

Speech by the Federal Chancellor at the launch of the International Year of Biodiversity 2010

Monday 11 January 2010

in Berlin

Minister, Norbert Röttgen,

Excellencies,

Guests,

Colleagues from the Bundestag,

Professor Leinfelder,

Ladies and Gentlemen,

May I also welcome you warmly to the launch of the International Year of Biodiversity here at the Museum of Natural History in Berlin, which is a perfect setting for this event. I am delighted that you have accepted the joint invitation of Federal Environment Minister Norbert Röttgen and myself.

Both my long political history and my current role as Federal Chancellor mean that for me personally - and indeed for the entire Federal Government, as demonstrated by the wide range of ministries represented here today - the conservation of biological diversity is a particular concern. I have just had a quiet chat with Mr Steiner and we both immediately agreed that the conservation of biological diversity has the same dimension and importance as climate protection. Its complexities are often more difficult to describe. The goals are not quite so straightforward as, for example, restricting global temperature increase to 2°C. But nevertheless it is a fundamental problem and a fundamental component of the whole Rio process, a process which we will review and assess in 2012, 20 years since it began.

For this reason I would like this event at the beginning of the International Year of Biodiversity to send a strong signal of responsibility to the people of the world. We must join forces to steer a new course towards effective international protection of biodiversity and its sustainable use. We need a trend reversal, and it would be wrong

to say, "not now". We need it now - not at some point in the future, but immediately. But I must also stress that we have to be realistic, for it is not easy.

In actual fact 2010 was meant to be the year by which we had achieved a significant reduction in the loss of biodiversity. We will not reach this target. It is no good hiding our heads in the sand – we have to face the facts. That is why we must use this Year of Biodiversity to revitalise our efforts and acknowledge that the loss of habitats and species is dramatic, and that above all the rate of loss is alarming.

Estimates indicate that the global rate of biodiversity loss caused by humans is 100 to 1000 times higher than naturally occurring extinction. Again and again we hear the very simplified argument that biodiversity has always been changing. Similar claims are put forward with regard to climate protection. The actual questions posed each time are: what is caused by humans? How quickly do the changes caused by human intervention in nature occur? The answer is that the loss of species is occurring 100 to 1000 times faster than the natural rate.

This loss of biodiversity has serious consequences for us all - for biological diversity is rather like a database of nature. It is an irreplaceable resource base for meeting the essential needs of our rapidly growing global population. It is a protective shield for preserving human health. For the more biodiversity we have around us, the more robust is our own survival system. Bearing in mind the fact that biodiversity is declining at the same time as the global population is undergoing rapid growth, it is clear that there are in fact two developments in direct opposition to each other, and this exacerbates the negative effects.

We should remember that biodiversity is a natural foundation of life. Billions of people live on food from the oceans. Just looking at developments in the biodiversity of the world's seas sets alarm bells ringing. If we consider how many people are affected by poverty, that most of them live in rural areas and that they are dependent on traditional agricultural methods and on what can be harvested from nature, it becomes clear to us that conserving biodiversity in the form of stable agro-

ecological systems is crucial for the survival of these people. We must not lose sight of this fact.

We also know that agriculture in Europe would be unthinkable without its characteristic soil organisms and biodiversity, the complexities of which we, with our meagre biological knowledge, are not even aware of. Not that I mean to insult anyone here, but I know my own grasp of biology is poor. It is shocking to realise how few species we can even give a name to - and yet how rich biodiversity as a whole is.

On the other hand, some agricultural systems secure the habitats of plants and animals. We know that in Germany – and this is an ongoing battle in nature conservation - certain habitat types, for example heaths, are only conserved because they are used for grazing. In my constituency, a typical migratory area for cranes, a major dispute has just broken out concerning whether to maintain the cranes' feeding areas in the open landscapes or whether to restore landscapes which have been overgrown by trees and can consequently no longer be used by migrating cranes as feeding and resting grounds. In cultivated landscapes, such issues often give rise to disagreements.

Ultimately, every one of us is dependent on well-functioning ecosystems. Diversity is the basis for this, for only diversity ensures that ecosystems can continue to develop and adapt. Such adaptation capacities are vital, especially if we make the link to climate change, which itself puts considerable pressure on the organisms' adaptability and adaptation capacities.

Today, we still know relatively little about complex ecosystems and the interplay between species. We know little about how species react to new situations such as those arising from climate change. We cannot accurately predict what the permanent loss of species means for the system as a whole. But we can be very sure that there is no hope of anything positive coming of it.

