



United Nations Environment Programme

برنامج الأمم المتحدة للبيئة · 联合国环境规划署
PROGRAMME DES NATIONS UNIES POUR L'ENVIRONNEMENT · PROGRAMA DE LAS NACIONES UNIDAS PARA EL MEDIO AMBIENTE
ПРОГРАММА ОРГАНИЗАЦИИ ОБЪЕДИНЕННЫХ НАЦИЙ ПО ОКРУЖАЮЩЕЙ СРЕДЕ

Interfaith Partnership for the Environment

“Earth and Faith: A Book of Reflection for Action”

Welcoming Remarks by
Dr. Klaus Toepfer
UNEP Executive Director

United Nations Headquarters
West Terrace
6.00-7.30 p.m.

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Thank you for joining us this evening.

This Earth Day celebration provides us with an important occasion to pause and to reflect on the serious environmental threats facing life on earth, and to mobilize communities around the world to take action to reverse environmental degradation. In this regard, I am particularly pleased to introduce “Earth and Faith: a Book of Reflection for Action”.

This recent publication is the product of UNEP’s collaboration with the Interfaith Partnership for the Environment - the result of a longstanding dialogue established between UNEP and faith communities. This initiative grew out of the realization that although a wide gap is perceived between religions, all faiths share a common ethics based on harmony with nature.

I am particularly pleased to welcome so many of you coming from so many different walks of life and faiths, but all sharing the same commitment to bringing together this common element, as well as to exert a positive influence on the natural environment and thus promote harmony and awareness among the adherents of various faiths.

Your presence is particularly relevant, as this year has been declared the United Nations Year of Dialogue among Civilizations – a dialogue to emphasize that the current globalisation process encompasses not only economic, financial and technological aspects, but also human, cultural and spiritual dimensions. As noted by the Secretary-General, Kofi Annan: “diversity is not only the basis for dialogue among civilizations but also the reality that makes dialogue necessary”.



It is through such a dialogue between the scientific and faith communities that, we hope, will emerge a greater understanding of the complexity of our challenges and commitment to taking responsible actions for our common good.

Addressing the challenges and the role of the United Nations in the 21st century, the Secretary-General identified environmental sustainability as one main priority for the organization. Most of the work of the United Nations will have to focus on the need to meet social demands, address demographic pressures, and poverty in developing countries counterpoised against the excessive and wasteful pattern of consumption in the developed world.

UNEP's GEO 2000 confirms that the global environmental crisis facing humanity in the new millennium is a world threatened either because people have too much, or too little. The positive aspects of globalisation are numerous but there is growing evidence that the gap between rich and poor is increasing and that the life support systems on which our economies depends are being overloaded.

Globalisation is seemingly creating a global village. It also brings with it the challenge of preserving our diversity, whether cultural or biological, for the two are intimately linked. Respect for biological diversity and ecosystems, implies respect for human diversity because both elements are fundamental to stability and durable peace on earth.

We have learned that parts of the world with the greatest biodiversity also have the highest concentrations of native cultures, and that the extinction of these cultures, including the unprecedented and alarming loss of linguistic diversity, could lead to further environmental degradation and loss of traditional knowledge for the management of the environment.

2,500 languages are in immediate danger of extinction and an even higher number are losing the ecological contexts that keep them as vibrant languages. It is imperative that we stop to contemplate this trend and not allow such a vast archive of knowledge and expertise slip away. Thus, we must acknowledge the need to preserve "diversity in one world", in other words, a world in which every part works in the service of the whole, in the same way that nature does.

Ladies and gentleman,

Our energies are now converging on the road toward Johannesburg, where the World Summit on Sustainable Development will be held in September 2002. The Summit will be a call by the United Nations to further transform the slogan "We the peoples" from words into action.

Although the geographical, economic and political boundaries are rapidly dissolving under the dominating tendency of globalisation, the need to foster a new spirit of international cooperation in order to implement our plans of action has never been so great.



At the inaugural Global Ministerial Environmental Forum in Malmoe, Sweden, last June, Environment Ministers unanimously expressed their confidence that, at the dawn of this new century, we have at our disposal the human and material resources to achieve sustainable development, not as an abstract concept but as a concrete reality.

Undoubtedly, **a new consciousness is emerging**, based on the unprecedented development of promising technologies, greater institutional capacity to address wide-ranging environmental threats, as well as an enhanced and increased role of civil society.

But this new consciousness has to be morally grounded because if we deprive ourselves of the richness of our language, of our cultures and spiritual values, we will lose our sense of direction and purpose.

The book “Earth and Faith” provides a unique re-evaluation of the approaches being shaped by the major religions of the world in response to the global environmental crisis. It highlights an implicit moral imperative to examine and ameliorate the economic and social conditions embedded in our ethical and spiritual values that lead us to behave in an environmentally disruptive manner.

I perceive your efforts as a major contribution to a new environmental ethics and stewardship. Your work provides us with the **needed sense of direction**, which should have profound repercussions on the way we, as individuals, and our societies perceive the environment, leading us to more responsible actions.

For this, allow me to express my greatest gratitude to the Interfaith Partnership for the Environment and to congratulate all those who have contributed to the success of this unique publication. And, I encourage you to work further with us in defining, after all what should become, **our common ethical language for the earth in our commitment to making sustainable development a reality.**
