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Biodiversity: Giving Proper Value to a Priceless Asset

*Check Against Delivery
Seul le texte prononcé fait foi
Es gilt das gesprochene Wort*

Biodiversity Protection – Beyond 2010

Athens, 27 April 2009

President of the Republic,
President of the Parliament,
Prime Minister,
Ministers,
Excellencies,
Dear Stavros,

Ladies and gentlemen,

I would like to start by thanking Greece for hosting this conference on Biodiversity and to my colleague Stavros Dimas for organising it.

Biodiversity is one issue to which I attach the greatest importance and that we have to tackle with urgency. As I said it last year in Bonn, in the Conference of the Parties to the Convention on Biological Diversity, not only we have a moral obligation but it will be significant for our contribution to the next Copenhagen conference on Climate Change at the end of this year.

To protect biodiversity is one of today's great challenges. Over the last four and a half years, the European Commission has been at the forefront of the fight against climate change. This is an area where Europe can be justifiably proud of its role as a world leader. And it is an area where we cannot afford to fail. The success of our climate change policy will also be measured by the success of our efforts in stopping the loss of biodiversity. These issues – like so many of the challenges that we face – are irrevocably interrelated, just as the link with energy and energy security has helped to develop our understanding of the importance of climate change.

The loss of biodiversity is a global threat that is just as important as global warming. It threatens our natural environment and thus, the quality of our life. But biodiversity underpins also our economies. It is not therefore only because of the love of nature or a vision for our environment that we should keep biodiversity on the political agenda.

Efforts made by this Commission have concentrated on our ambitious target: to put a stop to the loss of biodiversity in Europe by 2010. For that, we must implement existing legislation such as the Birds and Habitats Directive; we must complete the network of protected areas in Europe; and we must agree on new policies to address deforestation and to reduce the EU's ecological footprint.

The Commission has worked hard on all these issues; and I believe that, as a result, the EU is much closer to meeting its biodiversity targets than it would otherwise have been.

But we need to be honest and to recognise that, despite our efforts, all the evidence is that the destruction of biodiversity is continuing.

The time has come to step up our efforts. "Business as usual" will not achieve our objective.

Perhaps we need to make the case more effectively in terms which are familiar to all of us from the past 6 months. Destruction of nature is the ultimate toxic asset. We are running up debts against the future of the planet that we will never be able to repay.

The UN's landmark Millennium Ecosystem Assessment developed the idea of 'ecosystem services.' These services include the provision of goods – such as food, fuel and medicines. They also include the regulation of the air we breathe, the quality of our waters and the fertility of our soils. Our prosperity is underpinned by healthy ecosystems.

And yet we take these goods and services so much for granted that often, we can only see how important they are when they are gone, when it is too late.

The potential of nature to inspire science is an example of the practical value of biodiversity. Many of our most important medicines are derived from nature, and new discoveries are being made every day.

Nature can directly benefit the economy. In Scotland, for example, nearly as many people are employed in natural heritage activities as are employed in biotechnology, call centres and electronics combined.

On the other side, neglecting nature can carry a very heavy price tag. In China, twenty years of extraordinary growth, while it has produced enormous economic and social benefits, has also meant serious costs in soil erosion, air and water quality. China is beginning to address these issues but the challenge is indeed a heavy one. It represents an estimated 8% of China's GDP.

In developing countries, protecting nature could have an important role to play in poverty reduction. Biodiversity is of most importance to the poorest who depend directly on the fuel, food and clean water that it provides. Unless it is managed sustainably then this natural capital is quickly eroded – and when this happens there is nothing to fall back on.

So our EU's external aid is also focussed on supporting developing countries in their efforts to reduce the loss of biodiversity through country strategies and thematic programmes. But we need to continue to put the link between biodiversity and the fight against global poverty.

Ladies and gentlemen,

We would I am sure agree that a genuinely sustainable strategy for economic development must take the health of ecosystems into account. So what more can Europe do to reverse the current trends? I would like to mention here some possible actions.

First, we must develop a clearer global understanding of "why biodiversity really matters". To do this, the Commission will build on the findings of the study on The Economics of Ecosystems and Biodiversity. We will work to improve on existing indicators. And we are in the process of launching a communication campaign worth €3 million.

Second, we need to improve our scientific understanding. The Nobel-winning work of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change has shaped the political response to climate change. A similar initiative is needed with regard to biodiversity – particularly since the drivers for biodiversity loss are more complex than for climate change, and the direct impacts are harder to measure.

Third, we need a fully functioning network of protected areas. The Commission will work with Member States to complete the Natura 2000 network, including marine areas, as soon as possible. Given the threat of climate change we will also need to improve the connectivity between sites.

Fourth, we should not limit our attention to protected areas. If we do we will be left with a patchwork quilt: pockets of nature in a desert of destruction. We need to identify and promote synergies between biodiversity protection and other policies. This is very clearly the case with climate change, as I have just mentioned, where mitigation and adaptation measures need to be fully compatible with policies for protecting nature. But we should also include biodiversity concerns when we make the shift to more resource-efficient economies.

Fifth, to protect global biodiversity, there are many actions that need to be followed through the work of the UN Convention on Biodiversity, but the priority should be developing practical measures to stop global deforestation. This is where international action can have the biggest and most immediate impact.

Finally, the level of financial resources allocated to nature protection remains relatively small (especially when compared to the welfare benefits that ecosystem services provide). We need to look at the current systems of funding, and if they are not working properly then they should be reviewed, whilst remembering that resources, particularly public funds, are uniquely scarce at the current time.

Ladies and gentlemen,

Nature's destruction reduces the quality of our lives, and stands in the way of sustainable, long-term economic development. And extinction is irreversible. Reaching the point of no return in degradation of ecosystems means just that: there is no return.

Over the course of next year, I hope there will be a particular focus on protecting biodiversity. We will need new thinking if we are to move beyond business as usual - and I look forward to this conference generating the new ideas, the 'message from Athens', that will allow us, Commission and Member States to develop the measures that will secure the protection of our natural heritage in Europe and also give a decisive contribution to the global challenge.

Thank you for your attention and I wish you every success in your work over the coming days.