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BIODIVERSITY AND THE UN

The United Nations is the only institution focused on advocacy for the total well being of humanity. Hence its emphasis on biodiversity--often neglected when countries and organizations consider their response to climate change. A seemingly infinite variety of living organisms, genetic diversity and ecosystems worldwide have produced the plenty that sustains human life, the water and soil that provides the food we eat and the air we breathe. Now life on earth faces an unprecedented challenge, as the world's climate grows steadily warmer. Never before in human history has the capacity of ecosystems been destroyed at the present rate--estimated at 1000 times the natural rate of loss.

The United Nations is promoting 2010 as the International Year of Biodiversity. Protecting the variety of plants and animal species is nothing less than protecting the underpinning of life itself and is essential to human survival. In 1992 the United Nations formulated the Convention On Biological Diversity which has raised awareness and suggested practical steps some countries have initiated. The Convention has been ratified by 189 states. The United States is a tragic exception.

Changes in the landscape, river basins and oceans have already closed off survival options for many species. Pollution, the introduction of invasive species and over-harvesting of wild animals all reduce the likelihood of natural adaption to climate change. The rural poor are especially vulnerable to the resulting change in soils, availability of medicinal plants and fresh water.

At least 40 per cent of the world economy and 80 percent of the needs of the poor are derived from biological sources which require genetic diversity to sustain them. To understand the importance of variety in agriculture, consider the fact that nearly all potential crop pests are now controlled by a variety of other organisms and these natural pesticides are often superior to artificial equivalents, since pests often develop resistance to chemical controls.

Biodiversity is vital for medicine. The World Health Organization estimates that 80 percent of people in the developing world rely on traditional medicines derived mainly from plants to treat malaria, stomach ulcers, syphilis and other diseases. Of the top 150 prescription drugs in the US, 118 are based on natural sources. Of these

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74 percent come from plants. Microbes and animal species contribute to a range of medicines, including Penicillin and Anesthetics.

Climate change is not the only threat. The world's human population is growing fast as well, while natural resources shrink. Fish, for example, is our most important source of protein, yet, as fishing experts say, we, the people, are at war with fish--and we are winning. The number of species of fish, as well as the total population in our lakes and oceans steadily declines. This is but one instance of a "silent tsunami" of biodiversity loss.

The United Nations is building awareness of the extraordinary challenge to biodiversity through a variety of projects. May 22, 2010 will be "World Environment Day" focusing on Biodiversity for Development in agriculture . Research in land farmed by indigenous people has uncovered 47 local varieties of rice, some of which may be better able to survive climate change and feed people already feeling shortages. Another project, The Equator Prize, aims to use the cooperation and knowledge of rural people. It seeks out and honors standing community initiatives that reduce poverty through conservation and sustainable use of biodiversity. Its outreach is diverse, paying particular attention to youth and women.

In its efforts the United Nations strives to protect cultural diversity, such as Indigenous languages that also provide valuable knowledge about biodiversity. All religions share in a respect for the earth and its bounty. In Indonesia, when Buddhist priests consulted with environmental experts on deforestation, they explained their traditional way of saving trees by sanctifying the trees as priests, so local people would be forbidden to cut them down.

To those who see nature as sacred, loss of biodiversity is a spiritual devastation. It is a practical threat to the survival of all human beings.

Dr. Sylvain Ehrenfeld International Humanist Ethical Union representative to the UN, with the help of Phyllis Ehrenfeld before her untimely death.