



Friday 8 October 2010

Speech of

**JOKE SCHAUVLIEGE**

**VLAAMS MINISTER VAN LEEFMILIEU, NATUUR EN CULTUUR**

**Sign to the World - Genk**

Good afternoon everyone,

Mayor Dries,

Commisioner Potocnik, glad to see you again,

Voorzitter Van Rompuy, beste Herman,

You probably know the song by Dean Martin from 1965: *“Let me tell you about the birds and the bees”*. There was a time that this song sounded happy and carefree; nowadays the story of the birds and the bees is less happy. And a lot less carefree.

Worldwide more than 190 bird species are threatened with extinction. It’s a global problem, ranging from Mexico to Australia, and also – let’s be frank – to Flanders.

Concerning the bees, the last decennium has not been very kind on them. The last years the mortality among bee population has incredibly increased, in winter times **and** in spring times. Numerous causes have been named: the varoa-parasite, the reduced immunity among the bees. But also the declining diversity among pollen plants. And climate change is offering us – ironically – unusually cold and long winters, something which the bees are very sensitive to. We all know what the dramatic consequences are: less pollinators mean less seed, less young plants, less fruit, etcetera etcetera.

What seemed to be an innocent, almost insignificant element – the bee and its tragic fate – has had grave consequences among the whole web of nature’s organisms and the fruits we reap from it. We’ve learned the lessons, we’ve learned the importance of biodiversity. And we’ve learned it the hard way by suffering the consequences.

Ladies & gentlemen,

Let me be very clear: the story of biodiversity exceeds the subject of birds and bees. This is why I'm very happy to be at this event that wants to give a sign to the world that business as usual cannot be our objective, that we cannot go on like this. As the current president of the EU-environment chair I have pushed very hard to put this theme on the international agenda. In the beginning of September we organized a European Conference in Ghent and we agreed on a very consistent message. Allow me to make a short synthesis:

First of all, we have to provide **strong science for strong policy**. In the past we haven't realized enough the dangers that face us as biodiversity is degrading in front of our eyes. We have to bridge the knowledge gaps and keep monitoring the situation 'in real live'.

Secondly, **biodiversity has to become a horizontal issue**. It has to be taken into account on all levels, including in tough pickles like trade agreements. This is the **only way** to integrate the theme among **all** policy lines, programs and initiatives.

Thirdly, to really integrate the issue among all policy lines, **the whole of society has to be infused with this idea**. All stakeholders and especially the private sector have to be aware of what is happening, and preferably take action to preserve and improve our biodiversity. Only one fifth of the biggest hundred companies in the world see biodiversity as an important issue. It's a start but it's not enough.

Fourthly – and you will notice that all of these necessities are interconnected – we will be able to convince a lot more corporations and private partners if **we give an economic face to biodiversity**. Some are saddened by this thought, as if the beauty and diversity of nature isn't important enough, but let's be pragmatic. The TEEB studies have opened eyes among the whole world: they urge us – especially in shaky budgetary times – to be careful with what we (still) got.

Fifthly, our current investments in biodiversity have to be optimized, and as much as possible be increased. Alternative accounting of what has value and what not, has to be considered. GDP is an economic criterion of the twentieth century. And let's not forget, usually the solution that respects biodiversity can be a lot cheaper than the big constructions who mess up the local ecological life.

Last – but not least – and I think this is why we are here today, we have to spread awareness, create citizen-involvement, stimulate change in behaviour and enhance a sense of responsibility. Easier said than done, but unlike in the past, we see media spending more and more attention to biodiversity issues. We see a global network of people, ngo's and communities rising to face the challenge. The internet and all its various communication tools might be of great assistance to us.

We see here, that influential people like commissioner Potocnik and president Van Rompuy have committed to this change and that they are solid partners in the years and decades to come.

Because, ladies and gentlemen, as the soul artist Otis Redding used to sing: **"a change is gonna come"**. The conference in Nagoya could become a turning point. But in the meantime we don't hesitate.

At the end of April this year there were already 500.000 new trees planted in Flanders in the '1 million trees-campaign'. **Now I may announce you that we are very close to 750.000 trees.** On a global level ten **billion new trees** have been planted in the world with support of the United Nations (UNEP)-program. On a European level we have built a network of 25.000 protected areas, almost 17% of the total surface of the European territory.

The regional landscape Kempen and Maasland is an excellent example of one of these protected areas. This landscape has made wise choices and has chosen a balanced integration of nature, heritage, landscape and tourism. Thus, they have shaped a strong local sense of ownership and participation. Everyone - entrepreneurs, farmers, ngo's, individuals, ... - could have their say and ultimately found satisfaction in the many qualities of this project.

It is by no means a coincidence that Ignace Schops, as a founder of the National Park Hoge Kempen and driving force behind the Regional Landscape, was given the title International Biodiversity Ambassador by IUCN. Ignace has the gift of persuasion. From NIMBY to PIMBY! (Not In My Backyard to Please In My Backyard!)

It's a transition we can all agree on. As the TEEB-report states: "Natural systems can save on future municipal costs, boost local economies, enhance quality of life and help secure livelihoods."

I have **nothing** to add to that. Except maybe one thing; after this speech we will add a stone to the globe. I can only say: our dedication to the cause of biodiversity is solid as a rock.

Thank you for your attention.

Joke Schauvliege

Flemish minister of Environment, Nature & Culture