

World Environment Day

Saturday, 5 th June

Biodiversity in Somalia

Source: http://www.so.undp.org/WED/bio_diversty.html

The United Nations declared 2010 the **International Year of Biodiversity** . It is an opportunity to stress the importance of biodiversity for human well-being, reflect on our achievements to safeguard it and encourage a redoubling of our efforts to reduce the rate of biodiversity loss. The theme of WED 2010 is “ Many Species. One Planet. One Future.”

Somalia is an arid and water-stressed country. It has only two permanent rivers. Whereas the country is not well endowed with an abundance of natural resources, it possesses important biological resources within its varied bio-geographic zones. Therefore, particular care needs to be taken to manage them.

The country's main natural resources such as trees, woodlands and grasslands, and aquatic resources (marine and freshwater), are the basis for people's livelihood and therefore the foundation for economic growth and development. The growth and survival of the Country and its people depend strongly on sustainable environment. Pastoralist production, based on livestock and natural products is the backbone of the national economy, supporting over 50% of the population. In the south, agricultural productivity and livelihoods are dependent on the Shabelle and Juba Rivers.

There is a history of poor resource management. Massive hunting in the early part of the 1990s depleted almost all wild animals. Today, similar activities are destroying much of the country's forest resources. This has a serious effect on the marine fisheries. Yet, the country does not have a legal framework for natural resource management. Years of civil war have pitted communities and clans against one another regarding access to grazing lands, watering points and fisheries.

According to the United Nations Environmental Programme (UNEP), approximately 50% of Somalia's land area can be considered permanent pasture, while 13% is suitable for cultivation. Much of the country is arid and semi-desert making it relatively unproductive. The vegetation in Somalia is predominantly dry deciduous bushland and thicket, dominated by species of Acacia and Commiphora. Closed forest cover occupies only about 2.4 % of the country. However, when the Juniperus forests and evergreen tracts in the mountains in the north are included, the total forest coverage would amount to around 14 per cent (90,000 km²) of the land. The mist forests of the Golis Mountains of the northern regions are the only true forest areas of Somalia and are important centres of biological diversity and species endemism. The lucrative charcoal trade raises many concerns for the country's remaining forests.

Vegetation cover is important in terms of stabilizing soils, preventing erosion and encouraging ground water absorption. Virtually all of the tropical floodplain forest that once existed along the Shabelle River has been cleared for smallholder agriculture, including sugar and banana plantations.

Forests are important resources for pastoralists during dry seasons and periods of drought. Forests and woodlands are also important resources because wood is the main source of household energy and construction materials for the bulk of the population. Important native forest exports include frankincense, myrrh, gum Arabic and yicib nuts. In 1985 Somalia was the world's largest source of incense, and produced over 2,000 tones.

Despite its harsh physical environment, Somalia is home to some 3,028 species of higher plants, of which 17 are known to be threatened. Somalia is considered a centre of floral endemism and of the known species, 700 (17 per cent) are endemic. Overgrazing and charcoal production have had a profound impact on species composition, ground cover and the structure of vegetation.

The Somali region has fauna and flora adapted to arid and semi-arid conditions. During the late 1800s an astonishing abundance and diversity of wildlife was reported. This, however, is no longer the case. Ruthless overexploitation has endangered much of the country's wildlife species, while key ecosystems have been seriously degraded. Only small remnant pockets of wildlife exist, with many species approaching extinction. For instance, 14 of the country's 22 antelope species are considered to be threatened. Ten species of bird are endangered. Two of bird species are critically endangered: the Somali thrush (*Turdus ludoviciae*) which is found in mountain-top woodlands in northern Somalia and the bulo burti boubou (*Laniarius liberatus*). Four endemic bird areas are recognized and a further 24 important bird areas have also been identified. About 14 protected areas have been declared in Somalia but only two are thought to be functional. In reality, there has been no formal protection offered to any of these sites since the early 1990s.

Water scarcity is one of the main sources of social conflict in Somalia, particularly during dry periods of the year or drought. In the south, the Shabelle and Juba Rivers are important sources of water for people and livestock, as well as irrigation – the area lying between the two rivers being the country's main agricultural zone. Temporary watercourses (laks) and cemented pans (Berkads) are another source of surface water. Underground aquifers are also widely exploited through boreholes, shallow wells or at natural springs. Agriculture accounts for the largest component of all freshwater withdrawals.

Somalia has the most extensive coastline in Africa. Coral reefs, seabird colonies and turtle nesting beaches are currently unprotected. The Somali maritime zone is one of the largest in the western Indian Ocean and has one of the large marine ecosystems – the Somali Current Marine Ecosystem – in the Indian Ocean. Somalia has both fringing reefs and patches of coral reefs along the Gulf of Aden coast as well as in the south near the

Kenyan border. Conservative estimates suggest that the fish catch potential is likely to lie between 180,000 and 200,000 tonnes per annum. However, overfishing has been observed, both offshore and inshore, particularly with regards to sharks and lobsters. Since 1990, lobster fishery has become the single most important fishery along Somalia's east coast. No control is currently exercised on fishing of lobsters.

It is evident that the country's biodiversity can only be preserved with massive increase in public awareness coupled with appropriate local solutions to natural resource management. Rural communities especially need to be involved in decision-making in relation to management of protected area systems. Adherence to ratified international and regional agreements related to environmental management and conservation will be a step towards institutionalizing policy and institutional frameworks.

Environment has not been embedded into national planning. Consultation with national stakeholders in the planning and policy setting is lacking. There is also the absence of technical capacity to assess environmental conditions and trends and inform sound environmental management decisions.

Somalia's natural assets – its grazing and agricultural lands as well as its rich marine fisheries – are a platform on which peoples' livelihoods can be built. Taking control of these assets and managing them productively, sustainably and equitably will, however, remain a considerable challenge for the decision-makers and population in the country.