UN environment programme

Letter from the Executive Director

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UNEP in 2019

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I am honoured and humbled to have joined the United Nations Environment Programme in June 2019 at a time when the environmental agenda has taken centre stage.

— Inger Andersen
UN Under-Secretary-General and
UNEP Executive Director

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2019 was a year when our past finally caught up with us and science provided an unambiguous call for urgent action. A year when the world witnessed devastating storms, ice sheets melting in the Arctic, giant wildfires and deadly floods. A year when we were warned that 1 million plant and animal species face extinction. A year when we were reminded that unless we act immediately to drastically cut greenhouse gas emissions, we will alter life on Earth forever.

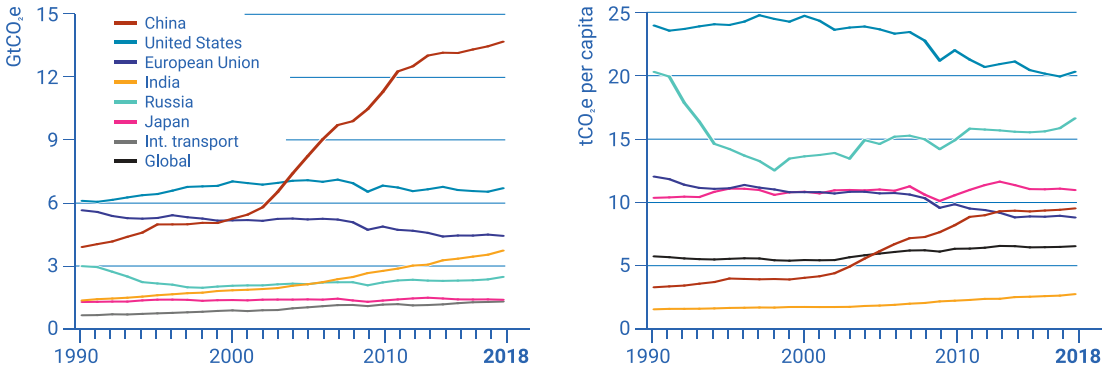
Although this letter reflects on our work in 2019, as I write these words, the world is facing its biggest crisis since World War II. We stand in solidarity with the billions of people around the world that are suffering the impact of the global pandemic of COVID-19 and extend our heartfelt gratitude to the millions of healthcare professionals and members of the United Nations family, including the World Health Organization (WHO), who are working around the clock to protect us. In due course, this crisis will call for a stronger line of enquiry into environment and health, as the connection between the health of people and the health of our planet is so fundamental, yet so often ignored. At this time, however, the immediate priority is to protect people by limiting the spread of COVID-19.

2019 was, despite its many challenges, a year that gave me hope. I was inspired by the millions of young people who took to our streets demanding action for the environment. And they were heard. Governments and businesses stepped forward with innovative policies and actions. While this global awakening is just a start, I am optimistic that we can ramp up our ambitions and actions for biodiversity and climate.

