

UN Biodiversity Conference Highlights: Saturday, 17 November 2018

On Saturday morning, the opening plenary of the main proceedings of the UN Biodiversity Conference heard from the President of Egypt Abdel Fattah el-Sisi and high-level officials. The afternoon plenary addressed organizational matters, and heard reports and opening statements.

Plenary

Opening: Amb. José Octavio Tripp Villanueva, Mexico, on behalf of the COP 13 Presidency, noted the important intersessional work of subsidiary bodies, other relevant UN bodies, and a wide range of stakeholders, and emphasized that “now is the time” to invest in biodiversity for people and planet. Yasmine Fouad, Minister of Environment, Egypt, and COP 14 President, underscored that nature and humanity are indivisible, and urged participants to work towards the objectives of the CBD and come up with an inspirational post-2020 framework for the dignity and survival of future generations.

CBD Executive Secretary Cristiana Paşca Palmer said that successes achieved since CBD’s adoption have not been sufficient to halt biodiversity loss and presented two stark choices: staying on the current path with cascading consequences, or choosing a path of conservation, restoration, and transformation. She expressed optimism, pointing to the outcomes of the preceding African Biodiversity Summit and High-level Segment, and urged delegates to be bold and wise in their decision making.

María Fernanda Espinosa Garcés, President of the UN General Assembly, via video, highlighted the international community’s responsibility to revert current trends regarding species extinction. Noting the interdependence of the three Rio Conventions, she stressed that they are essential for humanity’s survival. She underscored the need for collective action to preserve biodiversity, mitigate climate change, and ensure sustainability of consumption patterns and current development without jeopardizing the rights of future generations.

A performance from Egyptian school children followed, portraying the need for environmental protection and the importance of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

The President of Egypt Abdel Fattah el-Sisi noted ancient Egypt’s awareness of ecosystems and the dedication of the pharaohs to nature, and stressed Egypt’s constitutional protection for nature and natural resources. Pointing out that the CBD did not manage to fully mobilize the international community to effectively preserve biodiversity due to lack of mainstreaming, he called for integration of CBD objectives across all sectors.

Statements: Following a National Geographic video about how time is running out to “save the planet,” Amina Mohammed, UN Deputy Secretary-General, via video, stated that protecting

nature also contributes to peace and security. She highlighted the importance of nature-based interventions, which can provide solutions to climate change while simultaneously protecting biodiversity.

Corli Pretorius, Deputy Director, UNEP World Conservation Monitoring Centre (UNEP-WCMC), encouraged delegates to use the upcoming fourth session of the UN Environment Assembly as a platform to emphasize the urgency of the biodiversity agenda. Mentioning that 89% of respondents in a recent global survey said that it is up to humans to conserve nature, she called for nature-based decision making and transparency in processes going forward.

Argentina, for GRULAC, drew attention to the discussions of the High-level Segment on mainstreaming biodiversity into different economic sectors. He noted that during the last 25 years the CBD has seen “happy moments, disappointments, and challenges,” lamenting that biodiversity continues to be in decline. He further: requested developed countries to increase the availability of financial resources for access to, and transfer of, technology; emphasized the importance of creating “a space within the Convention where traditional knowledge, and cultural and traditional expressions are respected”; called for a flexible process, adaptable to different challenges with effective participation of all stakeholders; and stressed that scientific knowledge, evidence, and innovation constitute common language, setting the foundations for decision making.

The EU emphasized that despite many success stories in the work of the Convention, proceeding at the current speed will result in failure to achieve the Aichi Targets. She underscored the need for: transformational change in consumption and production patterns respecting planetary boundaries; effective mainstreaming of biodiversity at all levels; and providing opportunities for work with the private sector and all stakeholders under the post-2020 global biodiversity framework. She looked forward to cooperation under the Convention’s Protocols on, *inter alia*: specialized international access and benefit-sharing (ABS) instruments; a global multilateral benefit-sharing mechanism; capacity building; digital sequence information (DSI); and effective functioning of the Biosafety Clearing-House.

CANADA, also on behalf of NEW ZEALAND, AUSTRALIA, NORWAY, SWITZERLAND, and LIECHTENSTEIN, underscored that “biodiversity is in an alarming state and trends are not in our favor.” He called for addressing agenda items in a timely and efficient manner, and for focusing on resolving bracketed text. He further highlighted the importance of a robust post-2020 global biodiversity framework, and an effective, practical, inclusive roadmap to COP 15 in Beijing.

Belarus for CENTRAL AND EASTERN EUROPE and CENTRAL ASIA drew attention to the need for practical measures in the areas of intensive mining, industrial activity, and relevant infrastructure. She welcomed efforts to integrate biosafety-related issues and to harmonize national legislation with provisions of the Nagoya Protocol. She further expressed confidence that this Biodiversity Conference will find answers to challenges related to the development of new technologies, including biological ones, and will start designating goals for the post-2020 period.

Rwanda, on behalf of the AFRICAN GROUP, highlighted the loss of valuable biological resources from the continent, and the digitalization and use of genetic resources without due recognition and sharing of benefits. She cited the recently concluded Africa Biodiversity Summit and the Pan-African Action Agenda on Ecosystem Restoration for Increased Resilience as a demonstration of where the region stands, and where it wants to go.

The INDIGENOUS WOMEN'S NETWORK ON BIODIVERSITY drew attention to the loss of indigenous languages and expressed concern over the continued expansion of extractive industries, which are amplifying degradation of sacred grounds. The INTERNATIONAL INDIGENOUS FORUM ON BIODIVERSITY (IIFB) pointed to the current challenging times for biodiversity and dangers for indigenous land defenders, noting the need for informed solutions for a global strategy on biodiversity.

