

**Forests – the roots of Sustainability**  
Conference on the occasion of the International Day of Forests  
Geneva, Palais des Nations, March 21, 2013

Opening remarks by 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. Chikvaдзе 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 lowest coverage of forests, which were often degraded by overexploitation, coincided with the rapidly growing population and economies of the 18th century. 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. In Europe, the growing demand and danger of extinction of forests led to action, which can be seen as the roots of sustainable forest management.

Managers realized that forest resources are limited and cannot be regenerated in a short time. The concept of modern forest management, which started at the beginning of the 18th century, recognized that the regeneration cycle in forestry

is long (often longer than 100 years). Forests had to be used evenly over the whole productive cycle, and any harvest had to be followed by regeneration of the removed resource, in order to maintain the productive potential and preserve the future yield.

Modern forest management was not universally understood and applied evenly in different parts of the continent and not all negative impacts had been addressed promptly. However, the process of restoration of European forests had begun. Since that time, sustainable forest management has been evolving, increasingly addressing and including a variety of social and environmental aspects, essential for maintaining healthy and resilient forests able to address needs of the society.

“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.

The restoration process was however hampered by the two world wars. Forests were destroyed not only as a result of direct military activities, but also they were affected by the increased demand for material for war purposes and shortage of fossil resources. Intensive use of forests also continued after the wars, due to the reconstruction processes. However, immediately after World War II major afforestation efforts were undertaken in many European countries to compensate war time losses and to achieve timber self-sufficiency.

[This was, by the way, also the time when UNECE and FAO joined their efforts to promote forest management in Europe. The joint session of the UNECE

Timber Committee and FAO European Forestry Commission, held in 1947 is considered as the corner stone of this action.]

The rapid growth of European forest area observed in the first two decades after World War II slowed down since the beginning of the 1970s, but increased again at the beginning of the current century, and grew by an area equivalent to the size of the Czech Republic – between 2000 and 2010. This growth, as well as the maintenance of existing forest is carried out according to the principles of sustainable forest management, which in addition to the economic dimension of forest production, also addresses environmental and social aspects of development.

At present, European forests are more diversified and better prepared for addressing the needs of a contemporary society. While the area of forests protected for biodiversity is increasing, forests in Europe fully satisfy the demand for timber. Sustainably managed forests provide amongst other things, clean air and clean water generally free of cost. European forests are in most cases accessible for society and managed in a way that makes them suitable for touristic and leisure activities. They remain a major and still growing reservoir of terrestrial carbon, while they still provide a significant source of employment and revenue.

There are, of course, still numerous challenges resulting from past use as well as from changing climatic, economic, social and environmental conditions and ever evolving needs and expectations. European forests are often fragmented. Biodiversity conservation is still a concern and it is hard to predict how European forests will be affected by climate change, and how they should be

managed in order minimize the possible impact while securing the ecosystem services provided by the forest.

I am please to inform you that today we will hear about successful stories of sustainable forest management from our exceptional guests, and learn how challenges are addressed in different contexts.

I hope you will find the event of interest and acknowledge even more the important role that healthy forests have in keeping our societies healthy too.

Thank you for your kind attention.