

Press Conference for Launch of the Biodiversity Synthesis Report of the Millennium Ecosystem Assessment

London 19 May 2005

DRAFT SPEAKING NOTE FOR JIM KNIGHT

Introductions

Thank you for giving me the opportunity to speak at today's launch of the biodiversity synthesis report of the Millennium Ecosystem Assessment. Before I say a few words about this important event, I would like to take this opportunity to tell you a little about myself.

Last week, I was appointed as Minister for rural affairs, landscape and biodiversity as part of the new government. For the first time, the UK has a Minister whose responsibilities specifically refer to biodiversity, and I am thankful for the opportunity to be involved in such important work for my department – Defra - and for the UK as a whole.

As MP for Dorset South, I have the privilege of being associated with some of the most outstanding coastline in the UK. The importance of this coastline has been recognised via its World Heritage status, and I have seen for myself how the protection of this landscape and the opportunities presented by its protected status has benefited local people.

The value of ecosystems

This local example echoes one of the key international biodiversity messages in the biodiversity synthesis report which has been launched here today. We value biodiversity not just for its own sake. It also provides important services such as climate regulation, water purification, pollination, soil fertility and water regulation. It also contributes to the material welfare and the livelihoods of people, and has a key role to play in socio-economic issues, including security, healthcare, and social relations.

For example:

- 3.5 billion people depend on the ocean for their primary source of food
- 75% of the world's population rely on traditional medicine derived from natural sources for their healthcare needs

These two examples help to highlight the importance of biodiversity for all of us. However, the effects of biodiversity loss are often felt most acutely by those in the developing world, who rely directly on the services provided by ecosystems for everyday survival.

Drivers of biodiversity loss

The MA has identified a number of key drivers of biodiversity loss. One of the major drivers is habitat change, particularly from conversion for agriculture. The MA has found that a quarter of the earth's surface is now dedicated to cultivated systems. The Report also recognised the impact of climate change on biodiversity, which in turn affect livelihoods. The United Nations Environment Program reports the alarming fact that 250 million people worldwide are directly affected by desertification. These drivers could substantially change the natural world we live in, affecting everything from the amount of water available to the yield from our most important crops. These changes could have devastating effects on the livelihoods of the entire international community.

Biodiversity and sustainable livelihoods

It is no coincidence that the regions facing the greatest challenges in meeting the 2015 Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) for development are also regions facing large problems of ecosystem degradation. The MA biodiversity Synthesis Report highlights the link between biodiversity and the delivery of the MDGs. There is real potential for synergy between the various internationally agreed targets relating to biodiversity, environmental sustainability, and development. However, this Report highlights the dangers of not securing these synergies. We need to ensure that these links are explored in order to secure positive changes for the environment and people.

The 2010 target

The findings of the Synthesis Report also support the need for long term sustained action well beyond our current horizon of the 2010 biodiversity target agreed by the World Summit on Sustainable Development. This target - to significantly reduce the rate of loss of global biodiversity by 2010 - has provided the foundation for the UK's efforts to help conserve global biodiversity. But I also recognise the need for further joined-up, long term action by the international community if we are to have a real chance of slowing global biodiversity loss.

Working towards achieving 2010

The Synthesis Report highlights that despite the international commitment to reduce the rate of biodiversity loss, we are still losing biodiversity at an alarming rate. Changes in the world's biodiversity due to human activity have been more rapid in the last 50 years than at any other time in human history.

How do we address this continued loss of biodiversity? Above all, we must raise the profile of biodiversity issues amongst key decision makers in governments and business around the world.

The real gains for biodiversity and sustainable livelihoods will come through mainstreaming – that means taking account of biodiversity in all our decision making: by governments, by business and, of course, through the development aid process. We have to step up our efforts and take every opportunity to explain and promote the importance to human society of biodiversity and the services which it supports if we are to change the attitudes and practices which result in biodiversity loss.

Better science base

The MA also supports the message that good policy and decision making for biodiversity requires a robust science base. It has done an excellent job in bringing together the most up to date information on biodiversity. The international community now needs to focus on identifying priorities for future research and work together in filling the gaps.

Conclusions

I would like to congratulate all those involved in putting together the various reports and documents of the Millennium Ecosystem Assessment. The findings of this biodiversity synthesis report, and the MA in general, highlight the risks to humankind and the planet if we do not heed the warnings. These messages cannot not be ignored.