

Ecosystem Assessment Launched

On 6 June, the United Nations launched a four-year effort by 1,500 leading scientists to assess the condition of the world's wildlife habitats and ecosystems. It is hoped that the Millennium Ecosystem Assessment (MA), unveiled as part of the celebrations for World Environment Day (see page 199), will improve not only our understanding of the impacts that humans are having on the planet, but also provide remedies and chart ways in which the Earth's ecosystems can be saved and restored.

At a press conference to launch the US\$21 million project, Secretary-General Kofi Annan recalled that "last year, in the Millennium Report to the General Assembly, I pointed out that there has never been a comprehensive global assessment of the world's major ecosystems. The Millennium Ecosystem Assessment is a response to this need. It is designed to bring the world's best science to bear on the pressing choices we face in managing the global environment. It will examine the influence of human activities on the environment, and how, in turn, those changes are affecting our future prospects for health and well-being."

"Most of all," the Secretary-General told correspondents, "the Assessment promises to help us improve the lives and livelihoods of the poor, and make considerable gains in our efforts to find an equitable and sustainable balance between environment and development."

A 40-member board led by Robert Watson, the chief scientist at the World Bank, will oversee the assessment.

Timothy Wirth, a former US senator now with the UN Foundation, which administers businessman Ted Turner's \$1 billion gift to the UN and will help fund the project, said that the bulk of the world economy was rooted in five

biological systems: croplands, forests, grasslands, oceans and fresh waterways. In the jargon of economic globalisation, he said, the economy was a "wholly owned subsidiary of the environment." When the environment was forced to file for bankruptcy, because its resource bases had been polluted and degraded, the economy went bankrupt with it, and so did everything else. That was why the Secretary-General's call for an equitable and sustainable balance between the environment and economic development was absolutely critical. He added that the Assessment would be the first comprehensive report card on that balance and was itself crucial.

Dan Claasen, of UNEP's Division of Early Warning and Assessment, said: "One of our first tasks will be to find a common approach among various scientific and other organisations on how to assess the health of ecosystems. One of the most difficult challenges will be the assessment of inaccessible coastal and deep ocean areas including coral reefs, mangrove swamps and the continental shelves. We hope the satellite data will play an important role in mapping the location and extent of such sites. This will allow us to identify areas where direct scientific assessments by people on the ground are urgently needed."

The MA will build on the Pilot Analysis of Global Ecosystems (PAGE) published in 2000 and produced by the World Resources Institute (WRI) in collaboration with the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), UNEP and the World Bank. Such studies have shown that in many areas the capacity of ecosystems to meet needs for food and clean water is severely diminished and threats to biodiversity and human health are growing.

Angela Cropper of Stanford University and co-chair of the assessment panel, said: "The pilot analysis shows that the driving forces behind rapid deterioration of the world's ecosystems are rapid population growth and increased consumption. We now want to expand the analysis and go deeper." Asked to put "a face" on some of the urgent problems confronting ecosystems, she cited dying coral reefs, the degradation of forests and depleted fish stocks.

Hamdallah Zedan, secretariat of the UN Convention on Biological Diversity, noted that the whole project would "involve the largest number of natural and social scientists ever assembled to look at the consequences to the world's ecosystems."

Mohamed El-Ashry, Chief Executive Officer of the Global Environment Facility (GEF), said all of us were

Jonathan Lash, President of the World Resources Institute, noted that the Assessment involved institutions from the United Nations, the private sector and non-governmental organisations. It entailed collaboration across every region and from all scientific disciplines. The Assessment would work because there were several hundred scientists who would participate voluntarily in trying to contribute knowledge to the decision-making processes in the world. He added that the Assessment had been a model of multi-sectoral collaboration, and would only succeed if it continued to be that.

He stressed that while the trends that would be assessed were global, almost all the decisions that determined the health of ecosystems were local. An important part of the process would be the creation of models for regional and local assessment. In that regard, it was critical that the



UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan with our representative to the United Nations, Ambassador Bhagwat-Singh – New York

Courtesy: DPI - UN

constantly reminded of human dependence on natural ecosystems, and the threats faced when those systems were not managed sustainably. "From forest fires in south-east Asia to floods in China, Central America and Mozambique, natural events had been exacerbated by human degradation of ecosystems. In every case, it was the poor who had suffered the most."

private sector be involved. The Assessment's board included major representatives of that group.

The Millennium Assessment was also being launched in Beijing, Havana, London, Tokyo and Turin. In advance of the official launch, environmental assessments are already under way in Africa, Asia, Central America, western China and Norway. (MJ)

