



For use of the media only; not an official document

PRESS RELEASE

International Day for Biological Diversity Dedicated to Forest Biodiversity

Montreal, 22 May 2002 – The United Nations is celebrating the 2002 International Day for Biological Diversity today by highlighting the importance of forest biodiversity to the global environment and to human well-being.

"Forests contain some of the most vibrant ecosystems on the planet. They are home to a wondrous variety of birds, animals, insects and plants," said Klaus Toepfer, Executive Director of the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP).

"They are also vital to the health and well-being of people, in particular those who live in or around forests. Forests provide fuel, materials for building, natural medicines and foods such as nuts and berries. They also play a critical role in regulating river flows and – by soaking up carbon dioxide from the atmosphere – the climate," he said.

"Because forests contain most of the world's terrestrial biodiversity, they provide a wide range of economic, social, cultural and environmental benefits and services. Loss of forests results from macroeconomic, political and social causes as well as of institutional and social weakness and market and economic failures," said Executive Secretary Hamdallah Zedan of the Convention on Biological Diversity. "By conserving and sustainably using these invaluable ecosystems we can also contribute to the goals of social equity and economic development. Forest related policies and programmes should provide for local needs, national priorities and international commitments".

From 50% some 8,000 years ago, forests now occupy about 27% of the Earth's ice-free surface. The main causes of destruction are housing and infrastructure development, desertification and land degradation, and hundreds of years of large-scale conversion to agriculture and rangelands. Other factors are improper and wasteful forest management and logging practices, over-exploitation, invasive alien species, pollution and climate change.

The weak political power of local and indigenous communities, bad governance and the widespread but mistaken belief that forests and their resources are infinite have also contributed to this situation, as has the constantly increasing global demand for wood, fuel, paper, and other forest products.

Effective forest conservation requires that ecologically viable areas of all forest ecosystem types be preserved through networks of protected areas. More forest restoration programmes are clearly needed. At the same time, forest managers should start adopting the ecosystem approach, which seeks to manage biodiversity in a way that meets human needs while maintaining ecosystem integrity.

Decision-making on forest management also should involve indigenous peoples and local communities more in order to ensure that their legitimate needs are taken into consideration. Indigenous and local expertise can also contribute to effective and sustainable forest management. In addition, public awareness campaigns can promote sustainable production and consumption patterns and inform people about forest services and products.

The Convention's work programme on forest biological diversity emphasizes the ecosystem approach, socio-economic considerations, conservation and sustainable use. It promotes scientific analysis of how human activities and forest practices influence biodiversity and how the resulting damages can be minimized. The work programme is currently being strengthened and expanded.

Note to journalists: For more information please contact Cristina Stricker, Information Officer, tel.: +1-514-287-7031, fax: +1-514-288-6588, e-mail: cristina.stricker@biodiv.org. See also www.biodiv.org

