

PONTIFICAL COUNCIL FOR JUSTICE AND PEACE

***NOTE ON THE CELEBRATION OF THE  
WORLD DAY OF BIOLOGICAL DIVERSITY***

This year's World Day of Biological Diversity, celebrated on 22 May, is dedicated to the theme of forest biodiversity. This theme is of global importance and is a fitting subject for this year's commemoration, as the World Summit for Sustainable Development approaches. This World Day of Biological Diversity may thus help draw our attention to the vast and ample richness of our forests, too much of which now seems to be threatened.

Difficult scientific and technical questions surround the definition of forests and the amount of forest cover in the world, yet it is clear that forests possess a great variety of the earth's species. As God's creation, these species reflect much beauty and enhance our natural habitat; a heightened sense of this diversity increases our sense of awe and mystery before the Almighty's work. The natural wonders of creation provide humanity with sources of recreation, opportunities for leisure and relaxation, and grounds for reflection, without which human life would be spiritually and culturally impoverished.

Forests also bring many advantages to humanity's well-being and aid in its development, for there are direct and indirect links between the natural resources found in forests and the sustainability of human life. A large number of needed commercial products, such as construction timber, furniture, paper and firewood, come from forests, as do various species of plants and microorganisms that help produce many medicines and antibiotics. Others are sources of food or serve as means of genetically improving strains of edible plants. Furthermore, forests provide extensive environmental benefits by helping to prevent soil erosion and absorbing carbon dioxide, and thereby help regulate the earth's climate.

Mismanagement and overexploitation appear to be depleting many forest resources, especially those found in tropical forests which are home to the majority of animal and plant species and contain the largest biomass on the planet. Much of this loss may indeed result from the political, social and economic problems faced primarily by developing countries. Poor and landless people often have no recourse other than to scavenge and exploit wood fuel for cooking and heating, and this overuse may lead to deforestation and desertification. Some developing countries realize that allowing access to their tropical forests is a quick and easy path to needed financial resources. The realities of these economic pressures indicate that the solution to protecting forest biodiversity rests in eradicating absolute poverty and providing greater opportunities for the world's poor.

A number of practical measures have been taken to conserve the biological resources found in forests, and, given the great creative potential of the human person, more can certainly be developed. Approaches of species protection that leave species in their natural habitat as well as those that preserve them in other settings can be beneficial. Better managed, plantation forests have become another way of insuring permanent

genetic preservation. Land tenure reform, such as better defined tenure rights and more stringent governmental enforcement, would give those who rely on forests for their survival and livelihoods more responsibility and control over these resources. Allowing forest land owners to benefit from their property may indeed provide incentives for long-term conservation. Finally, the search for more efficient uses and sources of energy, which would help lessen the burden development concerns may place on the environment, is also necessary. All of these are ways to properly "keep" and "cultivate" (cf. Gen 2: 15) those creatures God has entrusted to us.

In view of the World Summit for Sustainable Development, international, regional and national efforts to promote responsible and lasting development are being promoted. Many important sectors of society, ranging from environmental and labor groups and agriculture to science and industry, are deeply involved in this process. These efforts need to be supported by a greater understanding of man's unique vocation to safeguard creation and care for his fellow human beings.

If sustainable development is taken as a step in ensuring integral human development, it will seek to base itself on a spirit of service to humanity and to the whole of creation. This task carries moral and ethical implications, and has a deep spiritual foundation: "man, the only creature on earth that God wanted for its own sake, cannot fully find himself except in sincere self-giving" (*Gaudium et spes*, n. 24).

There is an obvious need for more serious and responsible approaches to the use of the earth's natural resources, but ones that do not neglect the greatest of resources, the human person. We are called to make the best use of our God-given talents and abilities; in this case, by measuring the scope and extent of our social, economic and environmental problems and taking concrete steps for the increased protection of threatened forests and biological species. The Holy See therefore encourages all to develop a renewed consciousness of humanity's special vocation place in the world and relationship to the environment.

The Holy See cordially wishes those participating in this World Day of Biological Diversity much success in their endeavors on behalf of creation.

From

[http://www.vatican.va/roman\\_curia/pontifical\\_councils/justpeace/documents/rc\\_pc\\_justpeace\\_doc\\_20020522\\_day-biological-diversity\\_en.html](http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/pontifical_councils/justpeace/documents/rc_pc_justpeace_doc_20020522_day-biological-diversity_en.html) 4/17/2004