

Mountains and the intergovernmental dialogue on forests

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The Secretariat of the United Nations Forum on Forests (UNFF) is honored to present a brief note on mountains and the intergovernmental dialogue on forests over the past decade.

Both forests and mountains played important roles in the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development (UNCED) in 1992, resulting in the Forest Principles and Chapter 11 and 13, respectively, of Agenda 21.

Significant progress in international forest policy dialogue has been made since UNCED. Many international initiatives in support of sustainable forest management have been launched, both outside and within the United Nations system. The main focus of the work of the United Nations has been to facilitate the development of coherent policies to promote the management, conservation and sustainable development of all types of forests. The Intergovernmental Panel on Forests (IPF) and the Intergovernmental Forum on Forests (IFF), both under the auspices of the United Nations Commission on Sustainable Development, were the main intergovernmental fora for international forest policy development from 1995 until 2000.

In October 2000, the Economic and Social Council established a new subsidiary body, the United Nations Forum on Forests (UNFF) that succeeded the IPF and IFF. As part of the new international arrangement on forests, ECOSOC also invited the heads of relevant international organizations to form a Collaborative Partnership on Forests (CPF) to support the work of the UNFF and to enhance cooperation and coordination of action on forest-related issues. The CPF was established in April 2001 and is comprised of thirteen international organizations with major forest-related programmes and mandates.

The UNFF is a high level intergovernmental body with a ministerial segment that aims to: provide a forum for continued policy development and dialogue; promote the implementation of agreed actions towards sustainable forest management; enhance coordination to address forest-related issues; and strengthen political commitment to sustainable management of all types of forests. The main operative means of the UNFF are its multi-year programme of work and the plan of action for the implementation of the IPF/IFF proposals for action.

During the IFF, mountain forests were highlighted as unique and fragile ecosystems. It was stressed that mountain ecosystems deserve special attention because of their contribution to sustainable livelihoods and their ecological significance. Many mountain populations, living in isolated and harsh environments, are economical, socially and politically marginalized. Forests provide important goods and services of benefit to local populations. The importance of mountain forests for soil and watershed protection and the conservation of biological diversity was also stressed. The need to resolve conflicts between use of forest resources for local economic benefit and environmental protection in adjacent "downstream" or lowland areas, however, was recognized. Furthermore, it was noted that attention was needed to expand rehabilitation and sustainable forest management efforts in environmentally critical areas, including mountain ecosystems.

The recent second session of the UNFF, which focused on, among other things, forest conservation and protection of unique types of forests and fragile ecosystems, highlighted the unique role of mountain ecosystems. Several countries stated that many unique and fragile ecosystems, including mangroves, swamps, wetlands, and mountain areas are under-represented in national protected area systems and are vulnerable to the impacts of natural disasters, such as droughts and floods. Invasive species were also highlighted by a number of countries as a growing threat to fragile ecosystems.

The UNFF provides an opportunity for countries to discuss emerging issues relevant to their implementation of the IPF/IFF proposals for action. In this context, and taking into account the International Year of Mountain 2002, the next session of the UNFF to be held from 26 May to 6 June 2003 in Geneva, Switzerland, could highlight the linkages between sustainable forest management and sustainable mountain development. The UNFF session will focus on the economic aspects of forests; forest health and productivity; and, maintaining forest cover to meet present and future needs.

Furthermore, in March this year, the CPF established a CPF Network to facilitate interaction and communication with a wide range of other international and regional organizations, including NGOs, private sector entities and other major groups. The European Observatory of Mountain Forests (EOMF) is an active member of the CPF Network and the UNFF Secretariat encourages the EOMF to act as a focal point within the CPF Network on matters related to mountain forests.

For more information on UNFF and the CPF Network, please contact the Secretariat of the United Nations (unff@un.org) and or visit the UNFF website: <http://www.un.org/esa/forests/about.html>