



Nature-based solutions for sustainable development in the Arab region

Keynote address of IUCN Director General Julia Marton-Lefèvre at the AFED Conference – Beirut, Lebanon, 29 November 2012

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Your Excellency Minister Nazem El Khoury, representing the President of Lebanon,

Your Excellency Secretary General of AFED, Mr. Najib Saab,

Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen, colleagues, friends,

I am very pleased to be here on this occasion for many reasons, including the celebration of the life of Professor Mohamed Kassas who was the President of IUCN in the 1980s and was an important mentor in my life. Both Ashok Khosla, the former President of IUCN who is with us today, and I benefitted from knowing Professor Kassas, and I know that he was glad to see us succeed him in IUCN.

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Our message is simple: nature is not a victim; nature is part of the solution.

promoting sustainable use of dryland ecosystems.

Drylands are challenging environments where human ingenuity, knowledge systems, and careful use of resources are essential for survival.

That is why we are working with the Bedouin communities, and learning from their traditional knowledge of managing fragile environment. We are assisting the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia in developing its national strategy on access and benefit-sharing in relation to genetic resources.

We are also promoting gender-sensitive climate change responses in Bahrain, Egypt and Jordan — the work I presented earlier this week at the UN climate change conference underway in Doha, Qatar.

Today, four out of five countries in the Middle East have less than 10% green cover.

Forest landscape restoration is one of the most cost-effective solutions to conserve biodiversity, combat poverty and climate change all at the same time.

Last year, IUCN and partners launched the so-called Bonn Challenge to restore 150 million hectares of lost forests and degraded lands worldwide by 2020. Achieving this goal could generate around US\$ 85 billion per year for some of the world's poorest communities.

We are looking forward to working with all of you in making this happen in the Arab region.

Already here, in Lebanon, whose national flag features the emblematic Cedar tree, there is much enthusiasm about forest landscape restoration, and IUCN is offering its advice on indentifying the most suitable native trees for this purpose.

Furthermore, healthy ecosystems serve as a foundation for food security. Just think of a Sahara oasis with its cornucopia of citrus fruits, figs, peaches, apricots, vegetables and cereals!

They can also provide cost-effective buffers against natural disasters. For example, coral reefs provide coastal protection and other valuable services worth an estimated US\$ 170 billion a year, and yet 70% of coral reefs worldwide are threatened or destroyed.

IUCN has been active in the region for decades and has conducted studies covering the Red Sea, the Arabian Gulf and the Mediterranean marine ecosystems. The coastal habitat and marine management studies for Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, Oman, Libya and other countries conducted in the 1970s and 80s now constitute globally important baseline assessments.

For example, in just over two decades, the Red Sea went from a remote frontier to an international tourism hotspot. Some 3 million tourists visit the Red Sea every year. In a frenzy to capitalise on this tourism boom however, the Red Sea's resources are being depleted.

Together with UNESCO and other partners, IUCN has launched the Changing Oceans Expedition to document the growing human impact on marine environments.

Two sites will be sampled in the Red Sea. Scientists will then deliver recommendations on how to keep tourism within sustainable limits, in order to provide benefits well into the future.

In the Gulf, we are working with Qatar on assessing the status of fish species as part of our well-known IUCN Red List of Threatened Species, and are about to start coral reef

monitoring together with Kuwait. IUCN is also assisting Oman, Tunisia and Morocco in strengthening their eco-tourism sector.

highest political levels in promoting nature-based solutions for sustainable development.

As AFED Secretary-General Najib Saab justly remarked, “...after wars, revolts, and all sorts of miseries, people will still have to eat and drink and breathe, and therefore manage their natural resources.”

The very fact that the AFED conference is taking place at this time and in this location, with delegates from nearly 50 countries, is proof—if proof were needed —227