

Keynote speech: Jan McAlpine, Director of the United Nations Forum on Forests

Sir Peter Crane,

Fellow Foresters,

Ladies and Gentlemen,

It is a great pleasure to be here this evening, at the 18th Annual Conference by the Yale Chapter of the International Society of Tropical Foresters. I would like to thank the Yale School of Forestry and Environmental Studies for hosting this important dialogue on Landscape-Scale Restoration.

The UNFF is a world body comprised all 193 UN countries with a facilitative and catalyzing role in engaging and strengthening cross-sectoral linkages with various partners within the UN system, and outside. Since its creation in 2000, the UNFF has promoted a 360-degree perspective of all things forests, recognizing the need to widen the debate on forests well beyond the deforestation and afforestation, to a broader sense of its economic, environmental and social values.

I often like to point out that forests are a cornerstone of the entire landscape, including wetlands, agriculture, mountains, drylands, rivers, biodiversity and people. They are an essential source of livelihoods, food, water, and medicine for some 1.6 billion people, a quarter of the world's population.

We are all aware that forests are critical for human well-being and poverty reduction across landscapes and economic sectors. Many rural communities rely on forest benefits and functions as a means of their livelihoods, including, for example, food, fuel, water, medicine as well as the cultural and spiritual values so fundamental to people in different countries. All of these elements taken together reinforce the message that forests are vital to the survival and well being of people everywhere, all 7 billion of us.

If we turn our attention to the country level we can truly understand the needs of forest-dependent communities. Take the example of energy; in many developing countries, it is estimated that more than 80% of total energy consumption comes from fuelwood. National trade in many countries is also a significant source of employment, contributing to poverty alleviation in rural areas. In Cameroon, nearly half the cost for logging in rural areas by the forest industry goes to rural communities as their income.

Addressing the needs of forest-dependent communities requires a cross-sectoral approach. Simply put, the cross-sectoral approach is about breaking down the institutional silos and working horizontally across institutions in various sectors, including agriculture, community and rural development and natural resources management, to name a few.

A great example of the cross-sectoral approach is landscape restoration, which brings together forest-dependent communities, private sector and local governments to identify and put in place land-use systems that will help restore the various forest functions across a whole landscape. In practice, the landscape approach is intended to shift the emphasis away from simply maximizing only the economic or environmental benefits to optimizing the social, economic and environmental benefits of forests within the broader landscape, including agriculture, mountains, drylands, rivers, wetlands, biodiversity and people.

Landscape restoration can only be achieved when private institutions, along with local communities and governments work together towards Sustainable Forest Management, which is informally called “SFM.” The challenge ahead is to explore institutional arrangements that are better suited to each country’s dynamic conditions as there is no one-size-fits-all solution. Each country’s government must determine its own priorities. What is essential for this exploration is a practical approach for the reform of public institutions that can reinforce cross-sectoral cooperation, including through public-private partnerships, utilizing market incentives.

In order to achieve SFM we have to move past our narrow silvicultural-only approach to forest management. We are well past the point where we only value the timber production value of forests. We need to integrate, in particular, managing agriculture with managing forests. It is a fundamental priority. It is the new horizon, without which we will simply not be able to achieve not only sustainable forests for future generations, but also sustainable development.

In many countries, the private sector is at the forefront of providing forest products to the end customers – their actions directly influence consumer behavior. Positive support from consumers of forest products from sustainably managed forests can help restore the forest landscape. By the same token, public institutions are in a position to put in place incentive mechanisms for the private sector to support changes required to meet the needs of forest-dependent communities. This will entail utilizing market incentives through measures such as voluntary codes of conduct for industry, certification and labelling of sustainably sourced products, and payment for ecosystem services.

When the United Nations General Assembly declared 2011 the International Year of Forests, it created an opportunity to highlight the great value of forests, and the social, economic and environmental values and benefits they provide. “Forests for People” was the theme of Year and continues to be the focus of the United Nations Forum on Forests Secretariat’s outreach activities.

The message behind the Year is that humanity’s connection to forest ecosystems is innate. Active participation in their sustainable management is thus vital to safeguarding our shared future.

