

**OPENING REMARKS – N.ISHWARAN, DIRECTOR, DIVISION OF
ECOLOGICAL AND EARTH SCIENCES, UNESCO. FRANCE**

- HE Mr. Abdulaye Yerodia Ndongbassi, Vice President of the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Reconstruction and Development,
- Representatives of great apes range states, co-operating donor nations, UN and multilateral institutions, non-governmental organizations and other current and future partners of GRASP
- Excellencies, Ladies and gentlemen

First and foremost I take this opportunity to express the deep appreciation and thanks of the Director General and staff of UNESCO to HE The President, Mr. Joseph Kabila, the people and the Government of the Democratic Republic of the Congo for hosting this first intergovernmental meeting on great apes conservation and the Great Apes Survival Project (GRASP). Over the next five days, UNESCO and UNEP, and I am sure all our GRASP Partners stand ready to work closely with our host, the Government of DRC to make this meeting a resounding success. Personally I consider it a privilege and honour to deliver a few introductory statements at this historic event.

GRASP is a unique alliance where UNEP and UNESCO, the 23 range states that are home to wild great apes populations, and other partner nations and non-governmental organizations have decided to join forces to promote and strengthen great apes conservation throughout the world.

Since a group of experts met at UNESCO Headquarters in Paris in November 2003 to prepare this intergovernmental session, the GRASP partnership has grown in strength. During this meeting the GRASP Council and the intergovernmental group of range states will review the outputs of the Paris meeting as well as other proposals, including a draft declaration that will be submitted to the high-level segment of this meeting scheduled for Friday, 9 September 2005.

UNESCO contributions to species and area conservation are well known through its World Network of Biosphere Reserves and World Heritage sites. Many sites that are home to important great apes populations, e.g. Virunga National Park for the mountain gorillas here in our host country, or the orang utans in the Gunung Leuser National Park of Indonesia, are recognized in these global site-networks of UNESCO. While support to conservation of selected populations and habitats included in such UNESCO sites will continue over the long-term, UNESCO is also doing its best to mobilize new support for great apes conservation under GRASP.

Dr. Walter Erdelen, the Assistant Director General of UNESCO's Natural Sciences Sector will be here to participate in the high-level segment of this meeting that will meet on the 9th September and will describe in detail to you UNESCO's on-going and planned contributions to GRASP. I shall refer here to only a few examples of UNESCO's contributions to GRASP.

As the agency that has a mandate for Science in the UN system, we hope UNESCO could work with the GRASP partnership to place great apes conservation on a sound scientific footing. We are encouraged by the increasing scientific tenor of GRASP

dialogue and discussions, particularly through the work of its interim Scientific Committee. An example of UNESCO's direct contributions to scientific research on great apes is the recent decision of the Director General of UNESCO to set aside US\$ 1 00,000 for awarding research grants to young scientists from 16 of the least developed economies of the 23 great apes range states as part of the MAB Young Scientists Research Grant scheme of UNESCO.

UNESCO is keen to work with all partners to organize educational and awareness raising events in range states, particularly as part of the UN Decade for Education for Sustainable Development (UNDESD; 2005-2014) that has been launched this year under the leadership of UNESCO, as well as in other partner countries to build support for research and conservation on the great apes. Over the last year UNESCO has backed up efforts of the GRASP-Japan team to build support for great apes conservation in that developed nation; a great apes exhibition has just been concluded in the UN Pavillion at the Expo in Aichi, Japan, and has been a clear success in drawing attention of the Japanese public to the needs of great apes conservation.

We are discussing with the Museum of Natural History and other partners in France similar initiatives that can mobilize French public and private sector and civil society support for great apes conservation. More details of these and other UNESCO-led initiatives to build support for great apes conservation and GRASP will be worked out during discussions related to specific agenda items that will be considered this week.

Excellencies, friends and colleagues, GRASP is a unique opportunity and effort to address specific scientific and conservation needs of a group of important primates

that are genetically closest to humans. Success in this effort can lead to insights into launching similar initiatives for the conservation of other targeted groups of species that perhaps call for the special attention of the global community. We eagerly look forward to the next few days of dialogue and discussions to take this dynamic partnership towards a new level of operational effectiveness and for delivering tangible benefits to great apes conservation in range states.

I wish to conclude by wishing my colleague and friend Dr. Samy Mankoto, the Secretary General of this Conference, his Deputy Dr. Melanie Virtue from UNEP and their excellent team comprising highly skilled individuals from the Government of DRC, UNESCO, UNEP, range states and partner nations and NGOs all the very best for a successful and significant meeting.

Thank you.