This can be clearly illustrated with a few examples, and I would like to name one of these. Probably few here will have heard of the Australian gastric brooding frog. I only just found out about it in connection with today's event - sadly too late. As the name implies, the gastric brooding frog incubates its young in the stomach. The tadpoles secrete a substance into the mother's stomach which stops them being broken down by stomach acids and enzymes. Researchers were confident that a highly effective medicine against stomach ulcers could be developed from this, and initial studies were very promising. However, before the studies could be concluded the only two species of gastric brooding frog became extinct. This demonstrates how we rob ourselves of opportunities because certain natural resources are no longer available to us.

Let me give you two further examples, ones which perhaps hold a little more hope. The cultivation and protection of nearly 12,000 hectares of mangrove forests in the coastal regions of Vietnam cost a good one million US dollars. However, this saved costs of coastal defence measures amounting to over 7 million US dollars. This is a classic example of how a well-structured natural environment can save us money. And we must also remember that mangrove forests serve as a nursery for many fish species and thus form the basis for coastal fishery. If we take action, a classic win-win situation can arise.

Norbert Röttgen has already mentioned the losses caused by the destruction of coral reefs. If CO₂ emissions remain the same, the reefs will probably cease to function altogether within the coming decades. This will have terrible consequences for coastal protection and fish farming. The loss of the reefs would mean the irretrievable loss of livelihood for half a billion people.

You may all know similar examples. We want to draw together these examples and take a closer look at costs and benefits. For this reason, in 2007 the German government, the EU Commission and the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP), jointly commissioned a study to assess the economic value of the provision of food, drinking water, fuels and medicines by functioning ecosystems.

We know that the Stern Review raised the profile of climate change by describing in familiar economic terms the magnitude of the loss arising from inaction. What resources would we have to invest to go even some way towards repairing the damage? I believe that if we start thinking in these terms then we really do have a chance.

The commissioned study has the strong backing of the British government and other countries, and I would like to emphasise my gratitude for that. The results are to be presented at the next meeting of the Conference of the Parties to the Convention on Biological Diversity in Japan this autumn. Already, the findings to date show that we will face enormous costs unless we are prepared to act now and take measures to counter biodiversity loss.

Therefore, in this speech I want to focus not only on the seriousness of the situation but also on the concrete action we can take for the conservation of biodiversity.

Firstly, we must invest financially in the protection and conservation of ecosystems, because these investments pay off. I believe that Germany succeeded in sending important signals during its CBD Presidency. At COP 9 in Bonn in May 2008, I pledged an additional 500 million euros between 2009 and 2012 for the protection of forests and other ecosystems - and from 2013 onwards an annual sum of half a billion euros. I feel this was an important and necessary commitment.

In a first step we have raised funding for Germany's bilateral development cooperation from 200 million euros in 2008 to over 240 million euros.

For this example, it is important to reiterate the following context: conserving habitats and species is always also an aspect of development policy. Around 80 percent of the world's genetic and biological resources are found in so-called developing countries. This, too, is something we must be aware of. These countries have a wealth of biodiversity.

In the case of Africa, for instance, we know that up to 40 percent of species may vanish due to climate change because they cannot adapt to the growing aridity. Visitors to South Africa can already observe this. These developments are not awaiting us at some point in the future; unfortunately they can be seen all too clearly in some examples today.

On top of this, poverty forces people to overuse scarce natural resources. And of course, overuse leads to further destruction. This means we would be wise to invest in the future and view development cooperation and the conservation of biodiversity in a single context. The destruction of biodiversity thus has social, cultural and economic consequences. For this reason, we will only achieve the Millennium Development Goals - the standard goals of development cooperation - if ecosystems can be stabilised on a permanent basis.

It is also interesting to note that the conservation of biodiversity is essentially an aspect of climate protection policy too. This is very evident in forest ecosystems which sequester carbon dioxide and thus regulate the climate. This was also discussed at COP 15 in Copenhagen, a meeting which did not exactly put us in an optimistic mood. But we will not give up, on that point we are all agreed. I have just been talking to Norbert Röttgen and Mr Steiner about this as well. There is no alternative to this negotiation process. The issue of forests played a particularly important role in the negotiations, although I would like to stress that forests must not be used as a means of feigning climate protection. As for the CO2 emission targets, we were ultimately reduced to looking at waste management and similar areas in order to still salvage some kind of result. This is nowhere near the level of quality that climate protection needs.

Whether we are talking about food security, development cooperation or climate protection, we can see how the issues are interwoven. This is why in Germany the different ministries work hand in hand. I am very grateful that this approach has facilitated the sustainable use of some forests and other ecosystems, that they are preserved as carbon stores and that our development cooperation is planned

constructively. The LifeWeb Initiative, which aims to conserve endangered habitats, plays an important role in the selection of suitable projects.