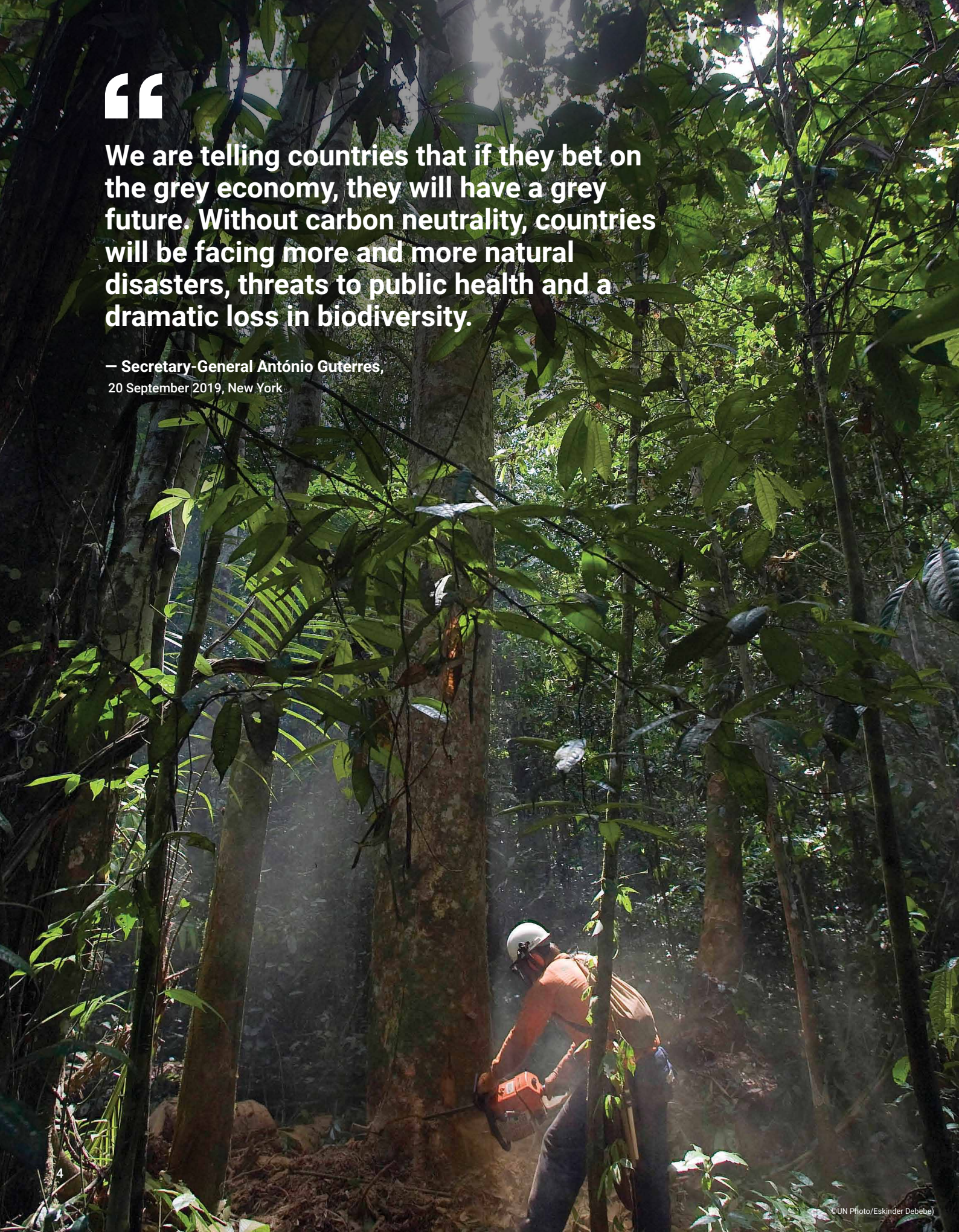
The context of the development of the Medium-Term Strategy 2022–2025 provides an opportunity for the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) to do even better. We can be more efficient. More focused. More impactful. Transforming UNEP into the best that we can be will be one of my top priorities going forward. That change will only happen with full buy-in and leadership from UNEP's amazing staff.

2019 was also a year of deep tragedy for UNEP and the broader United Nations family. The deadly crash of an Ethiopian Airlines plane on its way to Nairobi with delegates to the United Nations Environment Assembly resulted in the death of all 157 people on board – United Nations staff, youth delegates, scientists, members of academia and other partners. Among them was our dear UNEP colleague Victor Tsang. The way in which UNEP staff rallied in the face of such a disaster and organized the most successful Assembly ever is testament to the talent and dedication of this team.

TOP GREENHOUSE GAS EMITTERS



Note: *Excluding land-use change emissions due to lack of reliable country-level data, on an absolute basis (left) and per capita basis (right)*
Source: *Emissions Gap Report, UNEP, 2019*



We are telling countries that if they bet on the grey economy, they will have a grey future. Without carbon neutrality, countries will be facing more and more natural disasters, threats to public health and a dramatic loss in biodiversity.

— Secretary-General António Guterres,
20 September 2019, New York

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Showing the world that nature is our biggest ally in fighting climate change

*In 2019, a **landmark report** by the UNEP-hosted Intergovernmental Science-Policy Platform on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services (IPBES) warned that the pace of nature's decline is unprecedented in human history. This clarion call, which made front-page headlines worldwide, spelled out what is needed: a fundamental reorganization across technological, economic and social systems.*

Still, the report showed that it is not too late. If we commit to change, nature can still be conserved, restored and used sustainably. And use it we must. Nature is the most effective and cost-efficient solution to many of the challenges we face.