You'll be hearing from the Global Partnership on Forest Landscape Restoration, in which our UNFF team is an active partner. As you will note from their site, it is estimated that 1.6 billion hectares of forests world-wide are eligible for landscape restoration. This is land that currently contributes little to biodiversity, to people or the economy. But it has the potential to explode our small visions into amazing results – on a landscape scale worldwide.

At the global launch of Forests 2011, Rwanda announced its plan for achieving border-to-border landscape restoration over the next 25 years. This was the first time that such a project encompassed an entire country. In Rwanda the “landscape” included not only forests, but trees as part of agriculture, subsistence agriculture, protection of water resources, and other ecosystem planning. This landscape approach was seen to be critical for the natural environment, but also critical for the economy and the people who inhabit the land.

Land restoration requires patience and vision – it is a long and decidedly complex process. But, it is a proven solution that reaps benefits even in places where forests were no longer there. In China's Loess Plateau, in a project funded by the World Bank, innovative action regenerated a barren landscape that had been degraded from centuries of unsustainable agriculture. Communities worked to replace overgrazing with terrace-building and tree planting practices. In just a decade, the dry, dusty plateau had become a mixed green landscape of forests and fields, an incredible feat of recovery for an area approximately the size of Belgium, 640,000 square kilometers. Moreover, this restoration contributed towards lifting 2.5 million people out of poverty.

The International Year of Forests which we have celebrated since February 2011 brought people back into the forest equation. As part of our activities to promote “forests for people” stories throughout Forests 2011, the UNFF Secretariat launched the Forest Heroes Programme and Awards to celebrate individuals who are dedicating their lives to sustaining forests. I would like to share the stories of two of our short-listed nominees Shigeatsu Hatakeyama, and Rhiannon Timtishen and Madison Vorva.

Oyster fisherman Shigeatsu Hatakeyama planted the first broadleaf trees that cleaned the river habitat of oysters in Kesenuma Bay (Japan), after discovering the link between forests and clean water. His work with non-profit “Kaki no Mori wo Shitau Kai” (Rebuilding from land to Sea), which spans two decades, has inspired annual afforestation activities and greater environmental awareness in the community. However, when the Tsunami occurred, most of the forest and the oyster beds were destroyed. While both can come back – they are renewable resources – we once again see that actions cannot take place in isolation.

Rhiannon and Madison, two young girl scouts, mounted a campaign against major opposition to require that the source of palm oil for girl-scout cookies is only from sustainable sources. Their work prompted Girl Scouts USA to commit to requiring that Palm Oil be used only from sustainably sources for their cookies. This had the net effect of boosting efforts to reduce deforestation for palm oil monoculture plantations.

Everyday heroes like Shigeatsu, Rhiannon and Madison remind us that we live in an interconnected landscape, which must be addressed through a cross-sectoral and cross-institutional approach.

We must facilitate conditions for sustainable forest management by boosting collaboration in the areas of finance and trade in sustainably produced forest products, by transfer of ecologically sound technologies, capacity building and governance, by promoting secure land tenure, as well as coherent and participatory decision making and benefit sharing. But also by working extremely closely with other “sectors,” cooperating with them to help address their objectives, identifying conflicts from their sector which affect forests, and partnering to find an effective resolution to the each area’s objectives. We are not talking about new institutions. We are talking about building on the institutions and governance systems that exist, strengthening our partnership and truly working together.

There is no denying that forest loss has many roots; from illegal logging, to people’s critical need for food security, resulting in requirements for agriculture, to roads and mining activities within natural standing forests. Misplaced economic values and pressure from an increasing population are costing us our natural environment and further relegates the most vulnerable people and forests to the fringes of society.

If I may, I’d like to end this speech tonight with a final thought. Forests are a mirror of evolving human needs, one that is dynamic and ever-changing. In our fields, we often use statistics to convey the magnitude of forests’ significance to humanity. It is an important way to convey the importance of forests, or agriculture, for example, and what needs to be done. But sharing the true value of forests will be best understood in the context of the impact forests have on the lives of real people, in the ways non technical people can grasp. We must work together to cross this new horizon.

I am certain that discussion and mutual exchange of good practices will benefit everyone at this conference.

Thank you for your time and attention.