This brings me to the second major challenge for international nature conservation policy after financial support: we need a global network of land and marine protected areas.

Now we know – as it is a topic under discussion, and Germany has a lot of experience in this regard, but some things still have to be spelled out – that globally linked systems of protected areas are urgently needed. We know that it is of little use to take action in one part of the world if nothing is done elsewhere. This is why it is vital to support partner countries in funding these protected areas and establishing effective management structures.

As we know from our experiences at home, it is also important to involve the local population in conservation activities. Only this can lead to long-term success. This basically brings us back full circle: giving fine speeches about protecting fish stocks is not very helpful if the people we are speaking to are hungry and poor.

Above all, we need a fair balance of interests between industrialised and developing countries. In this context, Europe needs to take a good look at itself. If a Summit between the EU and African coastal countries were to ask who represents the greatest threat to fish stocks, the answer is not likely to be those fighting for their daily survival, but rather the fishing fleets which - besides overfishing - do not even pay a fair price for the catch. On this point, we in Europe need to look at ourselves with a critical eye, though I realise how very difficult this can be.

The third area of action which I would like to highlight is the need for benefit sharing with the countries of origin of genetic resources. This, too, is a very complex issue.

Effective international arrangements on access and benefit sharing (ABS) must ensure that the wealth generated from resources primarily benefits the countries they come from. There are flaws in cultural attitudes in this regard. Somehow people

believe that when it comes to nature, anyone has a right of access and can do whatever they like without paying anything for it. However, those of us in developed countries must start acknowledging as a matter of course that we cannot simply take a country's genetic property without giving something in return.

Two years ago in Bonn we developed ambitious guidelines for international arrangements on ABS. This gives us both the opportunity and the obligation to conclude the negotiations successfully by the 10th meeting of the COP in Nagoya, Japan this autumn. You can be very sure that Germany supports this and that we want to jointly advance this process.

During our Presidency we worked hard to press ahead on this issue. We are also willing to continue our support in building the necessary administrative capacities, as we have done with our African partner countries recently. This is another interesting aspect of development policy.

And finally, the fourth key point: it is vital that we improve on our previous efforts to explain and communicate the importance of biological diversity.

I feel that the International Year of Biodiversity is an excellent platform for increasing understanding for and appreciation of biodiversity among both consumers and decision-makers in trade and industry. We need proper support from society on this issue. We need a general awareness that individual behaviour can have a direct influence on the status of ecosystems and biodiversity, and that therefore everyone can help advance biodiversity conservation.

Resource consumption – also a classic topic in the area of sustainable development – must be based on the capacities of ecosystems. Let us not forget: sustainable forest management was shaped by Germany's forestry practices, thus in a way giving currency to the term "sustainability". What has been self-evident for forestry for well over a hundred years must now genuinely apply to all ecosystems.

I believe that the study on the costs and benefits of ecosystem conservation can be very helpful. I also believe that a study alone does not go far enough. Rather, it would be useful to create an actual science-policy platform in the field of biodiversity, similar to the IPCC, the competent scientific body for climate protection. Without the IPCC platform, without the cumulative scientific views – even though opinions may vary – climate protection would not have been brought into focus as a pressing issue in the way it has been. Perhaps this is our opportunity to raise the profile of biodiversity.

I feel that the world can overcome the challenges. I am in favour of creating a UN organisation which addresses environmental policy at the same level as the traditional UN organisations, the scope including climate protection and biodiversity. Perhaps this is a project which we can implement in the run-up to 2012 and the 20th year of the Rio process, without giving the Climate Change Secretariat or others reason to fear they will become redundant. We need to add more weight to this whole issue.

You can tell from my remarks that all these areas are very much interlinked. Unless we secure a fair and equitable utilisation policy and pursue poverty reduction, climate protection and the conservation of biodiversity, we will be facing some extremely tough developments.

To conclude, ladies and gentlemen, I would like to say the following: there are very sound reasons for acting, and we know what we can do, but I also want to highlight the emotional aspects of a world rich in biodiversity. A world which never ceases to amaze us and which teaches us to respect nature. Contemplating the sheer variety of life on Earth is awe-inspiring. And if people do not respect nature, they may not respect each other either.

In this spirit, let us make this year, 2010, a year in which we not only canvass support for the natural diversity of our Earth, but also one in which we take an active stand for biodiversity. Spread this message to the wider world. There is much to be done, but we can achieve our goals.

Thank you very much.