



Secretariat of the Convention on Biological Diversity



“Planting seeds of peace with nature in the mind of people”

Statement by the Executive Secretary
Dr. Ahmed Djoghlaif

On the Occasion of the

**United Nations Unlearning Intolerance Seminar: Art
Changing Attitudes Toward the Environment**

Thursday, 8 May 2008

Ladies and Gentlemen

Two days ago, here in New York, at the “ Impressionist and Modern Art sale” , organized by Christie, le” Pont du chemin de fer d’Agentueil” of Monet was sold for 41 US\$ million. A bronze sculpture by Rodin was sold 19 US\$ million. Also here in New York, in October 1997, an unusual auction was organized by Christie and the remains of a pre-historical animal named Sue was sold for 8 millions dollars. Yet the daily fee entrance charged by Parks Canada at some of its historical sites is only fifty cents. Original artistic copies are always more expensive than reproduction. This doesn’t seem to apply to mother Nature.

According to UNESCO « culture is a multidimensional system which cannot be restricted to art and includes also the way of thinking, behaviors, value systems and beliefs. Culture is the global environment in which people live and interact. It includes the natural words as well the world created by man. It is directed not only toward the present and the future but also the past.”



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Worldwatch Institute has estimated that 1,7 billion people or 27% of humanity have “ entered the consumer society”. Nearly half of these consumers now live in developing countries. While, on average, half a hectare of productive ecosystems is necessary to sustain the needs of a resident of a developing country, more than five hectares are needed to satisfy the ever-growing consumption requirements of citizens of the world’s richest countries. Artist Paul Bonomini's "WEEE Man " reflects through art the modern electronic gadgets and appliances consumerism. Shopping is political, because you vote every time you spend money," said the Irish rock musician Bono.

In 2006, a driver’s helmet inlaid with diamond was sold for US\$ 400,000. During the 2006 Grand prix of Monaco one of the racing cars had a steering wheel inlaid with diamonds. A lady shoe inlaid with diamond was sold US\$ one million. According to the Guinness Book of world records, the longest car in the world is a limousine measuring 306 meters with 26 wheels. It has king size bed as well as a large Jacuzzi, a swimming pool and a helipad. The belief that goods give meaning to individuals and their role in the society is also reflected in all aspects of our contemporary culture. The illusion that natural resources are infinite and can be depleted at will without consequences is anchored in the collective belief of modern societies. As Albert Einstein once pointed out, “Look deep into nature and then you will understand everything better”.

As a result the “ecological footprint” of humankind now extends 20 per cent beyond the biological capacity of the planet. We are consuming more natural resources than can be regenerated. Humankind is living beyond the means and capacity of our planet. Thus, if everyone was to have the same standard of living as the United Kingdom, we would need three and a half planets. If we all wanted to enjoy the same consumption patterns as American citizens, we would need five planets. Indeed pressure from human activities on the natural functioning of the planet has reached such an extent that the ability of ecosystems to meet the needs of future generations is now seriously—perhaps irreversibly—jeopardized. Never since human beings first appeared on Earth has

anthropogenic change to our planet's natural functioning been so destructive as it has been over the last half-century, resulting in an unparalleled extinction of biodiversity on Earth

Maliowski has demonstrated that the cultural diversity is a direct response to the diversity of the environment. Cultural and biological diversity are closely intertwined. Indeed, there is an umbilical link between culture and nature, and between cultural diversity and biological diversity. The unprecedented loss of biodiversity is contributing to the erosion of the diversity of culture. Responding to biodiversity challenges will serve to enrich the cultural identity of human beings and strengthen their relation with Mother Nature.

The links between biological and cultural diversity go beyond the mere acknowledgment of human-nature interactions. Each culture possesses its own set of representations, knowledge and cultural practices that depend upon specific elements of biodiversity for their continued existence and expression. Indeed the various forms of diversity including language, knowledge, cultural and biological diversity create a synergism that provides the Earth and Humanity with resilience – resilience necessary for adaptation and survival.

However, we continue to destroy biodiversity at a faster rate than at any other time in human history. The pressures exerted by human activity on the natural functions of the planet have reached such a level that the capacity of ecosystems to meet the needs of future generations will be seriously, and perhaps irreversibly, compromised. Human-induced changes in the natural functions of our planet have never, since the appearance of humans on the earth, been as destructive as they have been during the past half century, when they have caused an unequalled degradation of the earth's biodiversity.

Aldo Leopold, considered to be one of the founding fathers of environmental ethics and conservation in the United States, pointed out that, "We abuse land because we regard it as a commodity

belonging to us. When we see land as a community to which we belong, we may begin to use it with love and respect.”

