



Statement of the Executive Secretary of the Convention on Biological Diversity

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Most Eminent Cardinals,

Monsignors,

Sisters,

My Distinguished Panellists and Participants,

We gather here to reflect on the impact of the Holy Father's **Encyclical – on *Care for our Common Home***.

Its message of stewardship of the natural world has played a central role in inspiring many countries to adopt the Paris Climate Change Agreement.

It remains central to our preparations for the challenges of the upcoming UNFCCC COP 22 and the Convention on Biological Diversity's thirteenth Conference of the Parties.

In this spirit, I seek to introduce you to an issue that rings closest to the Encyclical and to the message of Saint Francis – that of **biodiversity loss and the impoverishment of Nature**, and its relationship to climate change.

The Convention on Biological Diversity

The Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD),^[1] which I lead, entered into force in 1993, its three goals being conservation, sustainable use of biodiversity and equitable sharing of benefits (arising from genetic resources). Arising from the Earth Summit - it is understood as a convention for sustainable development.

The Convention serves as recognition that the Earth's biological diversity and resources are vital to humanity's social, cultural and economic development and that it is the responsibility of humanity to act as stewards of all life on earth.

Efforts to conserve and sustainably use biodiversity directly and indirectly impact upon multiple human rights guaranteed in the core international human rights instruments. The interrelated nature of biodiversity conservation and sustainable use and the enjoyment of human rights are reflected throughout the CBD, its protocols, the Strategic Plan for Biodiversity 2011-2020. Of particular relevance, also, are the measures under the CBD, taken to ensure gender equality and the promotion of the rights of indigenous peoples and local communities, including by facilitating their effective participation in the work of the Convention both at local, national and international levels.

The Convention has been ratified by 196 Governments, making it almost universal, with the exceptions of the United States of America, which has signed but not ratified to Convention, and the Holy See, which has neither signed nor ratified it.

The Protocols

Additionally, the Parties to the Convention have adopted two legally binding and enforceable protocols.

The Nagoya Protocol^[2] is a supplementary agreement to the Convention that promotes equity and balance between the custodians of biodiversity (mostly indigenous peoples and local communities and mostly biodiverse countries of the "South") and the users of genetic resources (mostly scientific and business community and developed countries of the "North").

As recognized in the preamble of the Protocol, public awareness of the economic value of ecosystems and biodiversity and the fair and equitable sharing of the economic benefits with the custodians of biodiversity are key incentives for the conservation and sustainable use of biodiversity. This protocol promotes more equity in international development and trade in particular by ensuring respect for the rights over genetic resources and associated traditional knowledge.

The Cartagena Protocol[3] is designed to contribute to the conservation and sustainable use of biological diversity by promoting the safe transfer, handling, and use of living modified organisms (LMOs) resulting from biotechnology.

The Cartagena Protocol reaffirms, in its preamble, the precautionary approach contained in Principle 15 of the Rio Declaration on Environment and Development and recognizes that modern biotechnology has great potential for human wellbeing, if developed and used with adequate safety measures for the environment and human health. Currently Parties under the Convention and this protocol are discussing the need for additional biosafety measures for the broader and powerful new technologies known collectively as synthetic biology.

Equity and Social Justice

In reflecting on God's Creation and the outcomes of evolution, the message of Saint Francis and the Encyclical of Pope Francis, I am convinced of the need to elevate the underlying concept of "**Equity**" which underpins the Convention and its Protocols, by considering the full spectrum of values embodied by biodiversity, including environmental, economic, social, cultural and spiritual values.

When ecosystems are degraded and biodiversity is lost, this negatively affects every aspect of human life, food and water supply, shelter, security, wellbeing, health, and social, economic, and cultural subsistence, development, dignity and spirituality – **the human condition is impoverished**.

The great Social Justice issue before us is that those same vulnerable populations that rely directly on biodiversity for their daily needs and who contribute least to the problems of biodiversity loss, environmental degradation, pollution and climate change, disproportionately bear the brunt of these catastrophes.

At the same time, increasingly it has been indigenous peoples and local and traditional communities who are asked to bear disproportionately costs of both development and conservation, through the annexation of their traditional territories and natural resources.

