



**MESSAGE OF THE EXECUTIVE SECRETARY
OF THE CONVENTION ON BIOLOGICAL DIVERSITY
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on the occasion of the
INTERNATIONAL DAY OF FORESTS
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“Forests and water”

“They can’t see the forests for the trees” is an apt expression for someone who cannot see the bigger picture. In fact, forests are much more than trees. As the most biologically-diverse ecosystems on land, forests are home to more than 80 per cent of the terrestrial species of animals, plants and insects. They provide shelter, jobs and security for forest-dependent communities, with approximately 1.6 billion people relying on forest resources for their livelihoods, with most of them (1.2 billion) using trees on farms to generate food and cash.

Forests play an important role in both adaptation and mitigation of climate change, as they provide local ecosystem services relevant for adaptation as well as the global ecosystem service of carbon sequestration, relevant for mitigation. They help protect against natural hazards such as landslides, help reduce soil erosion and provide short-term relief efforts and long-term recovery and prevention of future disasters.

The links between forests and fresh water are inseparable. Forests protect water resources, helping to ensure a supply of safe, clean water for some of the world’s largest cities, approximately one third of which obtain a significant proportion of their drinking water directly from forested protected areas. But while access to clean water is one of the most fundamental human rights, according to UN Habitat, currently more than one billion city-dwelling people lack access to clean water. This number is likely to increase as urban centres grow.

A growing population and a high demand for natural resources will undoubtedly place undue stress on forest ecosystems and their vital ecosystem functions. It is estimated that by 2030, the world will face a 40 per cent global water deficit under the business-as-usual climate scenario. Water quality and availability in many regions of the world is being increasingly threatened by overuse, misuse and pollution. In addition, the role of forests in regulating water flows and buffering against floods and droughts and influencing the availability of water resources is being compromised by mismanagement, and threatened by climate change.

A greater understanding and appreciation of the value of forests and the ecosystem services they provide would enable decision-makers to better assess trade-offs associated with alternatives for land and water use. For example, a study by the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO)



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estimates the economic value of the water storage function of China's forests as 7.5 trillion yuan (approximately US\$1 trillion), three times the value of the wood in those forests.

A major challenge is how to translate these values into policies that help support particular types of land management. One reason why it has proved so difficult to halt and reverse global forest loss is that those who manage forests typically receive little to no compensation for the services that forests generate for others. Hence there is little incentive for them to manage them sustainably. Even when areas are protected, values such as water provision are often not recognized by the users. Recognition of this issue has encouraged the development of systems in which land users are paid for the environmental services that they generate through management – an approach known as “payment for environmental services” (PES). Projects under PES schemes using forest conservation and restoration to improve water resources have been mostly developed in Latin America, but interest is spreading throughout the world.

Forest restoration can help address many of the interconnected issues of biodiversity loss and water scarcity, and numerous global initiatives have been initiated in recognition of the benefits restoration can provide. Notably, initiatives such as the the African Forest Landscape Restoration Initiative (AFR100), the Forest Ecosystem Restoration Initiative, the Amazon Vision program, Initiative 20x20, and the Rainforest Recovery Plan all include components to conserve and restore forests while recognizing the value to safeguard biodiversity, ensure the quality of water in watersheds, prevent drought and lessen the impacts of climate change.

Ecosystem services are essential for human wellbeing. They provide food, water, energy and other benefits. Thus it is important to connect ecosystems to global development priorities.

In 2015, the United Nations General Assembly adopted the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, composed of 17 goals and 169 targets. Goal 6 of the Sustainable Development Goals aims to, among other targets, by 2030 achieve universal and equitable access to safe and affordable drinking water for all and achieve access to adequate and equitable sanitation and hygiene for all. Importantly, target 6.6 recognizes the importance that healthy ecosystems play in providing water: “By 2020, protect and restore water-related ecosystems, including mountains, forests, wetlands, rivers, aquifers and lakes.”

The Convention on Biological Diversity and its partners, such as the FAO, are making every effort to raise awareness of the importance of conserving and restoring forest landscapes to improve livelihoods and biodiversity, as well as assisting with the development of policies and tools that promote the interconnectedness of water resources and forests. The FAO's Sustainable Forest Management Toolbox, for example, contains a forest and water module which presents general guidance on water management priorities in forests, as well as more detailed guidance on specific water-management issues.

Forests are crucial to the sustainable management of water ecosystems and resources, and water is essential for the sustainability of forest ecosystems. Let us work together and redouble our efforts to ensure that our forests remain healthy now and for generations to come.
