



DON'T DESERT DRYLANDS

UNITED NATIONS ENVIRONMENT PROGRAMME

MESSAGE ON WORLD ENVIRONMENT DAY

5 June 2006

The dry and delicate landscapes that we call deserts are among the world's most spectacular, harsh and beautiful. They support a specialized diversity of life, including some of humankind's most ancient cultures. On all continents, with the exception of uninhabited Antarctica, communities that live in or around deserts represent a direct link to knowledge, history and traditions that are increasingly imperilled by the dual pressures of globalization and environmental decline.

Deserts, and the cultures that have learned to live in harmony with them, are an important part of humanity's heritage. Desertification, on the other hand, is the manifestation of a multitude of destructive factors – almost all caused or made worse by human activity – that together represent one of the greatest challenges to environmental sustainability, human security and the achievement of internationally agreed development goals.

There is a fine line between dryland and desert—one which once crossed is hard to return from. It is vastly more cost-effective to prevent dryland degradation than to reverse it. It is therefore essential to focus on policies and technologies that will protect the world's arid, semiarid and dry subhumid areas. These areas, where rainfall is low and evaporation is high, may be fragile, but if managed well they are also fertile and capable of supporting the habitats, crops and livestock that sustain nearly one-third of humanity.

The fact that more than half the world's productive land is dryland emphasizes the critical importance of wise management at the global, national and local level. Impoverished land and impoverished people are two sides of the same coin. To raise public awareness about desertification, and to help to preserve dryland and desert communities, and the biological diversity on which they depend, the UN General Assembly declared 2006 the International Year of Deserts and Desertification.

In support of the International Year, UNEP chose the theme 'Don't Desert Drylands' for World Environment Day 2006. The degradation of drylands is a global problem, but it is perhaps most acute in Africa, the least developed region of the world and the most vulnerable to environmental change. The host city for World Environment Day 2006 is Algiers, capital of Algeria. With its geography, history and

culture inextricably bound with the world's greatest and best-known desert, the Sahara, and with its Environment Minister, Chérif Rahmani, the UN's honorary spokesman for the International Year of Deserts and Desertification, the country is ideally situated to highlight every facet of this complex issue.

Each year, on 5 June, World Environment Day provides an opportunity for communities and governments around the world to reflect on the essential role that the environment plays in our daily lives and our plans for the future. As the UN Millennium Ecosystem Assessment has highlighted, more than 60 per cent of the world's ecosystems are in decline or even degraded to an extent that we can no longer rely on their services. These include the world's drylands, as well as forests, fisheries and even the air that we breathe. It is plain that, despite increasing knowledge and a growing list of political agreements and commitments, humankind continues to squander our natural capital.

For example, it is estimated that desertification and drought account for a \$42 billion annual loss in food productivity worldwide. On top of this figure is the uncountable cost in human suffering and lives lost due to hunger and the need to abandon once productive land. These statistics are not only disturbing, they are preventable. This too, is the message of World Environment Day. As well as highlighting problems, each year the Day draws attention to the many available remedies.

Throughout its existence, UNEP has emphasized the importance of preventing and reversing land degradation. It played an integral role in establishing the UN Convention to Combat Desertification and is working alongside partners such as the UN Food and Agriculture Organization, the UN Development Programme and the Global Environment Facility, to implement it. UNEP has also gathered a comprehensive collection of success stories in the struggle against desertification in Africa, Asia and the Pacific, and Latin America and the Caribbean, which together demonstrate that appropriate, replicable technological and policy solutions exist to address the challenges of the drylands.

The degradation of drylands is a growing problem that needs imaginative, collaborative and multi-sectoral action. It is both a result of and a contributor to climate change; it is both the cause and the consequence of poverty. If left unchecked it threatens the future food security of humanity's steadily growing population and the stability of communities and countries in all regions. Therefore, on this World Environment Day, UNEP's message to the world is 'Don't Desert Drylands!'.

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