Remarks by Achim Steiner, UN Under-Secretary General and Executive Director
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At the Launch of Global Environment Outlook-4

Short or Introductory Remarks
25 October 2007, New York -- Today we launch UNEP’s Global Environment Outlook-4—the most authoritative, scientifically robust and peer reviewed report on the state of the world’s environment and its natural or nature-based resources.

It is an illuminating read outlining how over the past 20 years—since the publication of the landmark Brundtland Commission report—the financial wealth of the planet has soared by around a third.

But at the same time it is sobering: much of the ‘natural’ capital upon which so much of human well being and economic activity depends—water, land, the air and atmosphere, biodiversity and marine resources—continue their seemingly inexorable decline.

Most tellingly perhaps is the environmental footprint of the world’s population. GEO-4 estimates this demand for resources is now close to 22 hectares per person whereas the biological carrying capacity of the planet is somewhere between 15 and 16 hectares per person.

20 years after Brundtland, we may wonder what we have been doing to try and balance development with environmental sustainability.

The fact is quite a lot.

The multilateral environmental infrastructure has been rolled out—we have global treaties covering the ozone layer and biodiversity to climate and desertification.

GEO-4 is also salt and peppered with shining examples of creative and intelligent management from no-take zones in Fiji’s fishing industry to the restoration of river systems in Cameroon.

But the fact remains that faced with the magnitude and scale of the challenge, the response has, to put it mildly, often been confined to national action in limited or specific areas—air pollution in Europe for example.

Without an accelerated effort to reform the way we collectively do business on planet Earth, we will shortly be in trouble if indeed we are not already.

On one issue we may be finally turning the corner. That issue is climate change.
It has taken 20 years to build the scientific consensus. But in 2007 the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change has done that and in doing so deservedly jointly won the Nobel Peace Prize.

GEO-4 takes this logic across the whole spectrum of environmental issues. Like climate change, the GEO-4 findings request us all—governments, business, local authorities, NGOs and individuals—to put a full stop behind the science and for an accelerated effort on this wider environmental landscape.

The momentum on climate change in 2007 is nothing short of breathtaking—it is time to find the same sense of urgency on biodiversity and land degradation to fisheries and freshwaters.

Ladies and gentlemen, as with climate change, the cost of inaction and the price humanity will eventually pay is likely to dwarf the cost of swift and decisive action now.

Thank you

Long Version of Remarks
In 1987 Gro Harlem Brundtland, the former Norwegian Prime Minister and chair of the Commission, spoke with characteristic passion and vision about sustainable development.

“Many critical survival issues are related to uneven development, poverty, and population growth. They all place unprecedented pressures on the planet's lands, waters, forests, and other natural resources, not least in the countries of the global South,” she said.

“The downward spiral of poverty and environmental degradation is a waste of opportunities and of resources. In particular, it is a waste of human resources. What is needed now is a new era of economic growth - growth that is forceful and at the same time socially and environmentally sustainable,” said Ms Brundtland.

Well ladies and gentlemen, I will preface the launch of GEO-4 with equal if not more passion.

For the challenges outlined in Our Common Future remain, largely unresolved, persistent and even more acute than they were 20 years ago.

Most tellingly perhaps is the environmental footprint of the world’s population. GEO-4 estimates this demand for resources is now close to 22 hectares per person whereas the biological carrying capacity of the planet is somewhere between 15 and 16 hectares per person.

- Concentrations of the greenhouse gas CO2 are roughly a third higher now than they were 20 years ago.
In 1987, around 15 per cent of global fish stocks were classed as collapsed. GEO-4 says this has roughly doubled to 30 per cent.

20 years ago around a fifth of fish stocks were deemed over-exploited this has now risen to about 40 per cent.

More than one billion people in Asia are now exposed to outdoor air pollution levels above World Health Organization guidelines linked to the premature death of about 500,000 people a year.

Globally more than two million people may be dying prematurely as a result of outdoor and indoor air pollution.

Land use intensity, with links to land degradation, soil erosion, water scarcity, nutrient depletion and pollution, has increased. In 1987, a hectare of cropland yielded 1.8 tonnes. Now the figure is 2.5 tonnes.

In Latin America and the Caribbean, desertification—caused by deforestation, over grazing and inadequate irrigation—affects a quarter of the region.

