

Nature-based solutions for sustainable development in the Arab region

Keynote address of IUCN Director General Julia Marton-Lefèvre at the AFED Conference – Beirut, Lebanon, 29 November 2012

For more information, please contact :

Your Excellency Minister Nazem El Khoury, representing the President of Lebanon,

Your Excellency Secretary General of AFED, Mr. Najib Saab,

Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen, colleagues, friends,

Director General's Office
IUCN World Headquarters
Rue Mauverney 28
1196 Gland
Switzerland

Tel: +41 22 999 0299
Fax: +41 22 999 0002
director.general@iucn.org
www.iucn.org

I am very pleased to be here on this occasion for many reasons, including the celebration of the life of Professor Mohamed Kassas who was the President of IUCN in the 1980s and was an important mentor in my life. Both Ashok Khosla, the former President of IUCN who is with us today, and I benefitted from knowing Professor Kassas, and I know that he was glad to see us succeed him in IUCN.

I am also pleased to follow the speech of Her Excellency Razan Khalifa Al Mubarak, Secretary General of the Abu Dhabi Environment Agency, a Member and great partner of IUCN. My speech will also stress, as you heard from her, the need to look for positive solutions to the challenges faced not only in this region, but by all of us inhabitants of Planet earth.

Few parts of the world are as diverse and fascinating as the Arab region, the convergence point of Mediterranean, Persian and Arabic civilizations.

Spanning forests, deserts, mountains, mangroves and coral reefs, this region has it all ecologically — but is undergoing some profound environmental changes.

Indeed, these changes severely limit the survival options in the Arab countries, as you will have seen in the landmark report by the AFED titled *Survival Options*. Yet it is the political and social upheaval in this region that is now grabbing global attention.

So what can IUCN, and the region's environment and development community which is gathered here, bring to the table? How can we join forces to ensure the future sustainability — and, with it, prosperity and stability — of the Arab region?

Sustainability is, of course, in IUCN's DNA.

It was IUCN, in partnership with WWF and UNEP, who first coined the concept of "sustainable development" in the 1980 publication titled *World Conservation Strategy*, and has been working towards making it a reality ever since.

Today, we have another idea that, I believe, could be just as far-reaching and game-changing.

That idea is nature-based solutions.

IUCN pioneered this concept first in the context of climate negotiations, and increasingly as our overarching response to the biggest environment and development challenges of the 21st century.

Our message is simple: nature is not a victim; nature is part of the solution.

While our Union will always continue to vigorously defend threats to natural ecosystems and the plant and animal species that depend on them, including us humans, we now go a long way beyond the usual calls for protection, risk reduction and charity.

Of course, none of the major 21st century challenges of climate change, food security, and economic and social development can be resolved through nature-based solutions alone, but all of these issues depend on the health of the Earth's ecosystems.

So what makes a nature-based solution?

First, it must address the problem and deliver clear biodiversity benefits.

Second, it must be cost-effective relative to other solutions.

Third, it needs to be measurable, verifiable and replicable.

Fourth, it must be able to harness both public and private sources of funding.

And last but not least, it must respect and reinforce communities' rights over natural resources.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Nature-based solutions are not wishful thinking, they are work in progress.

Here, let me turn to the Arab region for some concrete examples:

West Asia is among the most water-stressed regions on the planet.

While many of the world's developed nations today find themselves in deep debt economically, all of us are in deeper debt ecologically, on track to demand 40% more water than the planet can supply.

With only three river basins, Jordan is facing a critical freshwater shortage.

Together with the Jordanian Ministry of Environment, IUCN is working to restore the Zarqa River – the country's most polluted and over-exploited – back to health. The river supports 65% of Jordan's total population and more than 90% of the country's small and medium industries.

In other places in the region, IUCN is working on improving water governance of the Nile River – the lifeline of 10 North African countries, and on restoring Iraq's unique marshlands at the confluence of the Tigris and Euphrates Rivers.

Linked to water scarcity, desertification is perhaps the most serious and least talked about problem globally and here in the Arab region.

Up to 50 million people around the world may be displaced in the next 10 years as a result of desertification. It is thought to cost the global economy 42 billion US dollars every year, while the estimated cost of preventing it is just 2.4 billion.

IUCN is working with the UN Convention to Combat Desertification towards achieving the goal of "land degradation neutrality", which was adopted by world leaders earlier this year at the Rio+20 conference.

In support of this goal, we are active from the Mashriq to the Maghreb on reviving oases, staving off the advance of the desert, climate-proofing local communities, and

promoting sustainable use of dryland ecosystems.

Drylands are challenging environments where human ingenuity, knowledge systems, and careful use of resources are essential for survival.

That is why we are working with the Bedouin communities, and learning from their traditional knowledge of managing fragile environment. We are assisting the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia in developing its national strategy on access and benefit-sharing in relation to genetic resources.