Indigenous Peoples, Local and Traditional Communities

In particular, indigenous peoples and local communities and especially pastoralists and semi-nomadic peoples from many geographic regions, such as small island developing states, mountain ranges, river deltas, arid lands and the Arctic, are already experiencing accelerated biodiversity loss and climate change and their traditional livelihoods and lifestyles are under imminent threat and must be considered highly vulnerable. Small islander communities in Melanesia[4] have already produced the first climate refugees.

Women and children from these communities are especially vulnerable.

As the Holy Father suggested in his Encyclical, **we need to revisit conventional thinking and pursue different sources of wisdom to adapt to the environmental crises we are facing**.

Indigenous peoples, local and traditional communities, through their traditional knowledge, urge humanity to remember what we have forgotten – **that we are all interconnected and that what we do to one another and to the Earth, we in fact do to ourselves** – to rediscover our roots, to respect Mother Earth; or Pachamama, as the peoples of the Andes call her.

Indigenous peoples and local communities (IPLCs) are not simply the passive victims of biodiversity loss and climate change. With their diversity, resilience, unique world-views, traditional knowledge and their 6 close attachment to their traditional territories,[5] they are valuable partners in the global efforts to address these challenges.

If the Convention on Biodiversity is to achieve the Strategic Plan for Biodiversity 2011-2020 and its 20 Aichi Biodiversity Targets to reduce significantly the loss of biodiversity, in light of the climate change crises, we must fully recognize and value indigenous peoples and local communities as major custodians of the Earth's biodiversity. The active involvement of these communities around the world is essential in the achievement of such ambitious targets.

The State of Conservation – and the Extinctions Crisis

By its own measures, despite current best efforts, conservation is still failing globally. Biodiversity on Earth continues its rapid decline. We continue to lose forests, wetlands and other ecosystems particularly in Africa, Asia, and Latin America.

The size of wild animals' populations on Earth has halved in the past 40 years – half the quantity of wild animals on the planet gone in a short lifetime. There are so few wild tigers, rhinos, and great apes that they will be lost

forever and very soon, if current trends continue. Sadly, their populations are already so low as to cast doubt on whether the numbers reflect enough genetic diversity to make the long-term survival of these species viable.

Different investigations have demonstrated that out of the 40 thousand living species that had their conservation status assessed, just over 16 thousand are in danger of extinction. One out of eight birds and one out of four mammals could disappear forever. Amphibians, a unique group of vertebrates, containing over 7,000 known species, are threatened worldwide. A recent assessment of the entire group[6] found that nearly one-third (32%) of the world amphibian species are threatened, representing 1,856 species.[7]

The intensification and homogenization of agricultural landscapes have greatly contributed to the loss of genetic diversity, with corresponding declines in the availability of plant and animal genetic resources critical to human nutrition, medicines and climate change adaptation and as sources of spiritual and cultural fulfilment.

In the great blue oceans that sustain all life on earth, biodiversity is equally imperilled because of overfishing, ocean acidification, coral reef bleaching, marine debris, poor governance and regulatory arrangements and other threats.

The rate of species extinction is now at least one hundred to one thousand times higher than what Scientists refer to as the background and historical rate of extinction before the Industrial Revolution.

If that rate of loss continues, it will soon lead to a tipping point with irreversible consequences for the capacity of the planet to continue sustaining life.

The ability of all humanity to continue to benefit from what is referred to as “ecosystem services”, which result from the functions of ecosystems and their biodiversity, which Saint Francis called “the abundance of nature”, is under threat.

Human activities are creating the greatest wave of extinction since the natural disaster that wiped out the dinosaurs 65 million years ago. We are living through the early phase of the sixth crisis of mass extinction of living species in the history of the planet – this time caused by human activity.

Many scientists and conservations speak of the sixth extinction crisis as the crisis of the Anthropocene.[8]

Those working on ecological limits tell us, that if all 7 billion people on Earth aspire to a consumerist western lifestyle, that Humanity would need five (5) Earth-like planets to meet these needs. We only have one Planet Earth and with it, an urgent need and unprecedented opportunity, for the kind of transformative action called for by the Holy Father in the Encyclical.

