



MESSAGE OF THE EXECUTIVE SECRETARY

OF THE

CONVENTION ON BIOLOGICAL DIVERSITY

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on the occasion of

WORLD HEALTH DAY

7 April 2018

*“Universal health coverage: everyone, everywhere”*

Today on the occasion of World Health Day, it is important to note that human health ultimately depends upon the availability of clean air, fresh water, medicines, food, and fuel sources. These ecosystem services are critical for good human health and productive livelihoods and depend on biodiversity.

Many global health challenges, such as infectious and non-communicable diseases, and malnutrition can be linked to the decline of biodiversity and ecosystem services. For example, deforestation has been associated with a range of health issues. In Cambodia, an assessment<sup>1</sup> found that each 10 per cent loss in forest area was associated with an increase of about 14 per cent in the incidence of diarrhea in children under 5 years of age. In contrast, a 10 per cent increase in protected area coverage was associated with a 3.5 per cent decrease in diarrhea.

Human health and nutrition security is intimately interconnected with biodiversity and the health of our ecosystems. Biodiversity plays a crucial role in human nutrition through its role in global food production, as it ensures the sustainable productivity of soils and provides the genetic resources for crops, non-crop terrestrial species, livestock and marine species harvested for food. Access to a sufficiency of a nutritious variety of foods is a fundamental determinant of health, so that populations are not malnourished or obese.

This was confirmed in the joint report, *Connecting Global Priorities: Biodiversity and Human Health*, released in 2015 by the Convention on Biological Diversity and the World Health Organization, which

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<sup>1</sup> Herrera, D. et al (2017). Upstream watershed condition predicts rural children’s health across 35 developing countries. *Nature Communications* 8, 811. doi:10.1038/s41467-017-00775-2

points out that a diversity of species, varieties and breeds, as well as wild food and medicinal sources (fish, plants, bushmeat, insects and fungi) underpins dietary diversity, good nutrition and health.

Plant biodiversity, for example, is the single largest source of natural medicines. Globally, an estimated 60,000 species are used for their medicinal, nutritional and aromatic properties. In many countries, including in Sri Lanka where World Health Day is being celebrated this year, traditional medicine forms an integral part of the health care delivery system. Just how important plants are for our health is highlighted by recent work<sup>2</sup> in Bolivia that identified 258 traditional medicine uses, used for a total of 13 disease categories and drawing on nearly 100 native (and non-native introduced) plant species. It is estimated that approximately 80 per cent of the world's population from developing countries rely mainly on traditional medicines derived from plants. When we lose plant species we lose the opportunity to discover potential drugs in the future.

Agricultural sustainability and resilience are particularly important in light of climate change. Climate change is already impacting the nutritional quality and safety of food and increasing the vulnerability of food insecure individuals and households. Unfortunately, biodiversity loss and climate change are mutually reinforcing. The loss of biodiversity hastens climate change, which in turn threatens biodiversity. To break this cycle, the conservation, sustainable management and restoration of ecosystems as part of an overall adaptation strategy can help people adapt to the impacts of climate change. Diverse and well-managed environments also help reduce disaster risks and enhance community resilience to both natural and human-created events.

These findings were also confirmed in *Connecting Global Priorities: Biodiversity and Human Health*. I welcome discussions on these and other findings at the upcoming World Health Assembly in May.

Finally, biodiversity is proven to be beneficial for our mental health. Green spaces in urban settings, for example, are linked to stress reduction. There is also strong evidence for the benefits of interaction with nature – including domestic animals and wild animals in wild settings – in treatments for depression, anxiety and behavioural problems, particularly in children and teenagers. Furthermore, children who interact with nature and understand the importance of conservation may be more likely to conserve nature themselves as adults.

As recently noted by the World Health Organization; every breath we take depends on another life, another species. In order to live in harmony with nature, let's focus on sustainably using, conserving and sharing the benefits of biodiversity in ways that enables it to survive and provide future generations with the sustenance for healthy and productive lives.

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<sup>2</sup> Bridgewater, Peter; Régnier, Mathieu; and Wang Zhen. (2012). *HEALTHY PLANET, HEALTHY PEOPLE - A Guide to Human Health and Biodiversity*. Secretariat of the Convention on Biological Diversity, Montreal.