

Trees for our survival

The importance of forests is recognised as world marks Day of Biological Diversity

Every year, May 22 is celebrated as United Nations Day of Biological Diversity. This year, the theme of the celebration was Forests and Biodiversity, in line with the declaration of 2011 as the International Year of Forests.

To mark the day, the United Nations Environmental Programme (UNEP) organised a conference in the UN compound at Gigiri where Dr Achim Steiner, the Executive Director of UNEP, gave welcome remarks and where statements from the UN Secretary General and from UNEP's Governing Council were delivered.

As always, Dr Steiner was inspiring. Among other things, he remarked that according to the latest studies, the annual economic worth produced by the Mau Forest is US\$ 1.5 billion. If population projections are right, by the year 2050 Kenya will have a population of 100 million people. Nevertheless, the country is in danger of throwing away some of its treasures like the Maasai Mara ecosystem, where a clash is taking place between the ancient pastoralist way of life and the current conversion of woodlands into wheat and other fields, and charcoal production.

After two short videos related to Forests and Biodiversity, a panel discussion took place, moderated by **Jean-Paul Deprins, Managing Director of Better Globe Forestry Ltd** and Editor-in-Chief of *Miti* magazine. Panellists were Nobel Laureate Prof Wangari Maathai, Esau Omollo, Deputy Director of Kenya Forest Service (KFS), Dr Ravi Prabhu of UNEP and Dr Dennis Garrity, Director General of ICRAF.

Prof Maathai highlighted the contrast between the "silent forests" (e.g. eucalypt plantations) and indigenous forests. However, she acknowledged the importance of eucalypts for the timber and building industry. In fact, away from the water catchment and riverine areas, she has no problems with eucalypt plantations. Her point of view on this matter is more nuanced than generally acknowledged. She made no secret of her aversion to cultivation in forest plantations, remarking that it leads to the disappearance of the plantations in favour of agricultural crops. She gave proof of this, in a slideshow.

Mr Omollo noted that plantations and forests in Kenya are fragmented, with long boundaries and many interactions with livelihoods of people. He also remarked that public sector



The panel. From left to right: Ravi Prabhu, Dennis Garrity, Esau Omollo and Wangari Maathai. (Photo BGF)



Jean-Paul Deprins (left) with Prof Wangari Maathai and Dr Dennis Garrity (right). (Photo BGF)

investment in forests is non-existent. Private investment in indigenous forests is very poor, if not non-existent, while these forests have a high regeneration potential. Plantation forestry currently is neglected, and no harvesting is taking place because of the presidential ban on logging.

Dr Prabhu explained REDD+ (Reducing Emissions through Deforestation and

Degradation). The "plus" extends the original REDD concept with enhancement of carbon stocks (e.g. plantation forestry). It is important to note that REDD+ reaches out to the private sector regarding establishment of tree plantations. In fact, it is an incentive (read "payment") for doing a good job, conserving and extending the forests. The REDD concept arose because 17-19 per cent of all greenhouse gas emissions come through

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destruction of forests. More information is available on www.reddplusdatabase.org.

Globally, the estimated loss in capital flow of services resulting from one single year's loss of forest is US\$ 2-4.5 trillion. This is truly staggering, and that is the real value of forest ecosystems and the biodiversity they offer.

The last speaker was Dr Garrity, who commented on an extraordinary development in the Sahel region, among others in Niger, where a large-scale regeneration of parklands is taking place. The main tree species in these parklands is *Faidherbia albida* (formerly known as *Acacia albida*), valued by farmers for its agroforestry potential. The trees shed their leaves during the rainy season, allowing light for crops under their canopy, and retain leaves during the dry season. Apart from that, the trees add nitrogen to the soil through their rooting system.

The regeneration was triggered by a government decision about 20 years ago, allowing farmers to own the trees and sell the products, so they started caring for the trees. In addition, the Hausa agriculturalists negotiated with the Fulani pastoralists to leave the trees in place. As for now, tree density has risen to 200-300 trees/ha, resulting in higher crop yields, more grass and more firewood, the latter even sold over the border, in Nigeria.

Dr Garrity also mentioned two more examples of landscape restoration. These are the Ngitili system in Tanzania where there has been natural regeneration of acacia and miombo woodlands, and the Tigray dryland restoration in Ethiopia. He advocated the concept of "Evergreen agriculture", meaning a double-storey system with perennials (trees) and annual species (agricultural crops). "Evergreen agriculture" utilises minimal tillage systems.

Dr Achim Steiner made the closing remarks, noting that respect for biodiversity and forests is now crucial. Indeed, for *Miti* magazine, this event was a revelation. Biodiversity is no longer an issue just for nature lovers, but the conservation of "earth's living treasure" is becoming essential for the survival and well-being of the human race. The rich biodiversity of forests helps us to combat the climate crisis, alleviate poverty, support human health and continues to supply new foods to the human race. Its economic importance is enormous.

— Jan Vandenabeele



Emergency food distribution to BGF workers in Kiambere. Times are hard now in dry areas, with a general crop failure due to drought. (Photo BGF)



Flore de Préneuf, Communications Officer from Profor (Programme for Forests), Worldbank interviews a local resident in the buffer zone of the future Sosoma plantations in Nguni, Mwingi East district. She is accompanied by Jean-Paul Deprins and Elias Musyoka (Photo: BGF)



BGF's nursery in Kiambere. Hardening off of mukau seedlings. (Photo: Flore de Préneuf, Profor, Worldbank)