

Joint IUCN and BDTF SEE statement
**On the occasion of the 5th Ministerial Meeting on
Environment and Climate Action in the Western Balkans**

18 December 2020

Your excellencies, Ministers and Deputy Ministers,
Representatives of the RCC and the EC,
Distinguished participants,
Dear colleagues,

It gives me immense pleasure to address you on behalf of the Biodiversity Task Force of South East Europe and IUCN. Let me open by congratulating the European Commission, the Regional Cooperation Council and all Western Balkans economies for their excellent work that resulted in the endorsement of the Sofia Declaration in November paving the way for the implementation of the Green Agenda for the Western Balkans.

Distinguished delegates, the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic is a stark reminder of the fragility of our societies and persistent environmental crisis that shapes the world today. The crises of biodiversity loss and climate change threaten the very fabric of life that we all depend on, from safe water and food availability, to health and security. The recently published IPBES Pandemics Report confirmed that land-use change, agricultural expansion and intensification, and wildlife trade and consumption are the main drivers of this risk globally. These are also important drivers of biodiversity loss in the Western Balkans that eventually hamper our socio-economic prosperity.

There is growing consensus that, unless we transition to more sustainable economic models with environment at the helm, we risk further social and economic disruptions. Placing nature at the core of growth strategies is a safe and cost-effective way for economies to recover and harness the vast potential of natural capital to generate multiple benefits to our economies, environment and society. In the Western Balkans, the Green

Agenda sets a road map to guide this transition to greener economies incl. the creation of competitive, decarbonized markets and new jobs.

Over the past three years, with generous support by GIZ, the Biodiversity Task Force of South East Europe under the RWG Env has played a critical role in informing decision makers on nature policy and identifying priorities on biodiversity conservation in the region. We are extremely grateful for the opportunity to contribute to the development of the Green Agenda and formulating regional priorities under its biodiversity pillar. BDTF SEE and IUCN are set to support its effective implementation by working on a comprehensive and far-reaching biodiversity and restoration action plan that will unlock much-needed financing and investments in nature. There is a strong need for scaling up efforts on safeguarding nature and Nature-based Solutions as a means to increase our resilience to climate and health-related threats and risks. By NbS, we mean both protecting more and managing better the nature we still have and restoring what we have already lost. For example, the WB economies are currently at around 10% with PA coverage as compared to the 17% global target and EU's 30% target by 2030. IUCN and BDTF are working on a regional study on biodiversity and we trust that it will set a solid baseline for any further planning on biodiversity conservation in the region.

In closing, let us all walk in the footsteps of a growing community of political, business and community leaders (e.g. carbon-neutral EU by 2050) and use the ongoing challenges as a wake-up call to curb the tide and build more resilient societies. The Green Agenda for the Western Balkans provides unparalleled opportunities to envision a sustainable future for the region, yet it will become a reality only if we place nature more centrally to our growth strategies and lead by example on that pathway.

Thank you.

Boris Erg, Director

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