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Back to Nature: Protecting our Most Precious Resources

Few would dispute that long-term environmental issues such as global warming, deforestation, desertification and extinction of natural habitats and wildlife will have a severe impact on travel and tourism. Environmental concerns received much attention during the boom period before 1997, but they appear to have faded from many radar screens. It would appear that only imminent threats should be taken seriously.

However, "imminent" may be closer than we think warned nearly 5,000 of the world's top environmentalists and conservationists, who gathered at the 3rd IUCN World Conservation Congress in Bangkok, November 17-25, 2004. Various papers and presentations in dozens of meetings indicated that the spectre of global warming is very real, the world's biodiversity is declining at unprecedented rates, deforestation is continuing unabated and over-fishing and dumping of industrial waste is harming the world's rivers and oceans.

If this continues, the impact on travel and tourism is obvious. For an industry that stands on two legs, "nature" and "culture", it would be like having one leg amputated. Protecting the industry from terrorism may be an immediate priority, but over the medium- and long-term protecting one of the industry's two primary products remains vital.

WHAT IS THE IUCN?

The world's largest environmental knowledge network, the World Conservation Union (known by its French acronym IUCN) brings together 81 states, 114 government agencies, more than 800 non-governmental organisations (NGOs), and some 10,000 scientists and experts from 181 countries. Created in 1948 and based in Gland, Switzerland, its mission is to influence, encourage and assist societies worldwide to conserve the integrity and diversity of nature. It has 1,000 staff in 62 countries.

The quadrennial IUCN World Conservation Congress, the world's largest democratic environmental forum, strives to bring knowledge about biodiversity into the mainstream of development decision-making. The Bangkok event was the IUCN's third Congress, and the first in Asia.

SAVING SPECIES

One key publication issued at the Congress was the *Global Species Assessment (GSA)*, said to be "the most comprehensive evaluation ever undertaken of the status of the world's biodiversity". It was produced by the IUCN along with Conservation International's Center for Applied Biodiversity Science, BirdLife International and NatureServe.

The GSA concludes that a total of 15,589 species face extinction. "From the mighty shark to the humble frog, the world's biodiversity is declining at unprecedented rates," said the report. In 1996, it was revealed that one in eight birds (12%) and one in four mammals (23%) were threatened with extinction. This infamous line-up has now been joined by more than half (53%) of Madagascar's freshwater fish and one in five (18%) assessed sharks and rays.

One in three amphibians (32%) and almost half (42%) of the world's turtles and tortoises are threatened. With amphibians relying on fresh water, their catastrophic decline is a warning about the state of the planet's water resources.

Habitat destruction and degradation are the leading causes of extinction, but other significant pressures include over-exploitation for food and medicine, introduced species, pets, pollution and disease. Climate

"As most threats to biodiversity are human-driven, human actions alone can prevent many species from becoming extinct."

change is increasingly recognised as a serious threat. Species provide food, medicine, fuel and building materials. They help filter water, decompose waste, generate soil and pollinate crops.

Most threatened birds, mammals and amphibians are located on the tropical continents of Central and South America, Africa south of the Sahara, and tropical South and Southeast Asia. These regions contain the tropical broadleaf forests believed to harbour the majority of the earth's living terrestrial and freshwater species. Australia, Brazil, China (PRC), Indonesia and Mexico hold particularly large numbers of threatened species. Countries with high numbers of threatened species and relatively low gross national income include Brazil, Cameroon, China (PRC), Colombia, Ecuador, India, Indonesia, Madagascar, Peru and the Philippines.

IUCN Director General Mr Achim Steiner said: "As most threats to biodiversity are human-driven, human actions alone can prevent many species from becoming extinct." There are many examples of species being brought back from the brink, including the southern white rhino and black-footed ferret and thousands of dedicated people around the world are doing their utmost to reverse the extinction rate."

SAVING MOUNTAINS

The degradation of natural resources, growing populations, haphazard development and a host of other challenges threaten the delicate mountain ecosystem of the Gilgit-Baltistan or the Northern Areas (NA) – "the roof of the world". Sandwiched between Pakistan, India, Afghanistan and China (PRC), NA is the meeting point of four great mountain ranges – Karakorum, Pamirs, Himalaya and the Hindukush.

The NA is home to the world's largest glaciers outside the poles. Spanning an area of 72,400 sq km, the NA serves as a vital catchment for the Indus, a river upon which the majority of Pakistan's irrigated agriculture and hydroelectricity depends. A prime tourism attraction, the region contains Pakistan's most important natural forests, rich mineral reserves, a wealth of biodiversity and a variety of cultural and archaeological sites.

