

Our Planet

United Nations Environment Programme

November 2014



Climate for Life



Ali Bongo Ondimba
Biodiversity and
Climate Change

Anote Tong
The Ocean: Too
Important to Ignore

Gregory Hunt
Promise of
Change

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Environmental
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For past issues visit:

www.unep.org/ourplanet

ISSN:

1013-7394

*OurPlanet,
the magazine of the
United Nations Environment Programme
(UNEP)*

Director of Publication: *Naysán Sahba*

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Design and Layout:

Hybrid Design (San Francisco)

William Orlale (UNEP)

Produced by:

United Nations Environment Programme

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Photo Captions:

Page 7, top: *Grand Bam Bam, Wonga Wongué Reserve, Gabon*

Page 8, top: *Isolated tree in Ivindo National Park, Ogooué-Ivindo, Gabon.*

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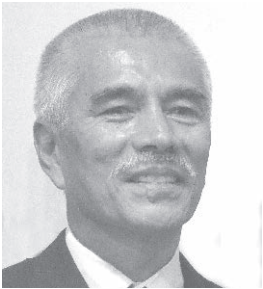
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Reflections



Photo: 2012 © Anssi Kulberg | UNEP



Achim Steiner

United Nations Under-Secretary-General and UNEP Executive Director

Whether it's the destruction of coral reefs, the clearing of tropical mangroves, or the slashing and burning of rainforests, the degradation of the planet's natural habitats and of the biodiversity that thrives within them have become the driving force behind the proliferation of protected areas around the world over the last decade.

This month the World Parks Congress, hosted by the International Union for Conservation of Nature, enters its sixth decade. It has been 10 years since the last World Parks Congress and in that time the importance of protected areas to the health of the planet has grown immeasurably.

Today, there are approximately 200,000 protected areas in the world, which cover around 14.6 per cent of the world's land and around 2.8 per cent of its oceans.

This may sound like significant coverage but given the workload of protected areas it is far from enough. Protected areas provide a host of indispensable services to humanity. World Bank and World Wildlife Fund for Nature research estimates that protected areas provide drinking water for one in three of the world's 100 largest cities; and homes, jobs and livelihoods to millions more.


As a carbon sequestration service, their impact is immense. Protected areas store the same amount of carbon as the tropical rainforests; they keep us healthy by being a source of clean air, as well as of new medicines; and they enhance food security by boosting fisheries and preserving wild relatives of crops.

UNEP research reveals that while protected areas have increased in number by 58 per cent over the last two decades, and in their extent by 48 per cent, many protected areas face management, governance and financial challenges—and half of the world's most important sites for biodiversity are still unprotected.

Protected areas, once thought of as little more than wildlife sanctuaries for tourists, are now considered vital buffers between humanity and the impacts of some of the gravest threats facing us, the most notable among them being climate change, along with natural disasters and food insecurity.

Essentially, protected areas are protecting us as much as they are protecting the many declining animal and plant species that find safe haven within them.

Despite mounting efforts to correct many ecologically destructive trends, our ecosystems



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continue on a trajectory of degradation, meaning that should “business-as-usual” continue, we will increasingly look to protected areas to shield us from the impacts of our relentless assault on the planet.

The Global Biodiversity Outlook 4 (GBO4) report, recently launched at the twelfth meeting of the Conference of the Parties to the Convention on Biological Diversity, provides ample evidence of how our progress is in danger of being overwhelmed by the continued exhaustion of natural capital for unsustainable cycles of economic growth.

It tells us that global rates of deforestation and forest degradation are declining—but they remain alarmingly high, and are contributing to 17 per cent of greenhouse gas emissions according to the United Nations Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change. The total area of land remaining in a natural or semi-natural condition, meanwhile, has been showing a downward trend in recent decades, with few signs of a reversal.

It tells us that 500 million people depend on coral reefs for protection against sea level rise and for their livelihoods, and that large marine protected areas offer opportunities for better protection of coral reefs. In spite of

this, it informs us, pressure from fishing and coastal development continues to intensify, resulting in an increase in the percentage of threatened reefs by nearly 30 per cent in the decades to 2007.

