



MINISTRY FOR ENVIRONMENTAL AFFAIRS AND TOURISM

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STATEMENT BY THE OFFICE OF MARTHINUS VAN SCHALKWYK, MINISTER OF ENVIRONMENTAL AFFAIRS & TOURISM, ON 19 MAY 2005

Celebrating International Biodiversity Day: SA Welcomes Publication of Global Biodiversity Synthesis Report

“Biodiversity is the strength of the web of life, binding together all living things. It is the greatest expression of the truth that diversity holds the key to life. It is also one of the most important and threatened assets left to humankind. The protection, promotion, and wise utilisation of biodiversity may very well form the cornerstone of our future global survival.” These were the words of Marthinus van Schalkwyk, South African Minister of Environmental Affairs and Tourism, speaking in Cape Town on Thursday 19 May. The Minister was welcoming the launch of the Biodiversity Synthesis Report of the Millennium Ecosystem Assessment (MEA) in advance of the worldwide celebrations of International Biodiversity Day on Sunday, 22 May.

Entitled “Ecosystems & Human Well-Being”, the report was officially launched today in Montreal, Canada by the Secretariat of the Convention on Biological Diversity. It assesses the state of global biodiversity resources and takes a critical look at the implications of biodiversity loss. Amongst the key findings are that:

- Changes in biodiversity due to human activities were more rapid in the past 50 years than at any time in human history;
- Over the last 100 years, human-caused species extinction has multiplied as much as 1,000 times;
- Some 12% of birds; 23% of mammals; 25% of conifers and 32% of amphibians are currently threatened with extinction; and
- The world's fish stocks have been reduced by an astonishing 90% since the start of industrial fishing.

“What makes this report unique and of unprecedented global importance is the scope of its enquiry,” said the Minister. “It examines biodiversity simultaneously, for the first time ever, at almost every possible level from local to regional to global. We are very proud that one of the pioneering regional assessments was the southern African Millennium Assessment¹, which was itself conducted at three scales: all of Africa south of the equator; within two major river basins, (the Gariep and Zambezi); and in several sites at the scale of local communities. Amongst the most significant results of this regional study is the conclusion that at least four of the eight Millennium

¹ The Southern African component can be accessed at <http://www.millenniumassessment.org/en/subglobal.safma.aspx>

Development Goals (reducing hunger and child mortality, combating diseases and ensuring environmental sustainability) will not be met in the southern African region unless decisive action is taken to stabilise our ecosystem services.”

Congratulating the local, regional and international authors of the report, the Minister added: “This work dovetails perfectly with our own recent South African initiatives on biodiversity. Earlier this year we launched the results of our National Spatial Biodiversity Assessment (NSBA) – the first-ever comprehensive spatial evaluation of biodiversity across South Africa. The results were a warning to us all, with 34% of our terrestrial ecosystems threatened and 5% critically endangered; 82% of our river ecosystems are threatened with 44% critically endangered; three of our thirteen groups of estuarine biodiversity in critical danger; with 12% of marine bio-zones under serious threat. This report placed us in a position of scientific authority to identify which areas of our country need the most urgent attention and protection. Perhaps more importantly, the report made specific recommendations as to how best to link conservation with development in these threatened areas – ensuring sustainable conservation and community upliftment.”

“It is this link between communities and the environment that holds the key to reversing biodiversity losses,” said the Minister. “The new global data supports our own local research showing that our poorest and least developed communities are most vulnerable to the impacts of biodiversity loss – whether locally, regionally or globally. As ecosystems collapse, and supplies of fresh water and agricultural production dwindle, it is our most at-risk citizens who suffer first and most deeply. Our South African response is to place communities at the centre of the environmental equation. Conservation, eco-tourism and environmental developments are all powerful sources of sustainable job creation and economic growth. The interests of people and ecology are one and the same – our shared challenge is to educate our citizens and direct our programmes to reflect this reality.”

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