The CBD ALLIANCE emphasized that “doing the same thing and expecting a different result would be madness,” adding that “a pledge-based system would not do it.” He advocated for concrete, time-bound targets, and stressed that the big polluters should not influence policy but be held accountable for the damage they cause. The GLOBAL BIODIVERSITY YOUTH NETWORK emphasized that the world moves towards ecological collapse, along with the continued marginalization of vulnerable groups, such as youth, women, and indigenous peoples, who are key actors in the implementation of any biodiversity policy.

Malaysia, on behalf of the GROUP OF LIKE-MINDED MEGADIVERSE COUNTRIES (LMMC), outlined the progress of their countries in achieving the Aichi targets, including increasing coverage of both terrestrial and marine protected areas. THE INTERGOVERNMENTAL SCIENCE-POLICY PLATFORM ON BIODIVERSITY AND ECOSYSTEM SERVICES (IPBES) outlined its recent reports that show both the alarming rates of biodiversity loss and that “action can make a difference,” and noted the upcoming publication of an IPBES global assessment on biodiversity and ecosystem services, prepared upon request by the CBD.

Organizational matters: Plenary addressed organizational matters for COP 14, Cartagena Protocol COP/MOP 9 and Nagoya Protocol COP/MOP 3. Delegates adopted: the COP 14 agenda (CBD/COP/14/1 and 1/Add.1/Rev.1); the CP COP/MOP 9 agenda (CBD/CP/MOP/9/1 and 1/Add.1/Rev.1); the NP COP/MOP 3 agenda (CBD/NP/MOP/3/1 and 1/Add.1/Rev.1); and the organization of work, including the establishment of two Working Groups (CBD/COP/14/1/Add.2). COP President Fouad recalled that COP 15 and 16 will be held in China and Turkey respectively, and invited the region of Central and Eastern Europe to indicate interest in hosting COP 17.

Reports: Plenary took note of the reports of intersessional meetings, including the: tenth meeting of the Article 8(j) Working Group (CBD/WG8J/10/11); 21st and 22nd sessions of the Subsidiary Body on Scientific, Technical and Technological Advice (SBSTTA 21 and 22) (CBD/SBSTTA/21/10 and 22/12); and second meeting of the Subsidiary Body on Implementation (SBI 2) (CBD/SBI/2/22).

Cartagena Protocol Compliance Committee Chair Clare Hamilton (UK) presented the Committee's report (CBD/CP/MOP/9/2), including a recommendation that Cartagena Protocol COP/MOP 9 issue a caution to Greece, the Marshall Islands, and Montenegro for failure to fulfill their reporting obligations. Nagoya Protocol Compliance Committee Chair Kaspar Sollberger (Switzerland) presented the Committee's report (CBD/NP/MOP/3/2), underscoring that it focuses on assessment and review, and that 82 of 100 parties have submitted their interim national reports.

Paşca Palmer presented her reports on the administration of the Convention and Protocols, and budgetary matters (CBD/COP/14/3 and 4), including three budget scenarios based on 4%, 2%, and 0% budgetary increases. Plenary then established a budget contact group, chaired by Spencer Thomas (Grenada). Expressing concern that the proposed budget was not provided until ten days before the meeting, JAPAN requested the Secretariat respect the 90-day rule for submission of documents, and questioned the request for nine additional Secretariat staff members.

Carlos Manuel Rodriguez (Costa Rica) reported on the Business and Biodiversity Forum (14-15 November), noting the importance of prioritizing: effective partnerships with businesses; new business models that can work hand-in-hand with public policy objectives; and investment in nature-based solutions to pressing societal changes.

Prizes and other initiatives: In a video message, Paul McCartney drew attention to overproduction of livestock and his “Meat Free Mondays” initiative.

Paşca Palmer presented the winners of the 2018 Midori Prize for Biodiversity, co-organized by the CBD Secretariat and the AEON Environmental Foundation: Kathy MacKinnon, Chair of the IUCN World Commission on Protected Areas; Assad Serhal, Lebanon; and Abdul Hamid Zakri, Malaysia. The finalists of the inaugural Pathfinder Award for Innovation in Nature Conservation were then presented, with the award going to Mirjam de Koning, Prespa Ohrid Nature Trust, a transboundary conservation fund working in the lake area shared by Albania, Greece, and the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia.

In the Corridors

The first day of the main proceedings of the UN Biodiversity Conference got off to a somewhat chaotic start with long queues and a difficult-to-access opening ceremony that left deliberations behind schedule before they even started. When plenary finally got “down to business” in the afternoon, participants were reminded of the main substantive and controversial issues ahead of them.

“The core of the meeting is the launch of negotiations for a post-2020 global biodiversity framework,” one participant noted. Others, however, highlighted the expected adoption of substantive outcomes on specific agenda items, urging delegates not to underestimate their contribution to national-level implementation. Among these outcomes, many underscored the voluntary guidelines on protected areas and other effective area-based conservation measures, and on ecosystem-based approaches to climate change adaptation and disaster risk reduction. Representatives of indigenous peoples and local communities, on the other hand, looked forward to deliberations on the voluntary guidelines on repatriation of traditional knowledge. The increasing number of those participants focusing on new technologies expressed their anticipation of controversial debates on the use of digital sequence information from genetic resources and synthetic biology, including gene drives. Many, however, were optimistic that the meeting's diverse and full agenda will result in robust decisions. A seasoned delegate remarked, while exiting the afternoon plenary: “while our plate is as full as it gets, it seems that the appetite to find common ground is growing.”