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### **Biodiversity: The More, the Merrier**

22/05/2010 - The day of May 22 is celebrated worldwide as International Biodiversity Day. Although very often invoked in expert contexts, with complex theories and data, describing what biodiversity means is relatively easy and straightforward. Namely, biodiversity refers to any presence of diverse forms of life in a particular environment. This may be the variety of bacteria in your stomach, genes that code your biological uniqueness, or presence of mountains and seas in your country's landscape as well as any other mosaic of habitats you may encounter through your daily routines. Yes, even a spider preying on a fly in your living room is an inseparable part of biodiversity that represents life on Earth.

Biodiversity makes Earth habitable and comfortable for human kind. It provides us with indispensable resources such as food, pharmaceutical goods, building material or fuel. Our planet's ecosystems also supply us with numerous services: air and clean water, soil regeneration, pollination and climate regulation being just some of them. Biodiversity also has a distinct social role, supporting resources for a rich social and cultural life, in terms of recreation and education, aesthetics, spirituality and artistic inspiration.

The importance of biodiversity is enshrined in the United Nations Millennium Declaration and the corresponding Millennium Development Goals, by stating its importance in "alleviating hunger and poverty, promoting good human health, and being the basis for ensuring freedom and equity for all."

However, despite its undisputable value, biodiversity is constantly being under pressure by human action and climate change that seriously affect the number of species that we share our planet with. Extinctions of species caused by humans are taking place at 1,000 times nature's normal rate. Last year, the Red List of the World Conservation Union, IUCN showed that even 38% of the observed species are in danger of extinction. The Millennium Ecosystem Assessment Report gives a plastic illustration: over the past 50 years, humans have changed ecosystems more rapidly and extensively than in any comparable period of time in human history. This has resulted in a substantial and largely irreversible loss in the diversity of life on Earth. Changes in the availability and quality of biodiversity and shifts in ecosystem balance minimize resources for the poor and vulnerable and threaten our natural habitat.

### **BIODIVERSITY IN BOSNIA AND HERZEGOVINA**

Bosnia and Herzegovina is a country rich in biodiversity. This country is considered to be among the top five biodiversity abounding countries in Europe (BiH Biodiversity

Assesment, USAID 2003) and as such especially important in terms of European biodiversity due to its high level of endemic species and relicts.

This comes as no surprise, when one considers that according to National Environmental Action Plan BiH is home to 30% or 1,800 endemic species of Balkan flora and numerous threatened species. The prerequisite for such biological richness lies in the geomorphological structure of Bosnia and Herzegovina, with series of diverse landscapes and climate zones, from northern plains along the Sava river to Dinaric mountain ranges and the Adriatic coast in the south, and also the fact that more than a half of the surface area of BiH is covered with natural and semi-natural ecosystems.

While BiH is an important location of biodiversity in the region, it has a high proportion of threatened species in Europe. The war destruction and the lack of concerted conservation efforts have left the biodiversity and natural resources endangered and unprotected. According to estimates and criteria of the International Union for Conservation of Nature in BiH, about 600 species of higher plants, 250 species of vertebrates (fish, amphibians, reptiles, birds and mammals) and dozens of species of invertebrates, and about 50 species of mushrooms and lichens are more or less endangered. Very low percentage of the land in BiH has been set aside in protected areas, and these are neither adequately organized nor financially sustainable. Two of three National Parks (Sutjeska and Kozara) are protected not because of their biological value but as historical battlefields from the Second World War, and the third park "Una", although declared national park two years ago, it still has no management plan in place.

Threatening biodiversity results in conversion of habitats, overexploitation of resources and great pollution. Negligence towards environment and systematic destruction of natural habitats and resources inevitably lead to extinction of numerous endangered plants and animals, such as gentian, salamander, grouse, brown bear and some species of trout.

Consequently, it is necessary to launch initiatives supporting biodiversity and environment preservation in Bosnia and Herzegovina. One of these initiatives is a project implemented by the UNDP's Energy and Environment Cluster and funded by Global Environment Fund (GEF) – "Mainstreaming Karst Peatlands Conservation in Key Economic Sectors". The project promotes sustainable development of karst fields and biodiversity in southwestern parts of the country - Livanjsko polje, internationally recognized wetland.

Livanjsko polje is the site of unique value; not only that it represents the largest wetland in Bosnia and Herzegovina, but at the same time it is the world largest partially flooded karst field consisting of valuable wetlands, an important bird habitat, marsh, peat and grasslands; all teeming with endemic and rare species.

One of the associated problems of biodiversity protection is the fact that local people perceive it, especially designation of protected areas, as a potential threat to their day to day business activities and regional development. However, they should value its

protection as an opportunity to improve environment and development of ecotourism. As a result, development of environmentally aware business and promotion of local green economy will be supported by the Project “Mainstreaming Karst Peatlands Conservation in Key Economic Sectors”.

These UNDP`s initiatives being implemented in Bosnia and Herzegovina, as parts of the broader picture of UN efforts to preserve biodiversity worldwide, reflect the words of the UN`s General Secretary, Ban Ki Moon, who emphasized the importance of environmental efforts in 2010, the international year of biodiversity, by calling on every country and each citizen of our planet to join together in global alliance for protection of life on the Earth.