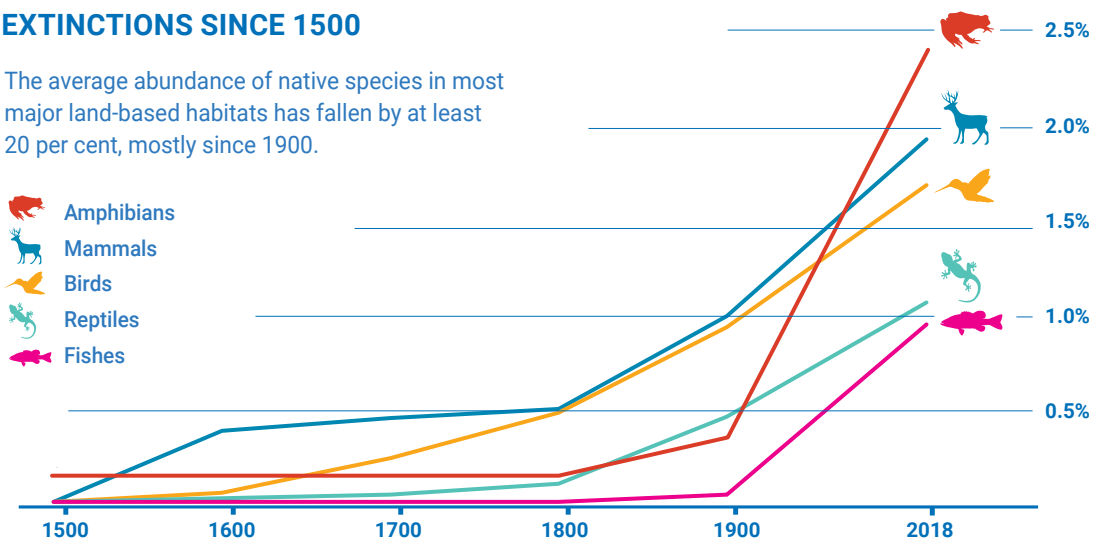
*At the United Nations Secretary-General's **Climate Action Summit** last September, UNEP unveiled more than 150 proposals for nature-based solutions as part of the launch of the **Nature-Based Solutions for Climate Manifesto**, which offers a roadmap to unlock the full potential of nature for climate action and development.*

*The tremendous capacity of nature to help us in our time of need will be at the heart of the **United Nations Decade on Ecosystem Restoration**. The United Nations General Assembly last year tasked UNEP to work with the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO) to lead the 2021–2030 Decade and scale up efforts to prevent, halt and reverse the degradation of ecosystems worldwide.*

*A critical moment for nature will come when the world agrees on a new **post-2020 framework for biodiversity** at the 15th meeting of the Conference of the Parties to the UNEP-hosted Convention on Biological Diversity. As 2019 drew to a close, the team was finalizing a zero draft. In addition to ambitious, measurable targets, success will only come with a real commitment for action by all sectors of government and society – especially business.*

EXTINCTIONS SINCE 1500

The average abundance of native species in most major land-based habitats has fallen by at least 20 per cent, mostly since 1900.



Note: *Cumulative % of species based on background rate of 0.1–2 extinctions per million species per year.*

Source: *2019 Intergovernmental Science-Policy Platform on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services Global Assessment Report.*

We stand at a critical juncture in our collective efforts to address the climate emergency. Our war against nature must stop.

— Secretary-General António Guterres,
1 December 2019, Madrid

©UN Photo / Mark Garten

Shaping global conversations and policies on the environment

UNEP's flagship reports dominated headlines in 2019, putting environmental challenges at the centre of international meetings, boardroom discussions and conversations from classrooms to kitchens to protest marches.

