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Remarks at the African Regional Workshop
CITIES, ECOSYSTEMS, AND BIODIVERSITY

A side event at the Africities Summit,
sponsored by:

- United Nations Environment Programme
- Task Force on Cities and Protected Areas,
World Commission on Protected Areas of
IUCN – The World Conservation Union
- Kenya Wildlife Service

Nairobi, Kenya
21 September 2006

THE VALUE OF BIODIVERSITY TO CITIES

What's the value of biodiversity to cities and to urban people?

I work with IUCN – The World Conservation Union on issues related to cities and conservation. More specifically, I lead a task force on cities within IUCN's World Commission on Protected Areas. We have 80 people on our task force from 40 countries. For the past three years, we've been looking carefully at this question of how biodiversity relates to urban places and urban people. It's a complex question and a difficult one.

UNEP Executive Director Achim Steiner just mentioned the separation between the urban and conservation camps, the separation between those who work on urban issues (including urban environmental issues), and those who work in nature conservation, mainly away from cities, often very far away.

Our task force has identified this separation, this division, this lack of communication between the urban and conservation camps as our greatest challenge. Bridging the divide won't be easy. We have a lot of material about this on our Web site, www.citiesandconservation.org.

Much of that material is from this book, *The Urban Imperative*, the full text of which is freely available online. You're welcome to come up and look through it at the end of this session.

In this book, we have, for example, a case study from Durban, South Africa, where they have scientifically measured the economic value of biodiversity to that city. We have a

case study from Melbourne, Australia, where they have carefully documented the health benefits of nature in that city. We have case studies relating urban biodiversity to cultural heritage, to economic development, to water supply, to schools, to tourism.

But this morning I want to concentrate on one aspect of urban biodiversity that may be less obvious but is absolutely fundamental: *Urban people need contact with nature, with biodiversity, for their well-being.* This applies to *all* urban people, including the poorest of the poor.

This may seem a luxury that most African cities can't afford, but there is now strong scientific evidence that kids need direct experience of nature for healthy intellectual, emotional, and even moral development. In order to become complete human beings, kids need experience of nature early in life, frequently, and preferably with their families.

There's a book about this recently published in the United States that's getting a lot of attention. It's called *Last Child in the Woods*, and it was written by a journalist called Richard Louv.³ It's about the consequences of separation from nature in a generation of kids mainly due to their spending time in front of screens: TV screens, computer screens, and so forth. But its basic conclusions about separation from nature apply to urban kids everywhere, to those who can't afford TV sets and computers, as well as those who can.

People who have some money can go to the countryside. But poor people in cities – everywhere in the world – tend to stay in their neighborhoods. Many of these people have come from rural areas and especially miss the contact with nature.

In some cities there are programs to take kids on buses out to national parks and similar places, and these are certainly worthwhile. But even in the richest countries it's hard to do enough of this to make a difference.

We are finding that the answer is to bring nature to urban people where they can see it and use it daily, rather than trying to take them out to the country.

In South Africa, the City of Cape Town has an extraordinary biodiversity strategy aimed largely at doing this. Tanya Goldman will be describing it.

In England, the Greater London Authority has a biodiversity strategy for the London metropolitan area that aims to make nature available within a ten-minute walk of every residence – and they are succeeding.

These are places for recreation, places to teach people about biodiversity and its importance in their lives.

Right now, you're probably thinking about how this might apply to your own city. And, most likely, you're thinking it would be impossible. Please bear with me.

If you're lucky enough to still have remnants of original habitat within your city or next to it – like Nairobi National Park, which we'll be visiting this afternoon – you protect them, and restore them where they've been damaged.

But if you're not that lucky, you do the next best thing.

In Los Angeles, in a relatively poor and crime-ridden area that has few conventional parks, let alone natural areas, a California state government agency found a piece of disused municipal land, a three-and-a-half hectare storage yard, and created a “natural park” planted with indigenous species that then attracted indigenous birds and small mammals. For the people of the neighborhood, it became a safe haven as well as a place of beauty. They use it heavily, and protect it fiercely.

There are pieces of empty land like this in poor areas of every city. And there are ways of creating and maintaining a natural park at relatively little expense. In Kenya, for example, this is being done in schoolyards, with schoolchildren gladly doing most of the work. In Los Angeles, neighborhood volunteers help maintain such places, and so do people assigned community service by the courts for minor crimes. In Cape Town, government money available for job creation and job training is used to run such projects. The same in England.

Now I want to make an important point that applies to what I've just said and probably to virtually everything that others will be saying about the value of biodiversity to cities and to urban people.

Very little of what I've described is a challenge for municipal authorities acting *alone*. The problems and the solutions have got to be a shared responsibility of city governments working with other levels of government, with nongovernmental and community-based organizations of all kinds, with business, with educational institutions.

When I talk with city officials, as I've done in many places around the world, a typical response is that they're overwhelmed by more immediate problems and don't have the money or staff to work on biodiversity.

The answer is: *You don't have to do it alone*. There are many successful models of partnerships. The projects I mentioned – in Cape Town, in Los Angeles, in London – are all partnerships involving different levels of government, involving NGOs, often involving other actors. Our task force has plenty of examples you can draw from.

I invite you to visit our Web site, www.citiesandconservation.org. I invite you to come up to me and talk about how this relates to your own city, and also talk with my IUCN task force colleagues who are here in this room: Pedro Menezes, task force deputy leader, who is a Brazilian diplomat based here in Nairobi; Gideon Amboga of the Kenya Wildlife Service; and Brett Myrdal of South African National Parks.

I want to mention something else. Your city – every city – depends on biodiversity well beyond your municipal boundaries. Your water may come from mountain forests hundreds of kilometers away, as is the case with Nairobi. And the urban sprawl spreading out from your city, the sprawl that is often eating up biodiversity, is probably happening in someone else's jurisdiction. You may not have legal authority outside your boundaries, but you can talk with your neighbors and cooperate with them, and you have political influence with your provincial or state authorities and your national governments.

I recently spent a couple of weeks in Mexico in a city called Xalapa. Twenty years ago, Xalapa had a population of 100,000. Now its population is 200,000. In 25 years its population is projected to grow to 400,000. This is a pattern familiar to everyone in this room. Xalapa is spreading into several neighboring municipalities toward a cloud forest and a national park that have very high biodiversity values. The leaders of Xalapa, leaders in government and politics, in universities, in business, in NGOs, know they need a collaborative approach to plan and act on their city's future, but they're not quite sure how to go about it. They've asked our task force to provide advice and models from other countries. If we can find a way to help them, Xalapa will make a very good pilot project. We're looking for an African city where we can do something along the same lines.

I look forward to talking with you.

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2. Founded in 1948, IUCN – The World Conservation Union brings together States, government agencies, and a diverse range of nongovernmental organizations in a unique world partnership: over 1,000 members in all, spread across some 140 countries. Web site: www.iucn.org.

3. Richard Louv, *Last Child in the Woods: Saving our children from nature-deficit disorder*. Chapel Hill, North Carolina: Algonquin Books, 2005.