Indeed the world is facing an unprecedented loss of biodiversity compounded by climate change . Extinction rates have been estimated as much as 1,000 times higher than the typical natural rates over the Earth's history. Every hour four species are lost. Every minutes 20 hectares of forests are disappearing; every year 13 million hectares are destroyed—an area four time the size of Belgium . Although they only represent 7% of the world’s surface, tropical forests currently house 50 to 70% of identified living species. They are also the richest areas in cultural biodiversity, with 1,400 to 2,500 different indigenous populations representing 54% of the world’s ecoregions and 36% of the total number of ethno-linguistic groups

A recent study by the World Wildlife Fund for Nature identified 900 ecoregions in the world, 200 of which are considered to be of strategic importance for the protection of biological diversity. The study demonstrates in great detail the correlation between the biodiversity distribution map and that of linguistic and therefore cultural diversity. Languages are one of the essential characteristics of the cultural and artistic diversity of the people of the world. Six out of nine of the countries representing 60% of the number of recorded languages are also biodiversity hot spots. Ten out of the twelve richest countries in biodiversity are among the 25 richest countries in endemic languages. Indonesia, for example, has the second highest number of indigenous languages, the highest number of indigenous birds and the fourth highest number of vertebrates. This country of a hundred thousand islands also has the seventh highest number of plants identified in the world.

The 200 ecoregions identified by the World Wildlife Fund for Nature comprise 4,635 ethno-linguistic groups representing 67% of the 6,867 ethno-linguistic groups classed as indigenous populations. Representing around 300 million people or less than 5% of the world population, indigenous communities are the holders and guardians of an invaluable biological and cultural wealth as well as exceptional ancestral knowledge.

Nature conservation is at the heart of the cultures and values of traditional societies. Indigenous communities have an umbilical relationship with nature, which is considered to be a whole, with mankind as its central nucleus. As such, the Earth is the “spiritual mother” who not only gives life and therefore food, but also provides the cultural and spiritual identity of its occupants. Because it has been handed down by our ancestors like a sacred legacy, it must be protected in order to bequeath it to future generations, as a gift blessed by the gods. Based on this principle, all creation is sacred and nature is divine and should be respected and revered. Indigenous populations such as the Koguis – which literally means ‘inhabitants of the Earth’ – believe that human beings do not own the earth, but that is the earth, considered to be a gift from god, that owns them and looks after them.

Federico Fellini said: “Every language sees the world differently” and the world-famous linguist David Crystal liked to say that “the world is a mosaic of visions and each vision is captured in a language. Every time a language is lost, a vision of the world disappears”. According to UNESCO, approximately 600 languages have disappeared in the last century and they continue to disappear at a rate of one language every two weeks. There are currently 6,700 languages, 40% of which are threatened with extinction and more than 90% of which are likely to disappear before the end of this century. There is therefore a danger that 90% of the diverse perspectives of this world will disappear.

A language is not only a technical means of communication between human beings. It is also a vehicle for expressing emotions and transferring cultural, social, ethical and spiritual values. Uniting communities, it is an integral part of their identity heritage and their distinctive integrity. A language is also and above all a treasure of ancestral knowledge and a real living encyclopaedia of traditional knowledge, passed down, orally in the majority of cases, from one generation to another.

This has led some to say that every time a language disappears, it is as though a bomb has been dropped on a museum. I would like to add that every time a language disappears, it is as

though a bomb has been dropped on nature, its people and its cultures. Linguistic erosion is accompanied by an erosion of biodiversity and is often a reflection thereof. The anthropologist Earl Shorris said in 2000: “There are 9 different Maya words for the colour blue in the Porrúa Spanish-Maya dictionary, but only 3 Spanish translations, leaving six butterflies that can only be seen by the Mayas, which proves that when a language dies, six butterflies disappear from the Earth’s consciousness.” Indeed as Achim Steiner, Executive Director of the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP), pointed out, “Science informs the head, music the heart and art the spirit; three unique qualities that must all be motivated if we are to answer the sustainability challenges of the 21st century.” I would like to add that value and respect inform our soul.

The sacred nature of the earth is at the heart of almost all religions of the world. There is in effect an intrinsic relationship between religion and the environment. Across civilizations, religion has always played a central role in the protection of the environment

Spiritual and cultural values are the intangible benefits of ecosystems. They are difficult to quantify in economic terms. For example, in so many places, sacred sites, beliefs, faith groups and protected areas meet, from the water sources inhabited by ancestor spirits of Madagascar’s parks and reserves to the Christian monasteries in Romania’s protected areas, from the pilgrimage routes walked by millions of Hindus and Buddhists in India and Nepal to the mountains, holy for Jews, Christians and Muslims alike.

Sacred sites also support high biodiversity values, holding considerable potential to support conservation efforts through developing “people-inclusive” protected area management objectives. Because of their unique intercultural and interdisciplinary character they can be a suitable means for environmental education, cross-cultural learning and intergenerational transmission of spiritual and bio-cultural knowledge.