Over the past decades, many of the NA's natural resources have come under increasing pressure, especially since the opening of the Karakoram Highway linking Pakistan and China (PRC). To address the degradation, a novel policy framework for sustainable development was disclosed at the IUCN Congress. According to IUCN Pakistan Country Representative Mr Abdul Latif Rao, the strategy recommends improved governance, natural resource management and the involvement of local communities

in the development processes.

The *State of Environment and Development Report* has also been published. Sixteen stand-alone background papers are available on the subjects of water, agriculture, forestry, biodiversity, rangeland, livestock and the private sector.

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SAVING WILDLIFE HABITATS

Can village communities replace fences and gun-toting guards in protecting wildlife habitats? Providing answers and insights from around the world, IUCN has launched *Indigenous and Local Communities and Protected Areas: Towards Equity and Enhanced Conservation*, a publication that explores the compatibility between human communities and protected areas.

A dramatic transformation is taking place globally in how wildlife and biodiversity are conserved. "Fences are coming down and the guns and guards appointed by governments are being replaced by a system characterised by 'social fencing' in which indigenous peoples and local communities are central partners," said Mr Ashish Kothari, Co-Chair of the IUCN Theme on Indigenous and Local Communities, Equity and Protected Areas.

The IUCN publication also highlights some serious hurdles to overcome. Mr Kothari said: "inappropriate national policies and laws, destructive 'development' projects that threaten community conserved sites, inadequate expertise and skills, lack of funds and, perhaps most important, a reluctance among formal conservation organisations (both governmental and NGO) to change their conventional approaches, are all challenges we have to face."

However, there is increasing evidence that participatory conservation is gaining ground with governments, communities and NGOs working hand-in-hand in several countries. "Community Conserved Areas" (including "Indigenous Protected Areas") are now widespread.

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SAVING SEAS

Bottom trawl fishing fleets are ploughing the ocean floors in search of luxury seafood for the markets of developed countries. Noise pollution from sonar is harming large marine species, such as whales, that are crucial to the balance of marine ecosystems.

'man-driven, human actions alone can lead to extinction.'

Pollution from shipping is degrading vast areas of habitat.

Large and microscopic species alike are at risk. Six of seven marine turtles, which provide a basis for ecotourism livelihoods in many coastal countries, are facing extinction. Investments in protecting these species are in danger of being undermined unless migratory routes are protected. Scientists have discovered extraordinary numbers of unique fish, corals and minerals, some of which have the potential to offer cures for cancer and other pharmaceutical benefits.

Conservation organisations have called for immediate action to halt fishing practices that are destroying deep sea biodiversity. At the IUCN Congress in Bangkok, conservationists met with scientists, government officials and others to improve legal mechanisms for protecting the high-seas.

"We don't yet have a reliable means of protecting the world's largest living heritage," said IUCN Global Marine Programme Head Mr Carl Gustaf Lundin. "As a result, foreign fleets are fishing off the coasts of less developed countries and potentially life-saving biodiversity is being destroyed."

National Geographic Society Explorer-in-Residence and Conservation International's Global Marine Resource Division Executive Director Ms Sylvia Earle said: "We are protecting less than 1% of our oceans. We must learn to value marine life less as commodities and more as part of the natural world on which we too depend."

World Wildlife Fund International Species Programme Manager Ms Amanda Nickson added: "Conserving the high seas is critical to the future of migratory and deep-sea species and habitats. The recent Northeast Atlantic Fisheries Commission decision to ban bottom trawling on five vulnerable marine habitats is a critical first step."

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SAVING FORESTS

The semi-arid Shinyanga Region in central Tanzania used to be called the "Desert of Tanzania" after trees and woodland were cleared to eradicate the tsetse fly, create land and space for agriculture and cater to a growing population. The clearing came at a cost. Wood for fuel took up to four hours to collect, the forage needed by the oxen at the end of the dry season was no longer readily available and wild fruit and medicinal plants were increasingly hard to find. In short, all the things vital to the livelihood

of the agro-pastoralist Sukuma people were disappearing.

In 1986, the Government of Tanzania started the Shinyanga Soil Conservation Programme (known by the Swahili acronym HASHI). With additional funding from Norway, the project relied on the Sukuma people's rich local knowledge of their natural resources and ways of managing them.

By the year 2000, between 300,000 and 500,000 hectares of foraging land was restored in 833 villages in the region. This success is attributed to a system of enclosures that the Sukuma traditionally used to sustain their land and lifestyle. HASHI was acknowledged at the Johannesburg World Summit on Sustainable Development in 2002, where it was selected as one of the finalists of the Equator Initiative.

