

Draft speech of IUCN President for the Global Forum on Human Settlements 2020

Formalities

- Excellency Ambassador..., Excellency..., Honorable..., distinguished guests, ladies and gentlemen,
- It is my honour to address you today as the President of the International Union for Conservation of Nature – the world's largest and most diverse environmental network.

Context

- The unsettling events of 2020 have imbued the 15th Annual Session of the Global Forum on Human Settlements with heightened significance: for humanity stands at a crossroads looking into the eye of a perfect storm.

COVID-19 fallout

- The economic, humanitarian and social fall-out from the COVID-19 pandemic could end up making the 2008-09 global financial crisis look like child's play. And as always, the poor, informal and marginalized communities will be the most adversely affected.
- In the midst of this crisis, many cities that we had come to know as centres of power and influence, as beacons of civilisation, or simply as 'smart', have revealed themselves to be vulnerable, inequitable, impuissant, and in some cases, wholly unfit for the future.
- Urban people who might once have taken food, water and energy for granted are now acutely aware of how easily supply chains can be strained and stymied.
- COVID-19 has rattled our cities and changed the way we view them. I hope it will change the way we design, build and manage them too.
- As public budgets are reassigned and stimulus packages deployed, it is imperative that we seize this once-in-a-generation opportunity to expedite the Great Green Transition and build a better world for all.

Climate change, biodiversity, etc.

- We can no longer ignore nature's warning shots.

- The Ebola virus is named after a river in the Congo Basin; the namesake of Zika virus is a forest in Uganda. COVID-19 is not the first zoonotic disease thought to have been triggered by ecological disturbance and wildlife exploitation. Nor will it be the last – at least not if we continue grating against the wilderness.
- Three-quarters of the planet's land surface has been “significantly altered” and 1 million species of plants and animals are thought to be at risk of extinction (IPBES 2019). Populations of wildlife have declined by 68% since 1970 (WWF Living Planet Report 2020) and, of the 20 international biodiversity targets agreed by governments a decade ago, none has been met in full (GBO5 2020).
- Despite a ‘lockdown lull’ earlier in the year, global greenhouse gas emissions have resumed their dizzying ascent (UN 2020). Capping a decade of scorching temperatures, 2020 is on course to become the hottest year on record. The world is warming, ice sheets are shrinking, glaciers are retreating, methane is bubbling through permafrost, oceans are acidifying, sea level is rising, wildfires are raging, and extreme weather events are now all too familiar (NASA 2020).
- The evidence is crystal clear, our planet is in trouble and therefore, we are in trouble too.

Cities matter

- We have long known that cities are central to the success of the Sustainable Development Goals.
- Despite occupying just a tiny fraction (2-3%) of the Earth’s land surface, they account for the lion’s share (75%) of natural resource consumption and contribute disproportionately (75%) to global greenhouse gas emissions.
- For over half of humanity (55%), they are also home.
- At IUCN, we recognise that the survival of the natural world depends on the sustainability of cities. We are mobilising our Union to help shape our collective urban future. At the behest of our Members, we have formed an Urban Alliance to advance the sustainable cities agenda. We are developing new tools and knowledge products such as the IUCN

Urban Nature Index, to help cities reduce their ecological footprints and become nature-positive.

- How can a city become nature-positive?
 - By protecting critical ecosystems from conversion to human settlements.
 - By promoting compact development that minimises sprawl.
 - By adopting nature-inclusive design.
 - By enhancing the performance of urban utilities to minimise waste and pollution.
 - By greening procurement to ensure that embodied impacts are minimized.
 - By adopting nature-based solutions to address pressing urban challenges.

Nature-based solutions

- These efforts are intended not only to conserve nature but to help communities prosper.
- In recent years, IUCN has worked to popularise the concept of nature-based solutions defined as *“actions to protect, sustainably manage, and restore natural or modified ecosystems, that address societal challenges effectively and adaptively, simultaneously providing human well-being and biodiversity benefits.”*
- In July 2020, we launched the IUCN Global Standard for Nature-based Solutions – the result of a long consultative process involving 800 experts. The Global Standard is intended to bring clarity, credibility and quality assurance to the concept.
- Examples from around the world attest that nature-based solutions can cost-effectively enhance the sustainability, resilience and liveability of cities. Trees mop up pollutants, dampen noise, and cool the air; wetlands and raingardens reduce flood risk; mangroves and marshes buffer storms; greenspaces facilitate exercise, spiritual nourishment and community interaction; and greenways support active travel.
- Yet in most cities, the provision of nature is inadequate or distributed unevenly, along lines of affluence. Stark inequities persist. Far too many people are denied nature’s benefits. We can and must do better.

A green recovery with nature and people at its heart

- COVID-19 has taught us that business as usual is no longer an option. An investment in the health of our planet is an investment in our own future. Decisions made now on the stimulus measures will determine the health, wellbeing and security of future generations.
- Ladies and gentlemen, I firmly believe that this public health crisis can mark a turning point in human history: a chance to reset our relationship with nature; to bring our economies within planetary boundaries; to reimagine our cities; to build a truly ecological civilisation.
- I thank you.