Ecuador’s Antisan glacier retreated eight times faster than in the 1990s than in earlier decades and Bolivia’s Chacaltava glacier has lost over half its entire area since 1990.

Energy consumption per head in Canada and the United States has grown by 18 per cent since 1987.

Available freshwater resources are declining; by 2025, close to two billion people are likely to live with ‘absolute’ water scarcity.

In West Asia, freshwater availability per person per year has fallen from 1,700 cubic metres in the 1980s to around 907 cubic metres—it is expected to decline to 420 cubic metres by 2050.

Populations of freshwater vertebrates have declined on average by nearly 50 per cent since 1987 as compared with an around 30 per cent decline for terrestrial and marine species.

About 40 per cent of big estuaries in the United States including those that link to the Gulf of Mexico and Chesapeake Bay suffer severe eutrophication—which can lead to deoxygenated ‘dead zones’—because of nitrogen enrichment. Farm fertilizers account for about two thirds of the nitrogen entering the Gulf via the Mississippi.

In the Caribbean, over 60 per cent of coral reefs are threatened by sediments, pollution and over-fishing.
• Exploitation of West Africa’s fish by Russian, Asian and European Union fleets increased six-fold from the 1960s to the 1990s with African countries receiving only 7.5 per cent of the processed value via license fees.

• Canada has three of the top ten most sprawling urban areas—Calgary, Toronto and Vancouver. Sprawl from coastal cities in the United States can stretch up to 80km inland.

• War and conflict has raised the number of refugees and internally displaced people in West Asia to about four million.

• Between 2000 and 2003, 13 out of 16 outbreaks of Ebola in Gabon and the Republic of Congo resulted from the handling of gorilla and chimpanzee carcasses.

There are more and more facts like these—facts that in the final analysis are about human well-being.

Ladies and gentlemen,
If you read the chapters and conclusions of GE0-4 you are reading the most authoritative compilation and peer reviewed publication of the best data available.

You may also wonder, given the severity of the sustainability challenge, what we have been collectively doing since the Brundtland Commission report.

In some ways this would be a justifiable pessimism but it is also ignoring some important milestones which the international community and the UN—in partnership with governments; parliaments; the private sector and civil society—have achieved.

20 years ago UNEP assisted in the negotiation of the Montreal Protocol—the treaty established to save and repair the ozone layer following evidence it was under attack from consumer and industrial chemicals.

Montreal, which celebrated its birthday only some weeks ago in the city of its birth, has so far phased out 95 per cent of ozone damaging chemicals.

Last month nations meeting again in Montreal agreed to an accelerated freeze and phase-out of HCFCs—at least in part because of their climate, rather than ozone-damaging, impacts.

In the late 1980s UNEP, in cooperation with the UN's World Meteorological Organisation, set up the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) to assess emerging scientific evidence that increased burning of fossil fuels was changing the climate.
In 2007, the IPCC’s fourth assessment report has validated the science—climate change is happening it is ‘unequivocal’.

The report also underlines the seriousness of the challenge from glaciers melting in the Himalayas to rising sea levels threatening over 30 million people in Bangladesh.

The IPCC has also calculated the costs—perhaps as little as 0.1 per cent of global GDP a year for 30 years to deal with climate change.

Its achievements were recognized earlier this month when the Nobel Peace Prize Committee awarded the IPCC, jointly with Al Gore, the Nobel Peace Prize for 2007.

Meanwhile, in 1992 at the Rio Earth Summit, conventions covering biological diversity; desertification and of course the framework convention on climate change were agreed.

A $ 3 billion funding mechanism, the Global Environment Facility, was established to assist developing companies meet the environmental and sustainability challenge.

The Kyoto Protocol on climate and the Cartagena Protocol on Living Modified Organisms have also come to pass alongside countless other agreements, guidelines and initiatives.

The Johannesburg Plan of Implementation was agreed at the World Summit on Sustainable Development (WSSD) in 2002 and re-confirmed at the World Summit in 2005.

GEO-4 also notes some important case studies and achievements in the quest to more sustainably and intelligently manage the Earth’s natural or nature-based assets.

