

Closing speech

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Minister Verburg, President Khosla, Ladies and Gentlemen, Colleagues and Friends

For two days you have explored the relationship between the natural environment and human life. You have investigated several important issues related to how society interacts with the natural environment, but also how society depends on that same environment. That nature is mightier than we thought is proven by the fact that the volcano-eruption disrupted all air travel in the European international skies. I was a victim as well. I was stuck in Lisbon and I can tell you that is not the worst place to be stuck.

I am convinced that broader society does not yet fully understand the close relationship between human survival, loss of biodiversity and healthy ecosystems able to deliver the many services we depend upon. Conferences like these are necessary to ensure that the knowledge we have is shared with others who more directly work on the subjects discussed during the past two days. But we need to do a lot more to get that knowledge out to the public. Let's be honest, the session on Emergency Aid and Ecosystems did not attract as many of the humanitarian aid organisations working in the field as we wanted. A key reason mentioned by those that chose not to come is that they find the issue interesting but too far from their core business.

Why? Why have we not been able to convince these organisations that this issue should be a priority? Our story aimed at mainstreaming the environment in all kinds of decision

making is convincing, but apparently we are still failing to tell the story in a convincing manner.

Biodiversity loss is not a potential problem. It is a real in the here and now. We know what biodiversity loss means for the delivery of essential ecosystem services. We have known since 2005 in what state the delivery of those services is, when the Millennium Ecosystems Assessment shared their conclusion that 60% of all ecosystem services are degraded. The shocking rate of loss of forests and the fact that 40% of all species on earth are threatened with extinction is causing this degradation. And, those scientists told us, it is the fact that ecosystems are starting to fail that will keep us from reaching the Millennium Development Goals.

Today we learn through the “The Economics of Ecosystems and Biodiversity” report that not only will this degradation stop us from meeting these development goals, we are also undermining the health of the global economy. It’s costing our economy trillions of euro’s, dwarfing the economic losses incurred through the credit-crisis.

Putting a price on nature’s services feels awkward; they’ve been free for all of our history. And, these services are vital to our lives. Yet putting a price on such services will help integrate the conservation of nature into the economic agenda. Putting a price on nature’s services will stimulate investment in their sustainable use.

Ladies and Gentlemen,
we are blessed these days with all this knowledge.
We understand our impacts on this planet better than we ever did.
We understand our relationship with our natural environment better than we ever did.

There is a lot more to learn, but we know enough to realise that we must “escape” the development paradigms that are at the root of our current biodiversity and ecosystems crisis. Take the discussions on how to achieve a sustainable Biobased Economy. We know that a bio-based economy is potentially an efficient and lucrative, fair and biodiversity-proof economy. But safeguards need to be in place. If during the transition from a fossil-based economy to a bio-based economy the wrong choices are made, the positive potential will not be reached.

You in this room, and especially the members of IUCN must communicate the message I speak about. We do not need to scare people. We are, as a species on this planet, uniquely capable of changing our future.

That is what a conference like this tells us too.

We are capable of thinking through the solutions to our problems.

And, a hopeful thought is, that this thinking is no longer limited to the select few that populate our world's NGOs.

More and more, the business community is becoming part of the process to develop these solutions. They are trying to understand how they should become "no net biodiversity loss" companies. They are starting to calculate the economic opportunities provided by healthy ecosystems to their own production processes. I can tell you that is true. I need more colleagues that are really calculating in this new way. They are developing the new business models that bring ecosystem thinking to the heart of their enterprise.

It's all still in an early stage, but even after a credit crisis, the issue of true corporate responsibility is still high on the agenda's of boards of companies. Recently the newspapers told us that DSM, but also Akzo Nobel will make performance in sustainability part of their reward system. It shows they are integrating sustainability in their daily practice.

The animosity that existed between NGOs and companies is also diminishing. Fortunately, more often NGOs and companies find each other in partnership, both exploring the new paths to a greener economy. We need a lot more of that. Are we there yet? No, but I am hopeful.

Ladies and Gentlemen,
No, the green economy is not yet a fact.
The debate is not yet won in the public sphere.
Being green is not yet normal.

I call upon you all to keep working at communicating the important message of the urgency of the situation and the solutions that we have already thought through. It's the UN Year for Biodiversity; let's use the extra attention given to our subject during this year to make that message clear. A high biodiversity is needed to keep our planet alive, and there is no other planet, no planet B, to which we can escape.

Let me close, ladies and gentlemen, with a few words on the role the IUCN National Committee of the Netherlands could play.

At this time there is great uncertainty if we are able to continue with our broad programme of work with partners around the world. As you may know, we stand to lose a very important part of the funding for that work. I hope we can find a solution so that IUCN NL is still able to work with partners around the world, including through organising these types of meetings, online, through our dedicated staff, or face to face such as today.

Supporting work in the field, working with companies on solutions and bringing civil society worldwide together with decision makers from government and business to jointly explore the paths to escape a future we do not want, is a crucial role this organisation needs to continue to play here. I know it is a very local issue. If you are in the power to do so, I ask you to find a way that you can help make sure this work continues.

Thank you