We are also promoting gender-sensitive climate change responses in Bahrain, Egypt and Jordan — the work I presented earlier this week at the UN climate change conference underway in Doha, Qatar.

Today, four out of five countries in the Middle East have less than 10% green cover.

Forest landscape restoration is one of the most cost-effective solutions to conserve biodiversity, combat poverty and climate change all at the same time.

Last year, IUCN and partners launched the so-called Bonn Challenge to restore 150 million hectares of lost forests and degraded lands worldwide by 2020. Achieving this goal could generate around US\$ 85 billion per year for some of the world's poorest communities.

We are looking forward to working with all of you in making this happen in the Arab region.

Already here, in Lebanon, whose national flag features the emblematic Cedar tree, there is much enthusiasm about forest landscape restoration, and IUCN is offering its advice on identifying the most suitable native trees for this purpose.

Furthermore, healthy ecosystems serve as a foundation for food security. Just think of a Sahara oasis with its cornucopia of citrus fruits, figs, peaches, apricots, vegetables and cereals!

They can also provide cost-effective buffers against natural disasters. For example, coral reefs provide coastal protection and other valuable services worth an estimated US\$ 170 billion a year, and yet 70% of coral reefs worldwide are threatened or destroyed.

IUCN has been active in the region for decades and has conducted studies covering the Red Sea, the Arabian Gulf and the Mediterranean marine ecosystems. The coastal habitat and marine management studies for Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, Oman, Libya and other countries conducted in the 1970s and 80s now constitute globally important baseline assessments.

For example, in just over two decades, the Red Sea went from a remote frontier to an international tourism hotspot. Some 3 million tourists visit the Red Sea every year. In a frenzy to capitalise on this tourism boom however, the Red Sea's resources are being depleted.

Together with UNESCO and other partners, IUCN has launched the Changing Oceans Expedition to document the growing human impact on marine environments.

Two sites will be sampled in the Red Sea. Scientists will then deliver recommendations on how to keep tourism within sustainable limits, in order to provide benefits well into the future.

In the Gulf, we are working with Qatar on assessing the status of fish species as part of our well-known IUCN Red List of Threatened Species, and are about to start coral reef

monitoring together with Kuwait. IUCN is also assisting Oman, Tunisia and Morocco in strengthening their eco-tourism sector.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Many of the nature-based solutions are not new, but have been in existence for centuries.

For example, the *hima* — a traditional system of resource tenure -- has been practiced for more than 1,400 years in the Arabian peninsula. It is perhaps the most widespread and longstanding indigenous conservation institution on Earth!

In several countries, including Jordan, Lebanon and Egypt, *hima* is being revived as a sustainable development and conservation model.

Hima are often sustained through community-based trust funds known as *waqf* — another promising solution in our global quest for innovative financial mechanisms to support biodiversity conservation. The rest of the world could draw useful lessons from these experiences.

Hima and many other nature-based solutions were showcased at the 2012 IUCN World Conservation Congress, which took place in Jeju, Republic of Korea, last September.

In Jeju, we weren't talking about *what* to do, nor *why* or *when*, but instead about *how* to make nature count in economics, politics and our everyday lives.

The good news is that the environment and business communities are starting to learn each other's language — as reflected in the increasingly popular concept of "natural capital".

IUCN is engaging with a number of private sector partners in the region — with Holcim on quarry rehabilitation in Lebanon; with HSBC on energy and water conservation in Jordan; with Shell on restoring Iraqi marshlands; and with Yemen LNG on minimizing environmental impacts in the Gulf of Aden.

Tomorrow, we will present some of these experiences at the IUCN roundtable session kindly offered by AFED, to which you are all very welcome.

Ladies and Gentlemen, dear Friends and Colleagues,

Today's political, economic and social challenges are very real and very serious.

But there is hope, and a growing understanding, that good conservation and management of natural resources can and does offer effective and valuable solutions to many of them.

All we need is a change in mindset. And I am convinced that with such a change we can solve more than one problem in this region and elsewhere.

I would like to leave you with one more final thought.

The wave of democracy sweeping across the Arab region marks a new era for civil society in shaping a sustainable future.

It is a unique opportunity for IUCN to engage with its Members and partners in the Arab region to make the transition to sustainability that puts people's human wellbeing and livelihoods at centre stage.

Thanks to our privileged observer status with the Arab League and our diverse State and NGO membership across the region, we work from the grassroots right up to the

highest political levels in promoting nature-based solutions for sustainable development.

As AFED Secretary-General Najib Saab justly remarked, "...after wars, revolts, and all sorts of miseries, people will still have to eat and drink and breathe, and therefore manage their natural resources."

The very fact that the AFED conference is taking place at this time and in this location, with delegates from nearly 50 countries, is proof—if proof were needed —of the Arab region's strength and resilience, but also of the deep commitment shared by each and every one of you, to its future sustainability.

I thank you for your attention and look forward to participating in this important conference.