The message is familiar: we are taking action, but the pace of progress is not fast enough to mitigate the range of escalating environmental threats that face us, of which habitat loss coupled with biodiversity degradation is one of the most serious.

The 20 Aichi Biodiversity Targets, if met, will contribute significantly to broader global priorities addressed by the post-2015 development agenda; priorities such as reducing hunger and poverty, improving human health, and ensuring a sustainable supply of energy, food and clean water. The findings from the GBO4 report make clear that a failure to meet the Aichi Biodiversity Targets by 2020 will be a failure to provide the foundations for a sustainable future.

Fortunately, a number of recent achievements have succeeded in building momentum and strengthening political will to keep the Aichi Biodiversity Targets on track: policymakers are encouraged by the fact that nearly a quarter of countries have already passed Aichi

Biodiversity Target 11 of protecting 17 per cent of their land area, and Target 16, the ratification by 51 parties of the Nagoya Protocol on Access to Genetic Resources, which entered into force well in advance of the 2015 deadline.

Given these successes and the fact that 179 countries have developed National Biodiversity Strategies and Action Plans—Target 17—it is still possible, with the right financial mechanisms in place, with concerted policy action and earnest determination, to meet many of the remaining targets.

The World Parks Congress comes just weeks ahead of the twentieth session of the Conference of the Parties (the supreme governing body of the United Nations Convention on Climate Change) taking place in Lima this December, and therefore represents an important opportunity to build on the momentum created by the achievement of key Aichi Biodiversity Targets by not only charting the future direction of protected areas for the next 10 years, but also by making the case for greater investment in protected areas as providers of vital climate regulation services.

The outcomes of the World Parks Congress will be called the “Promise of Sydney”, and it will be a promise we will have to keep if we want to decouple growth from greenhouse gas emissions, wealth from inequality, and progress from ecological destruction.

We have come a long way in the last four decades since UNEP was founded, from a narrow advocacy base to a burgeoning global consensus on the imperative of transitioning from carbon-intensive economic growth to an inclusive and sustainable model of development.

The next 10 years promises to be the most challenging and potentially rewarding part of the journey as we continue to galvanize public and political momentum for a transition to a sustainable form of development underpinned by an inclusive green economy.

Whether we are improving the governance of protected areas, conserving biodiversity or tackling the threat of climate change, we must not lose sight of the fact that we are all striving to achieve the same objective. The World Parks Congress, the Convention on Biological Diversity and the Climate Conference of the Parties, all taking place within weeks of one another, are a reminder that by uniting our efforts to ensure healthy and productive planetary ecological systems, we can more readily achieve the ultimate shared goal of an inclusive and sustainable future for all. ▲

Ali Bongo Ondimba Pride Turns to Vision

*Gabon is making significant advances in
developing a green economy*



**Ali Bongo
Ondimba**

President of Gabon

Early explorer-naturalists such as Paul du Chaillu, Mary Kingsley and Giacomo di Brazza (who discovered de Brazza's monkey on the Ivindo River and was brother to Pietro di Brazza for whom Brazzaville is named) shone a light on the diversity of Gabon's rainforests. Du Chaillu, particularly inspired wonder as the first explorer to observe and hunt gorillas, bringing back to Europe stories of derring-do that inspired Edgar Rice Burrough to write Tarzan of the Apes.

In 1999 a modern National Geographic explorer, the

His decision in 2002 to create 13 national parks covering 11 per cent of Gabon, cancelling over 1.5 million hectares of logging concessions in the process, was one of the success stories toasted at the last World Parks Congress, in Durban in 2003. The design of the parks system aimed to maximize their value for biodiversity conservation and ecosystem services, whilst optimizing resilience to climate change and minimizing conflicts with surrounding populations.

However, the creation of the parks was not an end point but rather a new beginning. Indeed, the concept of "sacred forests", where hunting and fishing are forbidden, is integral to traditional Bantu and Pygmy culture in Gabon, and the creation of the parks was seen by many as an integration of our traditions into the modern world of natural resource extraction.

The year before that historic decision, the government adopted a new forestry law making sustainable management of logging concessions obligatory. We also subsequently cre-

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