



**CONVENTION ON
BIOLOGICAL DIVERSITY**

Please Check Against Delivery

**REMARKS BY
HAMDALLAH ZEDAN
EXECUTIVE SECRETARY
CONVENTION ON BIOLOGICAL DIVERSITY
TO
THE INTERNATIONAL DAY FOR BIOLOGICAL DIVERSITY
19 May 2005
Montreal, Canada**

Ladies and Gentlemen, distinguished guests,

I would like to welcome you all to this year's celebrations of the International Day for Biological Diversity. Let me begin by expressing my gratitude to McGill University for the generous offer to host this event and to the Secretariat of the Millennium Ecosystem Assessment for their participation today. I would also thank the representatives of the city of Montreal, Quebec and Canada, as well as the various government representatives, who have taken time to attend our event today.

The International Day marks the adoption of the agreed text of the Convention on Biological Diversity on 22 May 1992. It was proclaimed by the United Nations General Assembly to increase understanding and awareness of the value of biodiversity and the need for its conservation and sustainable use.

The Convention itself is essentially an instrument for sustainable development. It recognizes that biological diversity is not only about plants, animals and micro-organisms and their ecosystems, but also about people and our need for food security, medicines, fresh air and clean water, shelter, and a healthy environment in which to live.

The theme of this year's International Day, "Biodiversity: Life Insurance for our Changing World", is intended to encapsulate the central role of biodiversity in underpinning sustainable development, and in protecting society from the consequences of unexpected shocks, such as water shortages, the emergence of infectious diseases, extreme weather events and the genetic vulnerability of crops and livestock.

The economic development and technological progress achieved over the years have helped to improve living conditions for many. But, at the same time, the biological diversity of life on our planet has been reduced at an unprecedented rate, threatening the sustainability of hard-won economic advances.

Change is, of course, inevitable. But biological diversity increases our capacity to withstand it. Diversity within species helps them to adapt and survive. Diversity among species increases the resilience of ecosystems, by providing multiple sources for ecosystem services. Greater resilience in ecosystems makes sustainable development possible and protects all life from the potential consequences of sudden changes, such as that brought on by natural disasters like the recent tsunami.

This message has been fundamental to the work of the Convention over the years and was reiterated at the World Summit for Sustainable Development in Johannesburg in 2002.

We are therefore honoured to launch the Biodiversity Synthesis Report of the Millennium Ecosystem Assessment, which was designed to meet the needs of the Convention on Biological Diversity.

The findings of the report confirm the decline in biodiversity but at the same time give some grounds for optimism. The report notes that virtually all ecosystems have been transformed by human activities. For example:

- 25 per cent of commercially exploited marine fish stocks are over-harvested, leading to the closure of many fisheries with significant socio-economic consequences;
- Changes in land cover, in particular tropical deforestation and desertification, tend to reduce local rainfall and contribute to desertification and water shortages;
- The capacity of ecosystems to mitigate the effects of extreme weather events such as the recent tsunami in the Indian Ocean has been reduced as a result of the conversion of wetlands, forests and mangroves.

The report also states that there is no indication that the rate of biodiversity loss is slowing. Already 15 of 24 basic ecosystem services are in a state of decline. The report confirms what the Parties to the Convention have understood for some time—biodiversity loss continues at constant or increasing rates, with negative consequences for human well-being in the future.

The impacts of ecosystem change and biodiversity loss are not evenly distributed. The poor are disproportionately affected. With limited access to substitutes or alternatives to the ecosystem services upon which they depend, changes that reduce the ability of ecosystems to provide critical goods and services will have a greater impact on the poor, potentially undermining our ability to reach the Millennium Development Goals.

The irony is that as biodiversity and ecosystems are degraded, the need for the many services is increasing. We need, for example, more food for a growing population. Therefore, the maintenance of agricultural biodiversity, both at the genetic and the species level, and a diversification of food production are essential to ensure supplies in light of possible attacks by diseases and pests.

The Millennium Assessment report does not provide a new message – these are findings that have been repeated in other contexts. It is however, the consensus opinion of over 1300 scientists from around the world. It expresses the message that the conservation and sustainable use of biodiversity is not strictly an either/or proposition. The indirect value of biodiversity conservation can help ensure the supply of ecosystem services over the long term.

The report's findings on the achievement of the 2010 biodiversity target and the Millennium Development Goals are cause for reflection. Given the observed trends in biodiversity loss, it is going to require an unprecedented effort

if we have to achieve by 2010 a significant reduction in the rate of biodiversity loss at the global level.

There is, however, hope. The report mentions that, with appropriate responses, it will be possible to achieve, by 2010, an actual reduction in the rate of biodiversity loss for certain components of biodiversity, for certain indicators, and in certain regions. Many of the necessary actions to achieve this reduction in biodiversity loss at the sub-global level are already incorporated into the programmes of work of the Convention on Biological Diversity.

Upon first glance, there seems to be the need for very marked trade-offs between achieving the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) and the 2010 biodiversity target. Many strategies that attempt to meet the MDGs targets may indeed be detrimental to the conservation of biological diversity. For example, the improvement of rural road networks may provide better access to markets for rural dwellers but will likely accelerate rates of biodiversity loss. In the long run, however, this decline could affect the ecosystem services upon which rural livelihoods are based, offsetting the short-term income gains. It is therefore important that any strategies for poverty alleviation and income generation take biodiversity concerns into consideration

This is an important conclusion—in addition to the short-term policy frameworks, decision makers need to set targets and goals for the long-term. We need to begin to look at targets for mid century—2050, and for the end of the century.

We hope that the report will prove useful to all those concerned with the Convention on Biological Diversity and provide assistance in the realization of its objectives, soon, and for the long term.

Thank you.