



***CHECK AGAINST DELIVERY***

**SPEECH**

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DESERTIFICATION AND SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT**

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Ladies and gentlemen,

Thank you for inviting me here today.

When we were considering the theme for this year's World Environment Day, it was clear that we had to link with the International Year of Deserts and Desertification.

As the video that you have just seen highlights, desertification is major challenge for sustainable development.

Drylands cover more than 40 per cent of the Earth. They are home to nearly 2 billion people—one-third of the world's population—and more than half the world's productive land.

Across the planet, poverty, unsustainable land management and climate change are turning drylands into deserts. It is estimated that between 10 and 20 per cent of drylands are already degraded.

The problem is particularly acute in sub-Saharan Africa and South Asia. It is a problem that threatens the lives and livelihoods of some of the world's poorest and most vulnerable people.

The video also highlights the fundamental difference between desertification and deserts. Desertification is the manifestation of a multitude of destructive factors, almost all caused or made worse by human activity.

Deserts, on the other hand, are among the world's most spectacular, harsh and beautiful habitats. They are fragile ecosystems that support a specialized diversity of life. Because of their highly specialized nature, these species are particularly vulnerable to habitat disturbance.

Surprisingly little is known and documented about deserts in terms of biological, ecological and cultural characteristics. The different deserts of the world are unique in terms of origin, evolutionary history and climatic patterns. They need tailored management and policies to protect them.

This message is central to a new UNEP report, the Global Deserts Outlook, which is being launched this week.

The report reveals that deserts are increasingly threatened by human activity. It reveals that the world's deserts are facing dramatic changes as a result of global climate change, high water demand, and salt contamination of irrigated soils.

These are also issues that are causing desertification in the world's drylands.

The report also details the richness and potential of deserts.

As we just saw, deserts often provide favourable conditions for renewable energy sources, such as wind and solar.

For example, the Global Deserts Outlook estimates that an 800 by 800 kilometre area of a desert such as the Sahara could capture enough solar energy to generate all the world's electricity needs and more.

Energy generation and supply is key to achieving the Millennium Development Goals. And, of course, clean energy, is essential to combating climate change.

It may seem obvious to some that deserts are ideal for generating solar power. But they have less obvious potential as well.

For example, the Global Deserts Outlook reveals that many deserts have sunlight and temperature regimes that favour shrimp and fish farms, such as are already found in Arizona and the Negev desert in Israel.

Such ventures offer new and potentially environmentally-friendly livelihoods for local people and businesses.

Then there is the benefit that may be derived from specialized desert species.

Nipa, a salt grass harvested in the Sonoran desert of north western Mexico at the delta of the Colorado River by the Cocopahs people, thrives on pure seawater, producing grain yields equivalent to wheat.

The report says Nipa "is a strong candidate for a major global food crop and could become this desert's greatest gift to the world."

Deserts could also provide valuable genetic material for new generations of drugs and industrial products.

As the report says: “The pharmaceutical potential of desert plants has yet to be tapped.”

Desert plants from countries such as China and India are being exported for herbal treatments and medicines to places like Germany. The report expects this trade will grow.

Meanwhile, scientists are also screening desert plants for promising medicinal compounds. Some, found in the Negev, are known to hold anti-cancer and anti-malarial substances.

Others, from the deserts of Argentina, Arizona and Morocco, are effective against diseases like uterine cancer and infectious diseases. Essential oils from two plants found in the deserts of Morocco appear to enhance the efficiency of feed for poultry.

However—and this is the story with biological diversity all over the globe—we are losing what we have faster than we can discover what potential benefits we are missing.

Despite the global target to reduce the overall rate of biodiversity loss by 2010, the rate of species decline continues to increase. The story is the same whether we are talking about rainforests or deserts.

Ladies and gentlemen,

Deserts, and drylands, are suffering because of human activities.

Climate change seems to be particularly affecting deserts. As our report illustrates, an overall temperature increase in deserts of between 0.5 and 2 degrees Celsius between 1976 and 2000 has been much higher than the average global rise of 0.45 degrees Celsius.

The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, which is jointly administered by UNEP and the World Meteorological Organisation, predicts declines in rainfall in many deserts of between 5, 10 or even 15 per cent. Deserts in southerly latitudes are especially vulnerable.

Another issue facing deserts, as well as drylands, is unsustainable water use.

Inefficient irrigation practices are causing salinisation, underground aquifers are being depleted, and river resources are being strained by over-use and ill-considered large dam projects.

There are examples from all around the world where once great rivers now fail to reach the sea.

The Colorado River in the southwestern United States has been dammed to generate water supplies and electricity for Arizona and California, but its delta in Mexico has lost most of its water and therefore its productivity.

A similar story is linked with the Aswan High Dam in Egypt. Built in 1970, it has reduced the level of nutrient-rich silts and soils flowing downstream, causing the Nile Delta to shrink.

Ladies and gentlemen,

These are just some examples from UNEP's Global Deserts Outlook of how fragile desert environments are under increasing pressure from forces such as climate change and ill-considered human activity.

As well as highlighting the challenges, the book points out the policy options that may help governments and other bodies deliver a more sustainable future for these extraordinary regions.

To a large extent, these solutions will also be applicable to those dryland regions of the world that face the threat of desertification.

They include protecting sources of water, making more efficient use of water, and reducing demand on water, for example from irrigation or from increasing urbanisation.

They also include sustainable exploitation of the potential of deserts, as sites for energy generation, as habitats for valuable biodiversity, and also as tourist destinations.

The report highlights the growing attraction of desert areas, both as places to live and as places to visit. Done sensitively this can bring benefits. Done insensitively, it can only bring harm—to deserts and to people.

Another UNEP publication which is also being launched during these World Environment Day celebrations addresses this very issue.

The UNEP guide on tourism and deserts, produced in partnership with the Tour Operators' Initiative, encourages tourism professionals to develop sustainable desert tourism strategies with national and local authorities.

Ladies and gentlemen,

These publications, this workshop, and the many events being organised throughout Algeria this week, are designed to highlight the challenges and opportunities related to the theme of deserts and desertification.

In this International Year Of Deserts and Desertification, I hope that our World Environment Day activities contribute to the preservation of deserts and the sustainable development of drylands and the people who depend on them.

I wish you a successful and enlightening workshop today.

Thank you.