Biodiversity Loss is a major risk to humanity and to the Planet, compromising the ability of present and future generations, particularly the poor and vulnerable, to thrive and flourish. To quote the French biologist Jean Claude Lefeuvre, ***“safeguarding the planet’s biodiversity is not a cost, not a luxury of rich countries, but on the contrary, richness for the days to come, the guarantor of a viable future.”***

As with climate change, the action taken over the next decade or two will determine whether the relatively stable environmental conditions on which human civilization has depended for the past 10,000 years will continue beyond this century.

Moral and Ethical Issues and Intergenerational Equity

Beyond the reality of our own short lives on Earth and the immediate effects of the loss of biodiversity, humanity must embrace the intergenerational issues as well as the moral and ethical issues of species extinction.

In the words of the Holy Father: ***“every year sees the disappearance of thousands of specieswhich our children will never see because they are lost foreverbecause of us, thousands of species will no longer give glory to God by their very existence nor convey their message to us – we have no such right”.***

In an era when sectarian differences have too often given rise to violence, our common dilemma of facing the challenges of declining biodiversity can be a uniting force. Diversity both cultural and biological, are the very roots of our resilience.

A Wide Range of Solutions – calls for similar action from the Encyclical and the Convention on Biological Diversity

Humanity has a wide range of options for addressing the crisis. Determined action to value and protect biodiversity can benefit people in many ways, including through better health, food security, access to clean water, and less poverty. It will also help to slow climate change by enabling ecosystems to store and absorb more carbon. It will also help people adapt to climate change by adding resilience to both human communities and ecosystems and making them less vulnerable, and by providing the needed genetic resources to adapt

the food systems to face the impacts of climate change. Better protection of biodiversity is therefore a prudent and cost-effective investment in risk reduction for the global community.

Achieving a positive outcome requires actions at multiple entry points, which are reflected in the goals of the Strategic Plan for Biodiversity 2011-2020, and its 20 global Aichi Biodiversity Targets, which is a plan of action for the entire UN system, adopted at our Tenth Conference of the Parties in Nagoya, Japan in October 2010,[9] endorsed by all other global biodiversity-related conventions and by the United Nations General Assembly.[10]

These include:

(a) *Initiating action to address the underlying causes of biodiversity loss*, including unsustainable production and consumption patterns, by ensuring that biodiversity concerns are mainstreamed throughout governments, the business community, and civil society, through communication, education and awareness, appropriate incentive measures, and institutional change;

(b) *Taking action now to decrease the direct pressures on biodiversity*. Engagement of the agricultural, forest, fisheries, tourism, energy and other sectors will be essential to success. Where trade-offs between biodiversity protection and other social objectives exist, they can often be minimized by using approaches such as spatial planning and management efficiency measures. Where multiple pressures are threatening vital ecosystems and their services, urgent action is needed to decrease those pressures most amenable to short-term relief, such as deforestation, over-exploitation or pollution, so as to prevent more intractable pressures, in particular the spread of invasive alien species and climate change, from pushing the system “over the edge” to a degraded state;

(c) *Continuing direct action to safeguard and, where necessary, restore biodiversity and ecosystem services*. While longer-term actions to reduce the underlying causes of biodiversity are taking effect, immediate action can help conserve biodiversity, including in critical ecosystems, by means of protected areas, habitat restoration, species-recovery programmes and other targeted conservation interventions;

(d) *Efforts to ensure the continued provision of ecosystem services and to ensure access to these services, especially for the poor who most directly depend on them*. Maintenance and restoration of ecosystems generally provide cost-effective ways to address climate change. Therefore, although climate change is an additional major threat to biodiversity, addressing this threat opens up a number of opportunities for biodiversity conservation and sustainable use;

(e) *Enhanced support mechanisms for: capacity-building; the generation, use and sharing of knowledge; and access to the necessary financial and other resources*. National planning processes need to become more effective in mainstreaming biodiversity and in highlighting its relevance for social and economic agendas. Convention bodies need to become more effective in reviewing implementation and providing support and guidance to Parties.

Some of these options and others are explored in the Encyclical, such as the need for developing an “Integral Ecology” bringing together all aspects of the environment – to create a new “Cultural Ecology” combining the patrimony of Nature, with the historic, artistic and cultural patrimonies, which are likewise under threat - An “Ecology of daily life” though “Ecological Education” - raising awareness of our common origin, of our mutual belonging, and of a future to be shared with everyone.

