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Executive Secretary, CBD

Distinguished colleagues,
Ladies and gentlemen,

It is my pleasure to welcome you here to this very important meeting. I would like to thank you all for coming here to London to what we all hope will be three fruitful days of discussions. I would also like to thank my colleagues in the UNEP World Conservation Monitoring Centre and the United Nations Development Programme for their contributions to this collaborative effort. My gratitude also goes out to those Governments and organizations that have provided financial support to enable such broad participation.

Last year, 2002, marked the tenth anniversary of the adoption of the Convention on Biological Diversity. It was also a turning point in the implementation process. In April, the Conference of the Parties adopted the first Strategic Plan for the Convention, together with the bold target of significantly reducing the current rate of biodiversity loss by the year 2010. That target was endorsed at the highest possible political level by world leaders gathered in Johannesburg for the World Summit on Sustainable Development.

The World Summit was a milestone for biodiversity in other respects. With the Secretary-General's WEHAB initiative, biodiversity concerns were, for the first time, placed squarely at the top of the sustainable-development agenda. For the first time outside the context of the Convention, biodiversity was formally recognized, together with water, energy, health and agriculture, as a basic necessity of life.

In addition to endorsing the 2010 target, the World Summit also recognized the critical role played by biodiversity in overall sustainable development and poverty eradication and that the Convention on Biological Diversity is the key instrument for the conservation and sustainable use of biodiversity and the fair and equitable sharing of benefits arising from the use of genetic resources.

For those of us involved in the Convention process, this was a gratifying and promising development. For too long, we have felt that biodiversity issues have been neglected, ignored, misunderstood. They have been marginalized and isolated from the mainstream of development thinking.

Indeed, this marginalization has been identified on more than one occasion as one of the greatest underlying obstacles to the achievement of the objectives of the Convention.

The task is now to translate this political commitment and recognition of the importance of biodiversity into tangible and quantifiable results. They need to be tangible because it is essential that efforts to reduce the loss of biodiversity are seen to have a positive impact on people's lives, especially the lives of the poor. They need to be measurable so that progress can be evaluated, constraints identified and gaps addressed.

To do this will require the engagement of all sectors at both national and international levels. Biodiversity considerations must be more firmly integrated into the full range of social and economic development policies and programmes. They should be moved to the forefront of thinking at all levels of society. In this respect, it is of paramount importance to increase both public and political awareness of the value of biodiversity and the consequences of its loss.

It is also essential to make the best possible use of existing initiatives and programmes. We need to concentrate our efforts and channel our energies. Cooperation with other organizations, both intergovernmental and non-governmental, has always been the hallmark of the Convention process. Now, we need more than ever to look for potential synergies, to harmonize our actions and to focus on achieving the 2010 target.

This is a key meeting for the Convention on Biological Diversity. The Parties have made a commitment. It has been endorsed at the highest possible political level. Policies, strategies and action plans are in place. The challenge now is to operationalize that commitment and to find internationally acceptable and scientifically credible ways of achieving it and measuring progress in doing so. This meeting has a very important role to play in this respect.

Failure to meet the 2010 target – or to demonstrate clearly that progress is being made in that direction – will undermine the credibility of the Convention process and, with it, the prospects of stemming the tide of biodiversity loss.

I am, however, confident that, given the political commitment that we saw in Johannesburg, the target can be met.

And I am equally confident that, at the end of these three days, we have a much clearer picture of what needs to be done and how to set about doing it.

I wish you well in your discussions.