- Restoration of Cameroon’s Waza floodplain has produced annual benefits of over $3 million in fish catches up to improved wildlife and plant resources.
- Emissions of air pollutants in western Europe have fallen by two per cent a year since 2000—a trend that is expected to continue until 2020.
- Improved management has virtually halved the deforestation rate in the Amazon since 2004. Paraguay, which until 2004 had one of the world’s highest rates of deforestation, has reduced rates in its eastern region by 85 per cent.
- South East Asia has set aside close to 15 per cent of its land for protection, above the world average which in 2003 stood at 12 per cent.
- In Fiji, no take zones and better management of marine areas has increased species like mangrove lobsters by 250 per cent a year with increases of 120 per cent annually in nearby waters.
- Conservation strategies are improving water efficiency in North America with the area in the United States irrigated by systems such as micro irrigation having grown to more than half the irrigated land.
Notable conservation measures in West Asia include the restoration of Iraqi’s Mesopotamian marshlands and preservation of local wheat varieties in Jordan and Syria.

The reality is however that the intentions and good work has failed to match the speed, pace and magnitude of the challenge particularly in the translation of global agreements into legislation and action at the national and regional level.

So where do we go from here to ensure that the next GEO or its successor report outlines the kind of dramatic improvements so urgently needed—improvements in resource efficiency and in more sustainable patterns of consumption and production.

I am by nature an optimist and indeed there are reasons to believe this is not misplaced.

2007 has witnessed unprecedented momentum on climate change and indeed an understanding that markets—intelligently steered—can deliver a great deal.

Under the Kyoto Protocol, the world now has carbon trading and its other flexible mechanisms such as the Clean Development Mechanism is set to funnel some $100 billion-worth of funds from North to South in the form of projects in cleaner and renewable energies.

Fossil fuels may still dominate. But according to a recent report by UNEP’s Sustainable Energy Finance Initiative, investment in renewables has reached $100 billion.

While renewable sources today produce about 2% of the world's energy, they now account for about 18% of world investment in power generation, with wind generation at the investment forefront.

Germany, once a minor player in the wind power sector, has leapt to number one as a result of a change in legislation that required utilities to buy a certain percentage of renewables.

Next month UNEP—with funding from the GEF—will announce a new cogeneration initiative and one on hydro-power for the tea industry in East Africa.

This is being made possible as a result of legislation on Power Purchase Agreements approved by the parliaments such as Kenya’s that allows companies, factories and tea plantations to sell surplus electricity into the Grid.

And there are many more examples of how the world is reforming its fundamental economic and market structures through the engagement of intelligent policies that steer—rather than simply watch globalization—and empower business and industry.
In Bali, in December, governments will be put to the test on their enthusiasm to negotiate a post 2012 emissions reductions agreement. They need to agree on launching talks to get to a new international climate deal in time and set the agenda and timeframe for these talks.

One area of debate will surround standing forests and whether their carbon sequestration should be included in the Clean Development Mechanism or some other funded arrangement.

If this can be included, perhaps we can foresee other creative financial instruments emerging for other seemingly intractable issue such peatlands, biodiversity and fisheries.

And perhaps governments might also step up to the mark on resources for those bodies charged with managing the global environment.

UNEP’s current core annual budget from governments is around $60 million a year.

During the Montreal Protocol meeting in September, the front page of the Canadian newspaper Le Devoir ran a picture and story about the refurbishment planned this winter for the Ritz Carlton Hotel.

$100 million is the price tag—that’s one hotel, in one city in one developed country over a few months versus the funds being spent to try and meet the global environmental challenges of the 21st century over one year.

And there are other figures. Currently, consumers spend some $36 billion a year on pets in the United States.

If we are to seize the opportunities for more intelligent management of the Earth’s natural assets upon which we all ultimately depend, then we need all sectors of society to respond and to be able to respond.

A strengthened UNEP, a reasonably resourced UNEP, must be part of that response or we will meet again in 20 years time and wonder, again, what we have been doing and when we are finally going to turn the corner.

Indeed, one fact that strikes one in GEO-4 is how financially rich the world has become since Brundtland, albeit unevenly shared.

Since 1987, global GDP per capita has risen from close to $6,000 to just over $8,000—a rise of over 30 per cent—let us start spending this wealth more wisely so that it is not just bank notes that we hand onto the next generation, but an economically productive, equitable and sustainably managed planet.

Thank you