, who are working together with us to make sure all sectors of the economy and of society play their part.

The solution involves all of us.

We have representation from national Governments and international organizations, and from colleagues at the subnational levels — regions and states, cities, towns and villages of every shape and size — that want to work together to preserve our common future.

We have leadership from indigenous peoples and local communities — those who are closest to the land, whose survival is most at risk, and whose traditional knowledge and practices can also show us the way forward.

Colleagues, let us not forget, that we represent here both our respective peoples and all people, and especially our youth. Our own publics and the global public want us to succeed. They are present here as well through the media, through online platforms and through direct participation. And they will only become more involved to preserve the future in the years ahead, as we mount renewed engagement efforts and public participation towards 2020 and beyond.

Colleagues, I want to close by reaffirming and recommitting as a Secretariat to working with you — in Africa and around the world. I am mindful that, for far too long, the burden of ecosystem degradation has fallen most on regions of the world that have been least able to afford it.

Regions of the world where the impacts of biodiversity loss, desertification and climate change are already being felt severely cannot and should not disproportionately pay for global challenges either by sacrificing their own sustainability pathways or through increased vulnerability to disaster, displacement and other deleterious impacts.

We are committed to building a post-2020 global biodiversity framework whereby the benefits are co-designed and shared. We are working to engage across sectors to mainstream biodiversity-based decisions into policies and plans so that we can address these challenges and create new opportunities that bring greater balance between social well-being, life on Earth, and sustainable economic growth. And I am so pleased that Naoko from the Global Environment Facility is here to talk about some of the specific ways that we can finance these co-benefits.

And I also want you to know that we are committed to working together to ensure that your peoples see and experience the benefits first-hand. An important movement is growing. One that has the potential to change our future. And nature is at the centre. Conservation and sustainable development cannot just be something we talk about in convention halls in beautiful settings such as this — they must be seen and felt in the everyday lives of all of our citizens. We must demonstrate for them that nature is not just something “out there” and “set aside”. Nature is life, including our own lives. Nature is you! Nature is here! Nature is all of us!

The work that you all do every day in your own countries is the work that will determine the future of all life on earth. As a unique species, we can imagine the future, and then create it.

We meet again in Beijing in 2020 for the fifteenth meeting of the Conference of the Parties. Success will depend on the vision and the work that we all put into it from today and every day until then and beyond.

I am hopeful that the adoption of this Summit's Ministerial Declaration on Biodiversity and the Pan-African Action Agenda on Ecosystem Restoration for Increased Resilience will provide an impetus for the implementation of that Short-Term Action Plan. The Secretariat of the Convention stands ready to further support this work, with partners, including the resources deployed through the Forest Ecosystem Restoration Initiative.

Your political leadership, paired with the support of the African Union Commission, the African Ministerial Conference on the Environment, the New Partnership for Africa's Development Agency, and the United Nations system, will help elevate the importance of restoration in achieving our 2050 Vision of "living in harmony with nature". It will also contribute to shaping the post-2020 global biodiversity framework. As a practical step forward, I recognize Africa's support to the proposed United Nations Decade of Ecosystem Restoration, 2021-2030, and the identification of concrete actions at the regional and national levels to be taken among African nations during this decade.

The year 2020 will mark the seventy-fifth anniversary of the founding of the United Nations. And 2020 will mark the five-year point of the Sustainable Development Goals, which are targeted towards the year 2030. 2020 will also mark a renewed focus for this process and, through it, for the future of humanity and nature itself.

Over the course of the next two weeks, and over the course of the next two years, we will be making decisions that impact not only the next two decades but the next two millenniums and beyond. May we all have the wisdom and courage to act accordingly. I count on your continued leadership and partnership.

Thank you.

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