

Biodiversity conservation may help reduce the impacts of natural disasters

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As ministers meet at the Eighth Meeting of the Conference of the Parties to the Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD COP-8), the United Nations University (UNU) urges governments to incorporate the Millennium Ecosystem Assessment (MA) findings in national planning processes and poverty reduction strategies to promote ecosystem services that may help reduce the extreme effects of natural disasters.

In a special address delivered at the high level ministerial meeting this week, MA Co-Chair and United Nations University Institute of Advanced Studies (UNU-IAS) Director Prof. AH Zakri called on governments to recognize the role of ecosystem services in planning and policy decisions related to such core concerns as economics, health, and even security. He also highlighted the importance of biodiversity for poverty eradication based on the findings of the MA – a five-year research effort by the world's leading scientists, with contributions from UNU experts, which gives compelling evidence of our dependence on healthy and diverse ecosystems for basic needs such as clean water, food, and air.

"The MA findings show that the increasing pressures on biodiversity and ecosystem services pose a major barrier to achieving the Millennium Development Goals of poverty reduction, food security, health, and environmental sustainability," said Prof. Zakri. "But it also shows that mainstreaming the sustainable management of biodiversity and ecosystems into central governmental planning and decision-making processes may reverse the trends of degradation in ecosystem services."

The MA shows that short-term economic and other benefits derived from exploiting forests, wetlands, oceans, and other resources are significantly outweighed by the greater long-term damage to human livelihoods and health. It also shows that healthy "ecosystem services" can mitigate the impacts of natural disasters, and biodiversity is the fundamental basis for the health of those services. This is evident in the most extreme effects of disasters such as landslides, floods and droughts being felt in Asia, Africa, South America and Central Europe – the world's most human-modified areas with the least biodiversity.

UNU paid tribute to Brazil's recognition of the role of ecosystem services by highlighting President Lula da Slilva's recent decision to protect 6.4 million hectares of the Amazon rain forest. "We should take inspiration from Brazil's commitment to protecting biodiversity," said Prof. Zakri. "Governments must invest in developing capacity and allocating financial resources to assess the economic and human consequences of changes in ecosystem services as part of their national planning processes. We know the problem and we have the tools, what is lacking is the political will and concrete action."

Source: United Nations University

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