The worst form of intolerance is lack of respect. A reexamination of human history from an environmental point of view demonstrates clearly that prosperous civilizations have disappeared owing to a lack of respect for the environmental equilibrium that is essential. Overexploitation was the cause of land degradation in North Africa around the time of the end of the Roman empire, when the region had long been considered the bread basket of Rome and its empire. The Mayan civilization, after centuries of prosperity, perished because of deforestation. Salination of the soil caused the disappearance of the Sumerian civilization. A similar outcome struck the Harappa civilization, which flourished in what is today Pakistan. A heavy price was paid by the civilization of the Easter Islands as a result of overpopulation. The historian Arnold Toynbee has shown through a study of 20 civilizations how the loss of spiritual values has led to cultural disintegration of civilizations thousands of years old

Modern humans, in detaching themselves from their original bloodline, have discarded the traditional values and beliefs that are the characteristic traits of ancient societies that long cherished them. This year marks a paradigm shift. The planet for the first time is more urban. Very soon the two-third of humanity will be living in cities. By 2050, 150 new cities the size of New York will emerge most of them in developing countries. An average of 31 villagers are predicated to show up in an Indian city every minute for the next 43 years. 700 people in all. By losing his umbilical link with mother nature, Homo Urbanos is waging a war against nature and against himself .

In accepting the Nobel Peace Prize, Prof. Wangari Maathai stated that, "There can be no peace without equitable development and there can be no development without sustainable management of the environment in a democratic and peaceful space. I hope that this prize will help many people see the link between peace, development and environment." I would like to add there will be no peace without a culture of peace in the mind of humanity and without respect for mother nature.

On adopting its constitution at the end of the Second World War, the founding fathers of UNESCO were keen to recall that “since wars begin in the minds of men, it is in the minds of men that the defences of peace must be constructed”. I would like to add that “ Since war against nature begin in the minds of men, it is in the minds of men that the defences of peace with nature must be raised” .

The topic of this meeting is particularly important, as the power of art is often overlooked when we think about the environment. To address this, as you have done here in your seminar “Art Changing Attitudes Towards the Environment”, the CBD created the Museum of Nature and Culture. As a work of art can often speak volumes about the intricate cultural and social fabric of a country, the Museum is a marvellous opportunity for Parties to share their cultural inheritance with the world, and to publicly showcase their country’s unique biological diversity in an artistic and symbolic way.

It is in this spirit that the secretariat has recently established at its headquarters in Montreal the Convention’ “Museum of Nature and Culture”. So far, 32 countries have graciously donated beautiful artworks that wonderfully represent their respective country’s rich and unique cultural heritage and its relationship to biological diversity. The Museum includes a donation by HEM Zine El Abedeine Ben Ali, the President of the Republic of Tunisia. The donated artwork, which is reflective of the biological diversity unique to specific countries, enlightens people about the beauty of the individual artwork and about the immediate need to protect and conserve the world’s biological diversity for generations to come. These pieces are now on permanent display as part of the Convention’s Museum of Nature and Culture exhibit, and are often the first thing visitors notice when entering our offices in Montreal.

At the occasion of the celebration in 2010 of the International year on Biodiversity, the island of Portland, the UNESCO World Heritage site, will host a memorial for extinct species. This initiative is being promoted by MEMO, a UK charity organization, in collaboration with the secretariat. The monument

itself will be a circular enclosure, the walls of which will bear the carved images of all those creatures known to have gone extinct since the Dodo. It will be both a scientific record of known extinct species and a celebration of the unique liveliness of each of them. The enclosed space will be a classroom, theatre and forum, both symbolic and literal, in which to explore nature and significance of the Earth's 6th mass extinction event and our relationship with other lifeforms on Earth. Incorporated in the monument will be a bell to be tolled for extinct species each year on 22 May at the occasion of the celebration of the international day on biodiversity.

It is for this reason that I would like to pay tribute to the United Nations Department of Public Information, the Natural World Museum and UNEP for organizing today an event aimed at promoting the important link between art and nature. I would like to pay tribute to Akasaka Kiyotaka, the Under Secretary General for his leadership and his team and I particular Mr Eric Falt. I would like to pay tribute to the six artists that have contributed to this event as well as to all the participants. I will like to invite all artists presents to day to join forces for the celebration of the 2010 International Year on Biodiversity. I invite DCP to join forces for the convening of a similar seminar here in New York at the occasion of the high level segment of the United Nations General Assembly General and the 10th meeting of the Conference of the Parties to be held in Nagoya, Aichi prefecture, in Japan in October 2010.

Indeed art is an important tool for action and change and for planting the seeds of peace with Nature in the minds of people. As Albert Einstein said , "Peace cannot be kept by force. It can only be achieved by understanding." Let the event today be the beginning of a movement for promoting art as a vehicle for respect for nature and facilitating environmental stewardship and peace.

I thank you for your kind attention