

Preface

The UNEP Year Book 2009, focusing on the six areas of our new Medium-Term Strategy, comes against a back drop of food, fuel and financial upheavals that underline the choices facing humanity in the 21st century.

These centre around whether a brighter and more sustainable future can be found in the old economic models of the 20th century or in a fresh, Green Economy approach—one that rewards greater resource efficiency, vastly improved natural asset management and decent employment across the developed and developing world.

The answer can be found in the findings of the Year Book 2009.

Ecosystems, vast natural ‘utilities’ whose goods and services are worth trillions of dollars annually, are also changing—entire forest ecosystems have disappeared from 25 countries and have declined by 90 per cent in a further 29.

The biomass of large, commercially-targeted marine fish species have declined by 90 per cent since the 1960s. The amount of cropland available per person may, by mid century, be less than 0.1 hectares, requiring an increase in agricultural production unattainable via conventional methods.

Climate change is another poignant example. The failure to fully ‘internalize’ the costs of rising greenhouse gas emissions is triggering impacts unimaginable only a few years ago.

Reservoirs in the Mediterranean and the American Midwest could soon run dry: the Greenland ice sheet may already be losing over 100 cubic kilometres a year with ramifications for sea level rise.

The Arctic is also a vast store of methane. More than 250 plumes are now bubbling up northwest of Svalbard—the prospect of dangerous ‘tipping’ points in the Earth’s climate are becoming ever more possible.

The Year Book also highlights more intelligent, creative approaches. Take biomimicry. The cooling system of the Eastgate Building in Harare, Zimbabwe was inspired by towers built by termites. It saves 90 per cent of the energy compared with a comparable building.

Rights-based catch shares for fishers—practiced in fishing grounds in countries like Canada and Chile to Mexico and the United States, there is evidence they can reduce and even reverse the risk of ecosystem collapse.

Hundreds of billions of dollars are being lined up to stimulate economies. It is an opportunity to overcome the current woes but also an opportunity to begin shaping markets—shaping them towards favouring not only the planet but also the livelihoods and well-being of six, soon rising to nine billion people. In short it is the chance to really kick-start the Green Economy.



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