*Ahead of the December climate summit in Madrid, our **Emissions Gap Report** helped drive the agenda. The report said that we either cut greenhouse gas emissions by 7.6 per cent every year from now until 2030 or accept that our world will warm by more than 3°C by the end of the century. Quoting the report, the Secretary-General told delegates at the summit's opening that the only solution is rapid transformative action by all – governments, regions, cities, businesses and civil society. If we fail, "the impact on all life on the planet – including ours – will be catastrophic," he warned.*

*Earlier in the year, UNEP released its sixth **Global Environment Outlook** – the most comprehensive and rigorous assessment on the state of the environment. It warned that millions of people in Asia, the Middle East and Africa could die prematurely from water and air pollution by 2050 unless urgent action is taken. The report also sounded the alarm on pollutants – including antibiotics – in our freshwater systems, saying that resulting antimicrobial resistance could become a major cause of death. The report informed major policy discussions, including China's next Five-Year Plan as well as the European Union's Green New Deal, and the Association of American Publishers awarded the Outlook its **Award for Environmental Science**.*

*With chemical production forecast to almost double by 2030 – and an urgent need to decouple this growth from damage to human health and the environment – our research has informed the process to draft a post-2020 framework for the Strategic Approach to International Chemicals Management. Our second **Global Chemicals Outlook** noted that the framework must bring together all relevant sectors and organizations to foster collaborative, ambitious action. If we get this right, it will help halt biodiversity loss and contribute to achieving other Sustainable Development Goals and targets.*

*Our **Environmental Rule of Law report** was the first such global assessment. It found that a lack of political will to fully implement and enforce environmental laws is one of the greatest challenges to mitigating climate change, reducing pollution, and preventing widespread species and habitat loss. Two months after its publication, the Supreme Court of India cited UNEP and the report in a ruling on a proposed airport that was to be constructed in an eco-sensitive area in the state of Goa. The decision judicially recognized the concept of environmental rule of law for the first time in India.*

*Our **Frontiers 2018/19 report** on emerging environmental issues addressed the threat posed by nitrogen pollution. The report informed discussions at the United Nations Environment Assembly, and Member States subsequently adopted a resolution on nitrogen management that included a proviso to better coordinate policies across the nitrogen cycle at national, regional and global levels.*

Science does not just show us where we are. It shows us how to get to where we need to be. The UNEP-hosted International Resource Panel released a summary of its new report Resource Efficiency and Climate Change at the Madrid summit in December. The report shows how material efficiency strategies applied to cars and residential buildings could help countries further reduce their greenhouse gas emissions. G7 countries alone could save up to 170 million tonnes of carbon emissions from homes by 2050, compared to 2016 levels. In this same sector and period, China could save some 350 million tonnes and India some 270 million tonnes. All of this could happen through strategies and technologies that are available today.

Clean energy and efficient cooling on a warming planet

The technical assistance provided by the Climate Technology Centre and Network (CTCN), the operational arm of the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change Technology Mechanism, has contributed to anticipated emission reductions of 11.8 million tonnes of carbon dioxide equivalent per year and benefited 90 million people. The CTCN knowledge platform is the world's largest source of online technology information, including technology descriptions, webinars, thousands of case studies and country plans. By December 2019, the Centre, co-hosted by UNEP and the United Nations Industrial Development Organization, had provided 188 technology solutions to 100 developing countries.

In 2019, we successfully raised additional funding for our ***Seed Capital Assistance Facility****, which has mobilized over US$2.6 billion in development co-financing, project finance and fund capitalization for renewable energy development across 27 developing countries in Africa and Asia.*

Efficient, climate-friendly cooling offers significant potential for cuts in emissions. Last April, together with partners, we launched the ***Cool Coalition*** *to invigorate the search for solutions. We are already working in 25 countries and with 90 partners. Cooling is an important blind spot in climate action: a 30 per cent improvement in the energy efficiency of room air conditioners could avoid the need for 2,500 power plants and save almost US$3 trillion by 2050. At the Secretary-General's* ***Climate Action Summit****, partners of the Cool Coalition announced new commitments, including national cooling plans, business reform and funding.*

Stronger environmental governance, together

We are honoured to work with and through many critical multilateral environmental agreements to advance progress on critical issues from biodiversity and ecosystems to regional seas and chemical waste management. UNEP serves as a "docking station" for these accords, which illustrate the power of collective action to tackle environmental issues that are too big for any one nation alone. One such example came in 2019 when the world took an important step to drastically reduce the production and consumption of damaging greenhouse gases, known as hydrofluorocarbons, and limit global warming. On 1 January 2019, the ***Kigali Amendment to the Montreal Protocol on Substances that Deplete the Ozone Layer*** *came into force. At that time, it had been ratified by 65 countries. By the end of the year, that number had grown to 91.*

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