



WORLD ENVIRONMENT DAY TOMORROW

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WE ARE BOUND TO PROTECT OUR ENVIRONMENT

Ecosystems support all life on Earth. The healthier our ecosystems are, the healthier the planet - and its people. The UN Decade on Ecosystem Restoration aims to prevent, halt and reverse the degradation of ecosystems on every continent and in every ocean. It can help to end poverty, combat Climate Change and prevent a mass extinction. It will only succeed if everyone plays a part. Ecosystems are an indispensable ally as we meet these challenges. Protecting them and managing their resources in a sustainable manner is essential. The restoration of ecosystems at scale is no small task, and it will take a concerted effort to truly restore the planet. The beauty of restoration is that it conveys a message of action and hope. Forests regulate the climate and duly absorb carbon from the atmosphere.

People and the planet are only as healthy as the ecosystems we all depend on. Bringing degraded ecosystems back to life - for example by planting trees, cleaning up riverbanks, or simply giving nature space to recover - increases their benefits to society and biodiversity. By declaring the UN Decade on Ecosystem Restoration, governments have recognized the need to prevent, halt and reverse the degradation of ecosystems worldwide for the benefit of both people and nature. The 2021-2030 timeline underlines the urgency of the task. The world's ecosystems - from oceans to forests to farmlands - are being degraded, in many cases at an accelerating rate. People living in poverty, women, indigenous peoples and other marginalized groups bear the brunt of this damage, and the COVID-19 pandemic has only worsened existing inequalities. We need to recreate a balanced relationship with the ecosystems that sustain us. Far from being something that is 'nice to have', restoration is essential to mitigating Climate Change, ensuring food security for a growing population and halting biodiversity loss.

ECOSYSTEM RESTORATION

Aware of the critical need to halt, prevent and reverse ecosystem degradation, and to effectively restore degraded terrestrial, freshwater and marine ecosystems across the globe, through Resolution 73/284, the United Nations General Assembly declared 2021-2030 as the United Nations Decade on Ecosystem Restoration (hereafter the "UN Decade"). To support the implementation of the UN Decade and help achieve its goals, there is a need for a shared vision of ecosystem restoration, defined as "the process of halting and reversing degradation, resulting in improved ecosystem services and recovered biodiversity. Ecosystem restoration encompasses a wide continuum of practices, depending on local conditions and societal choice". Ineffective urban planning and management have contributed to socio-economic inequality and deteriorating environmental quality. Currently, 1.6 billion people live in inadequate, crowded and unsafe housing (UN Habitat 2020). Air pollution is a major health risk: more than 80 per cent of people living in urban areas that monitor air pollution are exposed to air quality levels exceeding World Health Organisation guidelines. Air pollution is a major health risk, leading to an estimated 9 million premature deaths every year.

Ecosystem-based Disaster Risk



Reduction (Eco-DRR) can be defined as the sustainable management, conservation and restoration of ecosystems to reduce disaster risk, with the aim of achieving sustainable and resilient development. While aiming to primarily address disaster risk reduction, it is recognized that Eco-DRR can contribute to Climate Change adaptation (CCA).

The 2000s saw a growing interest in the importance of ecosystems for human well-being. The ecosystem approach is defined as a "strategy for the integrated management of land, water and living resources that promote conservation and sustainable use in an equitable way" and its principles were endorsed during the fifth Conference of the Parties (COP) to the Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD) in 2000.

Freshwater bodies are home to around one-third of vertebrate species and 10 per cent of all described species on Earth, with many more in the world's wetlands. Freshwater ecosystems provide food through inland fisheries, water for drinking, agriculture and industry, and transportation of goods. They regulate water quality and regional climate and provide flood protection. Forests and water are interlinked, with an estimated 75 per cent of the world's accessible freshwater coming from forested watersheds. Restoration of man-

