

Press Release

Eye on Earth Summit: Green accounting, biodiversity protection, access to information and leading by example – it's all linked.

Abu Dhabi, December 13, 2011 -- A crucial tool to “green” the world’s economy, the *World Bank said, is to move to a new way of accounting for national wealth that takes the value of ecosystem services into account. For the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora (CITES), better control of legal trade and a more effective fight against illegal trade in species is key to protect biodiversity. What links these objectives is the need for accessible, open and rich data – a point repeatedly made by the representatives of the five specialist working groups that are developing the Eye on Earth Special Initiatives.*

And Rob Swann, the only man to have walked to both the South and North Poles, reminded delegates of the leadership role they must play as individuals to succeed in changing the world.

These were some of the highlights of Monday afternoon’s session of the Eye on Earth Abu Dhabi 2011 Summit and Exhibition, a joint initiative of the Government of Abu Dhabi and the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP). The Summit has convened leaders from the worldwide geospatial data movement to sketch a roadmap for the better integration of the world’s flood of environmental and societal data for the benefit of all, and especially of emerging economies.

Following the initial opening of the Summit yesterday morning by H.E. Razan Khalifa Al Mubarak, the Secretary-General of Environment Agency – Abu Dhabi, delegates got down to business in the afternoon by focussing on three of key issues that must be tackled to move the world’s economy to a more sustainable point: how to financially account for the services that ecosystems provide, how to protect the world’s dwindling stock of threatened species from overexploitation, and how to bring users and citizens to the centre of the ongoing geospatial data revolution.

World Bank on Environmental Data Access

Rachel Kyte, the World Bank’s Vice President of Sustainable Development, was a young activist at the first Earth Summit in Rio de Janeiro in 1992. Back then, it was mostly attended by environment ministers. But today we know that sustainable development involves many other branches of

government, from finance to education. At the Earth Summit in 1992 the debate was about North-South (developed-developing world) financial and technology transfers. Twenty years ago, the aim was development. Now, it is about green, sustainable, inclusive growth.

“But each of these issues is being redefined by climate change, especially for the vulnerable and poor in developing countries,” said Kyte. The World Bank calculates that climate change is already costing Africa 5% of GDP growth every year. This suggests that financing priorities should change. “Sixty per cent of Africa’s farmers are women, but they only get 5 per cent of the financial credits. Yet they invest these credits far more productively – in seeds, inputs, and their children’s education.”

All of this needs better data. “After 20 years, we in the World Bank have put a value on open, accessible data. We believe in it. We have seen that it is possible to reduce poverty, restore ecosystems and generate extraordinary growth,” Kyte said.

CITES on Data Collection and Access

Hundreds of millions of people around the world harvest wildlife. They depend on the biodiversity for their livelihoods and survival, most particularly in local and indigenous communities. But how do we know that we are harvesting wildlife in a sustainable manner? Who is keeping the data, analysing it, sharing it, and how?

We need indicators to measure the impact of taking species from the wild, to regulate their sustainable use, and to understand how species keep ecosystems healthy. And measuring against these indicators is dependent on up-to-date data, the availability of analytical tools, and providing open and transparent access to data and information.

CITES, the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora, does this by regulating international trade in close to 35,000 species of plants and animals. Trade is only prohibited for 3% of these species. For the other 97%, trade is regulated in an attempt to be sure it is sustainable.

But the illegal trade in wildlife is attracting transnational, organised crime because it is so profitable, and so large: up to US\$10 billion per year. The value of rhino horn on the black market now exceeds the price of gold. And it is driving some species to extinction. The consortium which is fighting this

scourge, which also includes INTERPOL and the World Bank, is taking the fight against wildlife crime to another level through sharing data, analysis, intelligence, enforcement techniques and resources.

CITES, under whose auspices over 850,000 trade documents a year are drawn up for legal trade, is developing an electronic trade documentation system. This creates an up-to-the minute indicator of biodiversity use. And it helps tackle illegal trade. But capacity is required to use data and information in decision making. Yet, more remains to be done. "Overexploitation through illegal and unsustainable international trade is happening right now at a scale that poses an immediate risk to biodiversity. Responding to this risk has clear agreed global biodiversity benefits, as well as local benefits," said CITES Secretary-General, John Scanlon.

The chairs of the five working groups that are preparing the Eye on Earth Special Initiatives agreed that technology is progressing so rapidly that soon, for example, there will be sensors almost everywhere where there are people, and beyond. Everyone will soon be able to become an actor in a global environmental data system. But for this to become a reality, a number of hurdles must still be overcome. The biggest, for several panellists, was the lack of access to information laws, especially in Africa. The tools used to share and analyse data are still far from user friendly. And better metadata for crowdsourced information is essential to make it valuable.

Brazilian Vice-Minister of the Environment

The Brazilian Vice-Minister of the Environment, Dr Aspasia Camargo, agreed. "Data is not information and information is not data. We all know that. Information requires hypothesis, analysis, diagnosis, interpretation and conclusions. Information, is also and above all, an important tool of planning, especially [for] our chaotic unsustainable cities. President Bill Clinton reminded us last June in Sao Paulo that what cannot be measured cannot be managed.

Polar Explorer Rob Swan

Rob Swann, the only man ever to walk to our planet's both poles, rounded off the session with an extraordinarily inspiring speech that involved such larks as seeing his first exploration ship crushed by ice, how to wash yourself outside when it's -52°C, and what it feels like to have beads of sweat freeze on your skin – under your clothing. "Young people today, who will be the delegates at this summit in twenty years time, need to be inspired now to take up this issue and recognise its importance. Twenty years ago, I walked under a hole in the ozone layer when walking to the Pole. My eyes changed colour and the skin was burnt from my face. That inspired me to act and I want to use my experience to encourage the next generations to act as well, without having to endure the physical pain I experienced," Rob said.

Rob gave a blunt lesson in what leadership really means. He accompanied the first Emirati woman to Antarctica, and will be taking 10 young women from GCC countries to the South Pole on his next expedition there. "If we invest in information and inspiration, I am hopeful about our future."

Thankfully, Rob promised they wouldn't have to walk there.

That kind of leadership is one that Dr. Camargo, Vice President of the Environment for Brazil, empathises with, who said: "Developing countries like Brazil and the Emirates are looking for the new role in world affairs, and why not by the way of sustainability."

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About the Eye on Earth Summit and Exhibition

Held under the patronage of His Highness Sheikh Khalifa Bin Zayed Al Nahyan, President of the United Arab Emirates, the Eye on Earth Abu Dhabi 2011 Summit & Exhibition is hosted by Environment Agency - Abu Dhabi (EAD), facilitated by Abu Dhabi Global Environmental Data Initiative (AGEDI) and held in partnership with the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP). It brings together the global leadership of the environmental information movement, a group dedicated to bringing the benefits of better information to people and decision-makers around the planet.

For more information visit, www.eyeonearthsummit.org

About Environment Agency – Abu Dhabi (EAD)

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