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SAVING CORAL REEFS

Coral reefs are some of the most valuable and spectacular places on earth. Approximately 100,000 coral reef and reef-associated species have been described to date and some estimate that there could be two million more. Reefs protect coastlines from erosion, provide a home for economically important marine species and form an important link in cycling nutrients from land to the open ocean.

It is estimated that reefs provide seafood for one billion people in Asia alone, many of them from poor communities. Reef-based activities, principally fishing and tourism, provide economic livelihoods for millions of others. Today, reefs face further stress from coral disease, invasive species and coral "bleaching" brought about by rapid climate change. Sedimentation, land-based pollution and over-harvesting of reef species are also threats.

Although it reveals that more than 58% of all coral reefs are now endangered, the 2004 edition of *Status of Coral Reefs of the World* points to progress and recovery. Pressures on coral reefs from disease and predators such as the crown-of-thorns starfish appear to have stabilised or even reduced.

Since the 1998 El Nino global coral bleaching event, a one in 1,000-year event in many regions, there has been strong and healthy recovery in well-managed and remote reefs. However, the recovery is not uniform and many reefs virtually destroyed in 1998 are showing minimal signs of recovery. For example, more than 60% of reefs in South Asia were killed by the bleaching. Today, almost half remain dead and many are showing signs of a

shift to permanent algal domination. In the six years since 1998, there has been no repeat of mass coral bleaching however localised bleaching events occurred in 2000 and 2003.

Reefs in the Pacific and around Australia remain healthy, however there are few encouraging signs for reefs in Southeast Asia and the Indian Ocean. This is largely due to human pressures related to poverty, population growth and lack of alternative livelihoods. Small Island Developing States in all oceans remain particularly vulnerable to climate change due to the critical economic importance of coral reefs and reef resources.

Overall, recovery should continue if there are no major climate shifts over the next few decades. However, increasing sea surface temperatures and CO₂ concentrations provide clear evidence of global climate change in the tropics. Predictions are that extreme events, such as the mass bleaching of 1998, will become more common in the next 50 years.

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BATTLING LEAD POLLUTION

Over-exposure to lead causes learning disabilities, behavioural problems, mental retardation and other diseases. More than 75% of all lead production goes into batteries. Occupational Knowledge International's (OK International) Environmental Certification Programme for Lead Battery Manufacturing, launched in India in 2003, provides an incentive for lead battery manufacturers to reduce emissions and encourage proper battery recycling. Complying manufacturers can place 'Eco-Friendly' certification labels on their batteries.

"The World Health Organization estimates that 120 million people – primarily children – are overexposed to lead and 99% of the most severely affected reside in the developing world," said OK International Executive Director Mr Perry Gottesfeld. "Our Certification Programme offers companies a way to be rewarded for doing the right thing for the environment and public health."

OK International and its two Indian partners, Development Alternatives and the National Referral Centre for Lead Poisoning, won the United Nations-sponsored SEED (Supporting Entrepreneurs for Environment and Development) Award for the programme.

Visit: www.okinternational.org.

BRIDGING THE INFORMATION DIVIDE

Information required for effective conservation is fragmented and difficult to find. A unique coalition of organisations from around the world is committed to sharing data, information and knowledge in ways to improve the effectiveness of conservation

efforts. The Conservation Commons, created at the Bangkok IUCN Congress, brings together a vast number of institutes, museums and conservation groups to endorse common principles and free and open access to conservation information.

The initiative seeks to break down barriers to access, more effectively connect users of conservation data to the information they need and adopt new standards for integrating knowledge and experience. The Commons will make it possible for different stakeholders and decision-makers to quickly and easily share data, experiences and best practices and learn about key policy developments. The entire database is available to the public.

IUCN Chief Scientist Mr Jeff McNeely said: "The Conservation Commons is one of the single most important initiatives for the future of conservation."

Visit: www.conservationcommons.org

CONCLUSION

As a primary beneficiary of a healthy environment, the travel and tourism industry, especially in the ecologically diverse Asia Pacific region, has much to gain by joining the effort. It is all too easy to lose sight of a long-term vision in the New Normal, an era driven by short-term targets and response to crises. Nevertheless, the struggle to seek tomorrow's meal requires at least some thought about next month's too. Nothing ventured in the conservation effort, means nothing gained and everything to lose.

Indeed, for the travel and tourism industry a unique opportunity has presented itself. The newly-elected IUCN President is Mr Valli Moosa, a former Minister of the Environment and Tourism in South Africa. With a foot in both camps, Mr Moosa is well-placed to build strong bridges between the conservation movement and the tourism industry.



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