

International Day of Forests: Forests – the roots of Sustainability

Thursday 21 March 2013

Mr. Sven Alkalaj

**Excellencies,
Distinguished guests,
Ladies and gentlemen,**

It is an honour for me to address this distinguished audience on the occasion of the first official International Day of Forests.

As you may be aware, the United Nations General Assembly has designated the 21st of March as the International Day of Forests. The Day will be observed each year to celebrate and raise awareness of the importance of forests and trees to all life on Earth.

I should like to thank our partners who have made this celebration possible: Ambassador Fitschen and the Permanent Mission of Germany; the Food and Agriculture Organization; Mr. Chikvaidze and his team from the UNOG Library and finally, my colleagues at UNECE.

I should also like to thank our distinguished speaker, Mr. Panfilov who travelled all the way from Moscow to be here with us today and provide us with information on the situation of the largest forest in the world, the Russian one.

Thank you also to Mr. Neumann, who, despite a heavy agenda, managed to stop over in Geneva to shed some light on the concept of sustainable forest management, which has been benefiting our forests for over three centuries.

Thank you, too, Ambassador Dengo, for coming to this event and sharing Costa Rica's experience on sustainable development and forests. Thank you to Ms. Müller for willing to leave sunny Rome to enlighten us with some global perspectives on sustainable forest management.

We're also grateful to have Mr. Innes with us today who crossed the Atlantic to showcase examples of sustainable forest management in North America.

I'd like to also thank Mr. Palahi, from the European Forest Institute, who will explain how sustainable forest management helps safeguard the beautiful Mediterranean forests.

Last but not least, Mr. Granholm, current Chair of our Timber Committee, who will facilitate what promise to be very lively and interesting discussions.

Ladies and gentlemen,

It was a surprise to me to learn that the concept of sustainability was developed by foresters centuries ago. The idea of modern forest management started already at the beginning of the 18th century. The industrial revolution, with its growing economy and expanding population, brought about the lowest coverage of forests, which were often degraded by overexploitation.

Although in this period many traditional uses of wood were replaced by other resources (such as iron and coal), wood still remained a major construction material, and was used for mining and as a fuel for metal smelting. The growing

demand and danger of extinction of forests led to action, which can be seen as the basis of sustainable forest management.

“Sustainability” was one of the key intellectual contributions to humankind of the Enlightenment and it wasn’t until the modern environmental movement rediscovered this original forest principle that it first gained popularity.

“Sustainability” was reintroduced by the Bruntland Report and in the discourse during the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development in Rio in 1992.

Traditionally, the most important function of forests has been (and in many parts of the world still is) their use as a renewable source of timber and other products. Besides their economic role, forests offer many other benefits, which are increasingly being re-discovered as useful to society.

They offer habitat for a myriad of wildlife, a wide array of goods and services, and, best of all, they provide us with opportunities to connect with the natural world. Forests are generally managed in order to fulfil all these functions simultaneously.

Thanks to the way they enhance our lives and maintain a healthy society, forests truly deserve to be celebrated. Once again, enjoy today’s celebration.

Thank you for your kind attention.