

**Forests: the Roots of Sustainability**  
**Conference on the occasion of the first international Day of Forests**  
**Geneva, Palais des Nations, March 21, 2013**

**Opening remarks by Ambassador Thomas Fitschen, Permanent Mission of Germany**

Mr Alkalaj, Excellencies, ladies and gentlemen, dear all who care enough about forests to join this Library Talk on "Forests: the roots of sustainability" on the occasion of the first International Day of Forests,

It is a particular and very personal pleasure to welcome all of you to this event jointly organized by the UNECE, the FAO and the German UN Mission, and kindly supported by UNOG's Library, Archives and Cultural Service. Allow me to thank all of them already now.

Bearing in mind that the substance of our event has been organized by the UNECE and the FAO, and looking at the impressive list of presenters today, I am sure that all the economic and environmental aspects of preserving and protecting our forests will be amply covered later on. Issues such as

- today's economics of forest management and timber production,
- the scientific basis of modern forestry
- the importance of forests for our climate,
- their importance
  - o as natural habitat and part of the biosphere, full of species, and reservoir of biodiversity,
  - o as supplier of raw materials and commodities,
  - o as a source of scientific discoveries,
  - o as potential engine for economic growth and development,
  - o as a factor in ensuring food security,
  - o as an area where we seek recreation, where we want to connect with nature,

come to mind. I will leave all of these questions to our experts on the podium, and to you in the audience. But allow me to add some very personal thoughts and to try to look at the forest beyond the trees.

Germans are often said to have a very special relationship to forests. Our forests seem to carry some romantic surplus with them that resonates with us more than it does in other cultures – or so we think. Whether that is true I do not know, and in any case the best book on forests that I know was written by a Swede, Kerstin Ekman. But interestingly the day we celebrate today is called "International Day of Forests" - plural in the English language, i.e. the sum of all the forests in earth, but "Tag *des Waldes*" – singular – in German; the "Wald" as such, as an idea or a concept. I don't want to overinterpret this, but here language may indeed, as it should, be "telling".

Let me start out with two truisms: Forests are certainly more than a given part of the earth's surface covered by trees, and forests are not just "nature". Forests are many things for our societies, our economies, our culture, for each individual. Forests are by definition "plural", and so is the importance we attach to them.

The FAOs 2012 report on forests has an interesting historical chapter. That chapter is very aptly entitled “Forests and the evolution of the modern world”. It makes clear that it makes little sense to see forests as part of “perennial nature” as opposed to (man-made) culture, as something exterior or alien to areas settled by humans. Forests are – at least today and in most parts of the world - part of a larger (historical) landscape; a landscape inhabited – and formed - by human intervention over long periods of time. If we look at the current state of any given, “real” forest, we have to acknowledge that most of it is indeed the result of human activity. Forests have a history, and that history is human history.

The fact that a little over 30 percent of Germany, for example, is covered by forests, tells you very little. The “wald” we see there today is a far cry from the medieval type of mixed forests, let alone what in German is being called “Urwald”, i.e. a primeval forests untouched and unkempt as “nature” has allowed it to develop. Most European forests are the result of some of the most rigorous state intervention and planning, and of the application of academic forestry and scientific principles – you will hear more about that later.

So we could write the history of our societies as histories of making space for human settlements by clearing away the forests that cover a landscape. We could write it as history of creating arable land to feed growing populations by cutting down the trees that literally stand in the way of agriculture. We could write our economic history as a history of exploiting forest for timber that quite literally fuelled the expansion of our cities, traffic, industry, scientific progress and economic development. We could write that same history as a history of our foolishness at wasting our resources and causing lasting environmental harm.

But even that would cover only some of the importances, plural, that I mentioned earlier.

Throughout history forests were not only the economic source of wealth, but also a source of power. Questions of who was entitled to reign over the forests, to collect the timber and to hunt the animals - and who got excluded and prohibited from doing so - were eminently political ones. Forests are spaces where political power and privilege, class and hierarchy were asserted and defended.

But at the same time forests were areas where political power could be challenged and escaped from, where the traditional power of kings and landlords found their limits – think of Robin Hood and his men in Sherwood Forest, or Shakespeare’s *As you like it*, or any other band of brigands hiding in the woods whose story of a life in freedom and defiance of the traditional powers has come upon us.

Forests are also legal spaces: Spaces where law and order in the form of property rights and rights of usage – or the right to exclude and resist such exploitation - gets established and enforced. Forests can even be crime areas, from the notion of “poaching” and the fight against it to the concept of “illegal logging”, which presupposes the existence of a law that forbids such logging in the first place. What is a legitimate use of forests and what isn’t gets established by the law, and that law gets enforced. Or it does *not* get enforced, and the reason for that may lie far beyond the forest and have to do with the general state of the rule of law in the respective country.

Forests deep and dark can be dangerous. The Black Forest did not get its name for nothing, and the fact that a famous cake was named after it does not change a thing. It was in the darkness of the woods that Little Red Riding Hood met the wolf and where the witch trying to eat Hänsel and Gretel had her hut. The jungle as “green hell”, or the “Heart of Darkness” as

described by Joseph Conrad comes to mind. Forests can even become allies in the fight against foreign enemies – think of Caspar David Friedrich’s 1814 picture of a single lonely french grenadier surrounded, on a small, snowy glade, by a black wall of tall trees – German trees, of course, that are about to devour him without a trace. Or remember Shakespeare’s Macbeth where the wicked King, haunted by his crimes, finally sees Birnam Forest move against him, as predicted by the three witches.

But forests also be the opposite: an emotional refuge and provider of inspiration, a mental resource for human creativity. The Hundred Acres Forests was not where Winnie-the-pooh and Christopher Robin lived, but the place where entire generations of children found refuge from the challenges advanced by parents and school teachers. In one of my favourite poems by Robert Frost there is a short but touching line line that reads “*The woods were lovely, dark and deep*”. Friedrich Hölderlin in his 1805 poem “Love” calls on the reader to “*grow and be a whole wood! Be a more soul-inspired, fully blossoming world.*” And think of Henry David Thoreau, the New England Transcendentalist who on Independence Day 1845 moved to a small and simple hut in the forest near Walden Pond in Massachusetts. The reason he gave was as follows: “*I went to the woods because I wished to live deliberately, to front only the essential facts of life, and see if I could not learn what it had to teach, and not, when it came to die, discover that I had not lived.*”

Ladies and Gentlemen,

The point I am trying to make with my somewhat random and eclectic list of “importances” is the following: Our thinking about forests must not end at where the last line of trees stands. If we look at forests, we have to acknowledge them as spaces with different layers of history – and that is: human history. We have to appreciate them as spaces where many different claims, interests and assumptions about their value and purpose meet and compete. This makes our forests, in addition to all the other types of “space” that I have mentioned, a political space, and a democratic space. The future of our forests concerns our societies, present and future, as a whole. It is up to our societies as a whole, as a political body, to determine that future. “Forests for People” was the motto of the International Year of Forests 2011. That motto should also guide us today.

It is my hope that our little symposium today contributes to making that type of deliberations better informed, and I wish you an inspiring afternoon. Let me also seize this opportunity to invite you already now to drinks and food “for further thought” after our event.