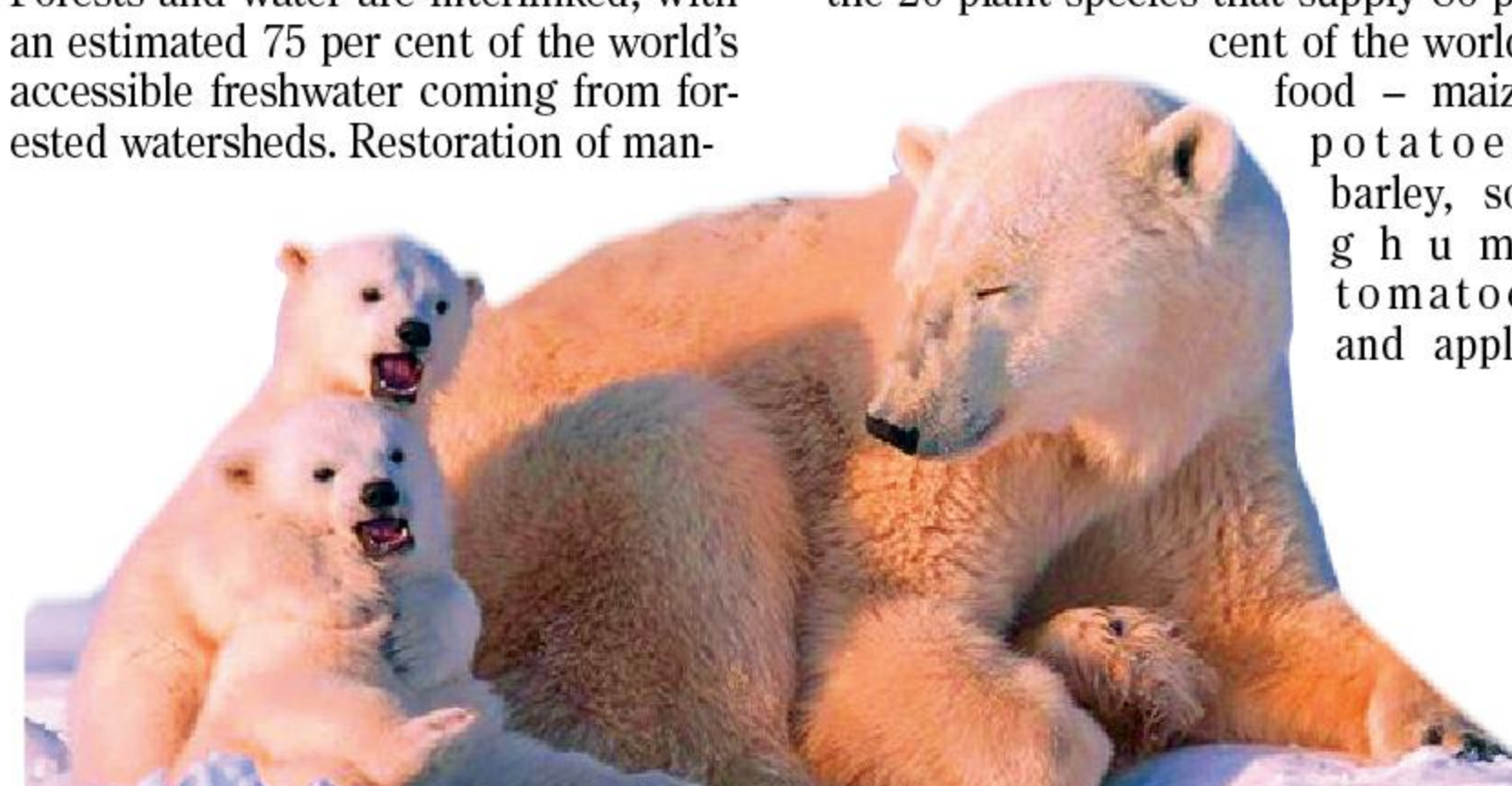
groves, coastal and marine ecosystems and freshwater ecosystems can all help to achieve food security targets. Aquatic system restoration measures include transforming management and production processes that cause ecosystem damage. Restoring wetlands and riverine areas can improve water quality by capturing pollutants and sediment from land degradation.

Farmlands sustain human life. They provide us with food, fibre and other essential products and also supply biodiversity habitat, economic opportunities and spiritual and cultural benefits. At least two billion people depend on the agricultural sector for their livelihoods, particularly poor and rural populations.

BIODIVERSITY HOTSPOTS

Interestingly mountain ecosystems host roughly half of the world's biodiversity hotspots. They directly support the livelihoods of people living in mountain regions and provide critical ecosystem services to inhabitants of lower lands, including freshwater, timber and recreation opportunities. Mountains are also a source of food: of the 20 plant species that supply 80 per

cent of the world's food - maize, potatoes, barley, sorghum, tomatoes and apples



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- originated from and have been diversified in mountains. Ecosystem restoration inland can also reduce climate-related hazards, such as flooding, soil erosion and landslides linked to extreme rainfall events. Forest restoration on slopes reduces erosion that results from intense rainfall.

Ecosystem health is interconnected with both physical and mental human health. We rely on ecosystems to regulate the climate, prevent disease and provide natural spaces in which to exercise and lower stress levels. They are also a source of ingredients for traditional medicine. Healthy, stable and bio-diverse ecosystems are the foundation of our health and well-being, as well as that of our fellow species. They help to regulate our climate and control extreme events, pests and diseases, as well as to provide us with water, food, raw materials and spaces for recreation. They absorb our wastes, sustain economic sectors and the livelihoods of millions of people, and they nurture our health, culture and spiritual fulfillment. In all ecosystems, biodiversity loss and degradation are caused by direct drivers (land- or sea-use change, direct exploitation, Climate Change, pollution, and invasive species), which are underpinned by demographic and economic indirect drivers that interact in complex ways.

The ocean sustains all life on Earth. It provides 90 per cent of the world's life-supporting space and 50-80 per cent of the oxygen in the atmosphere. It regulates our weather and climate, provides food and medicine and holds sacred and intrinsic value for many indigenous and local communities. International shipping is essential to the global economy, accounting for 80 per cent of global trade. The Armed Forces in Sri Lanka have done good work to keep Sri Lanka green. The Sri Lanka Army has planted thousands of trees across the country. The Sri Lanka Air Force engages some of its fleet in maritime patrols and acts as an aerial guardian against marine pollution. Further they have engaged in reforestation in a large scale, by using their helicopters for aerial sowing (commonly called seed bombing). The Sri Lanka Navy has also done excellent work to clean up and plant sensitive mangrove systems. The late king of pop Michael Jackson reminded us to "Heal the World". This beautiful reminder is still valid today. We must protect our environment, our lives depend on it.