

International Day of Forests Day
21 March 2016
Geneva, Switzerland



Acting Secretary General Ania Grobicki
Opening Speech on the occasion of International Day of Forests Day

Your Excellencies, distinguished guests, ladies and gentlemen, colleagues,

Thank you very much to this opportunity to greet you and address you today on behalf of the Ramsar Convention Secretariat, and thank you to the government of Finland and the Swiss confederation for hosting this event. Despite the environmental challenges that we see in our work and that we hear about daily on the news, this is indeed an occasion to celebrate because at last, there is policy coherence on the international level creating a balanced and explicit link between environment on one hand, and development on the other – embodied in the 17 Sustainable Development Goals that were adopted by all countries last September in New York. Wetlands are mentioned twice, together with forests – the first time under Goal 6, the water goal, and the second time under Goal 15, the biodiversity goal.

Under the water goal:

Target 6.6 *“By 2020, protect and restore water-related ecosystems, including mountains, forests, wetlands, rivers, aquifers and lakes”*

- **Percentage of change in water-related ecosystems extent over time**

Under the biodiversity goal:

Target 15.1 *“By 2020, ensure the conservation, restoration and sustainable use of terrestrial and inland freshwater ecosystems and their services, in particular forests, wetlands, mountains and drylands, in line with obligations under international agreements”*

- **Proportion of total water resources used (MDG Indicator)**
- **Annual change in forest area and land under cultivation (modified MDG Indicator)**
- **Area of forest under sustainable forest management as a percent of forest area**

So the SDGs clearly recognize that forests and water are closely connected and mutually interdependent. We can talk about “water for forests”: forests and woodlands, especially peatland forests, cypress and mangrove swamps, and floodplain forests in general depend upon water for their unique ecological character. *En revanche*, we can talk about “forests for water” : forests maintaining water quality, regulating surface and ground water flows, and helping to mitigate the risks of water-related disasters. Today’s event in New York, organized by the UN Forum for Forests, is also celebrating forests and water, and stressing that forested watersheds and wetlands supply 75 percent of the world’s accessible freshwater.

Forests play a major role in the global water cycle. However on a smaller scale, forests help to modify micro-climate and precipitation, which has a tremendous effect on the associated wetlands and biodiversity. It is now well-known that microclimate directly influences ecological processes, and reflects changes in ecosystem function and landscape structure across various scales. Forested buffer strips along rivers and streams are crucial for maintaining ecological character. Although much still remains to be studied in terms of the micro-climatic effects, forests reduce temperature peaks of both air, soil and water temperature (thus ameliorating the effects of climate change) and contribute to increased humidity. Without forests, temperatures rise and evaporation rates from soil and water increase, contributing to wetland loss, land degradation and desertification. On a larger scale, we now know that forested floodplains such as the Amazon Basin are major drivers of precipitation cycles across the entire subcontinent of Latin America. Again, conversely, sound river basin management such as promoted under the UNECE's Helsinki Convention supports forest protection and afforestation measures.

So the two types of ecosystems are really very closely interrelated and mutually supportive. It is also useful to look at specific types of forests. At the New York event, the Chair of Ramsar's STRP will be focusing upon mangroves, and the crucial role that they play in terms of coastal protection, and building resilience against the effects of cyclones and storm surges. Here my colleague Tobias Salathe will be focusing in his presentation on peatland forests.

Peat is essentially "young coal", and when peatlands dry out, they release carbon. Substantial carbon emissions occur through the draining of wet peatland forests and forested peatlands, often compounded by burning of these forests to clear the land. In view of the climate agreement, we need to look at some of the implications of REDD+ for wetland ecosystems. Ramsar is arguing that in addition to afforestation measures, REDD+ should also take into account the need for the rewetting of these types of forest ecosystems.

To conclude, the SDGs have shown great wisdom in linking together two vital ecosystem types, water and forests, so closely together under both the water goal and the biodiversity goal. Our challenge now is to translate these useful targets into implementation and monitoring on the ground. The Ramsar Convention stands ready to support countries in doing so, together with our partners and colleagues here today.