

## UN opens Biodiversity Year with plea to save the world's ecosystems

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1 January 2010 – In a bid to curb the unprecedented loss of the world's species due to human activity – at a rate some experts put at 1,000 times the natural progression – the United Nations is marking 2010 as the International Year of Biodiversity, with a slew of events highlighting the vital role the phenomenon plays in maintaining the life support system on Planet Earth.

“Humans are part of nature's rich diversity and have the power to protect or destroy it,” the Secretariat of the Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD), which is hosted by the UN Environment Programme (UNEP), said in summarizing the Year's main message, with its focus on raising awareness to generate public pressure for action by the world's decision makers.

“Biodiversity, the variety of life on Earth, is essential to sustaining the living networks and systems that provide us all with health, wealth, food, fuel and the vital services our lives depend on. Human activity is causing the diversity of life on Earth to be lost at a greatly accelerated rate.

These losses are irreversible, impoverish us all and damage the life support systems we rely on every day. But we can prevent them.”

The Convention – which opened for signature at the Earth Summit in Rio de Janeiro in 1992, entered into force at the end of 1993 and now has 193 Parties – is based on the premise that the world's diverse ecosystems purify the air and the water that are the basis of life, stabilize and moderate the Earth's climate, renew soil fertility, cycle nutrients and pollinate plants.

As a former UNEP Executive Director, Klaus Töpfer, put it: “If any part of the web suffers breaks down, the future of life on the planet will be at risk.” That is why the UN General Assembly proclaimed 2010 as the International Year of Biodiversity.

Although initial celebrations began in November under the slogan “Biodiversity is life, biodiversity is our life,” the official launch will take place in Berlin on 11 January. This will be followed on 21 and 22 January by the first major event of the Year, a high-profile meeting at the Paris headquarters of the UN Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), which is expected to bring together heads of state, royalty and their representatives.

A host of other events – meetings, symposia, multi-media exhibitions – will follow throughout the year in venues around world, from Trondheim, Norway, to Delhi, India, from Doha, Qatar, to Cartagena, Colombia, and from Shanghai, China, to Nairobi,

Kenya, culminating in a high-level meeting at UN Headquarters in New York at the start of the General Assembly's 65th annual General Debate in September and an official closing in Kanazawa, Japan, in December.

“A wide variety of environmental goods and services that we take for granted are under threat, with profound and damaging consequences for ecosystems, economies and livelihoods,” Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon said in November at the start of the pre-celebrations.

“In this International Year, we must counter the perception that people are disconnected from our natural environment. We must increase understanding of the implications of losing biodiversity. In 2010, I call on every country and each citizen of our planet to engage in a global alliance to protect life on Earth.”

The Montreal-based CBD Secretariat likewise stresses the urgency in raising public awareness of the importance of biodiversity and the consequences of its loss.

“The goal for raising awareness of these issues is to generate public pressure for action by decision makers, and to create the conditions for governments, individuals and other important sectors, to be encouraged to implement the Convention and to engage with other international and national institutions, towards achieving the goals of the Convention.”

The Convention covers all ecosystems, species, and genetic resources, linking traditional conservation efforts to the economic goal of using biological resources sustainably, setting principles for the fair and equitable sharing of the benefits from the use of genetic resources, notably for commercial use and covering the rapidly expanding field of biotechnology, and addressing technology development and transfer, benefit-sharing and biosafety.

While recognizing that ecosystems, species and genes must be used for the benefit of humans, the Convention stipulates that this must be done in a way and at a rate that does not lead to the long-term decline of diversity.

It offers decision-makers guidance based on the precautionary principle that where there is a threat of significant reduction or loss of biological diversity, lack of full scientific certainty should not be used as a reason for postponing measures to avoid or minimize such a threat. It acknowledges that substantial investment is required to conserve diversity, but argues that conservation will bring significant environmental, economic and social benefits in return.

Looking at the economic costs of action or inaction, a recent UN-backed Economics of Ecosystems and Biodiversity (TEEB) study estimated loss of natural capital due to deforestation and degradation at between \$2 trillion and \$4.5 trillion every year – “a staggering economic cost of taking nature for granted.

“It is estimated that for an annual investment of \$45 billion into protected areas alone, we could secure the delivery of ecosystem services worth some \$5 trillion a year,” it said. “When compared to current financial losses on the markets, this is not a big price to pay. Sound ecosystem and biodiversity management, and the inclusion of Natural Capital in governmental and business accounting can start to redress inaction and reduce the cost of future losses.”