A new *Integral Ecology* that respects Nature and recognises our complete interdependence – on one another and all living things - a recognition that we are faced, not with separate crises, but that the social crisis (of inequity), the environmental crisis (and the loss of biodiversity) and climate change are all interlinked parts of **one complex crisis**.

The Encyclical talks about creating an “Ecology of daily life” - an integral improvement in the quality of human life through “Ecological Education” - raising awareness of our common origin, of our mutual belonging, and of a future to be shared with everyone.

Similar calls for action are found in the Strategic Plan for Biodiversity, starting with its first Aichi Target to ensure that: *By 2020, at the latest, people are aware of the values of biodiversity and the steps they can take to conserve and use it sustainably*.

As well as in the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and its 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) to help us all end extreme poverty, fight inequality & injustice, promote healthy, productive lives and address the interrelated challenges of biodiversity loss and climate change

A Common Plan

The Encyclical calls for “a Common Plan” and I propose to you that the Strategic Plan for Biodiversity 2011-2020, and its 20 global Aichi Biodiversity Targets, a plan of action for the entire UN system, adopted at our Tenth Conference of the Parties in Nagoya, 2010, [11] endorsed by all other global biodiversity-related conventions and by the United Nations General Assembly,[12] together with the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)[13] also adopted by the General Assembly provides such a Plan.

In line with the Encyclical’s overriding message on “Care for Our Common Home”, the of the Strategic Plan for Biodiversity is a world of “Living in harmony with Nature” where “By 2050, biodiversity is valued, conserved, restored and wisely used, maintaining ecosystem services, sustaining a healthy planet and delivering benefits essential for all people.”

Directly relevant to the mission of the CBD, the Encyclical encourages implementation of sustainable and diversified agriculture, promoting better management of marine and forest resources and ensuring universal access to water.

Pope Francis’s encyclical on *Caring for our Home* has engaged not just Catholics but more broadly Humanity itself – on responsibility and actions for Climate Change and the degradation of Nature but I would also like to explore with you the possibility of a deeper response on the issue of biodiversity loss by the Holy Church.

Exploring Possible Actions by the Holy Church

Firstly, we should acknowledge, despite the limitations of human politics and the current international governance system, that there has been significant progress in recent years in the implementation of the biodiversity agenda, though still not sufficient to halt the rapid loss of biodiversity (including ecosystems and genetic resources). However, we should also note that between actions taken and results there will inevitably be time lapses.

Reflecting on the actions outlined in the Strategic Plan for Biodiversity and in the Encyclical, can we explore what actions we can take together to address biodiversity loss?

Can we explore synergies in our common messages and goals such as sustainability, poverty eradication, living within ecological limits, our relationship with Nature - plants and animals, and more fully explore synergies between the Franciscan message and the goals and targets of the CBD?

Would the Holy See consider acceding to the CBD and engaging in its debates and dialogues?

What symbolic gestures and practical actions could the Catholic Church inspire its 1.2 Billion followers to take, concerning calls for sustainable lifestyles and more sober consumption patterns?

Aichi Target 11,[14] calls for at least 17% of terrestrial and inland water, and 10% of coastal and marine areas, to be protected. Could we explore what this would look like if embraced by the Holy Church and applied to church lands, dioceses and parishes?

Can we explore the possibility of joint publications that could be launched at future International Days for Biodiversity, on Biodiversity and Spirituality?

Can we co-organize with Vatican partners high-level ecumenical events on the margins of future CBD[15] and UNFCCC governing bodies meetings?

Building on the Assisi Faith Declarations on Nature,[16] what gestures and actions could the Holy Church promote in a strengthened dialogue on these issues with other faiths? (*In Conclusion*)

In the words of Saint John Paul II:

“A solution to ecological challenges demands more than just economic and technological proposals. It requires an inner change of heart that leads to the rejection of unsustainable patterns of consumption and production. It demands an ethical behaviour that respects the principles of universal solidarity, social justice, and responsibility.”

I stand before you with the hope that one day these esteemed bodies will also meet to prepare for future CBD COPs. The Convention on Biological Diversities’ thirteenth meeting of the Governing Body, referred to as CBD COP 13, occurs on 4-17 December, in Cancun, Mexico, shortly after UNFCCC COP 22.

With the review of progress towards the Strategic Plan for Biodiversity 2011-2020 and its 20 Aichi Biodiversity Targets planned for 2018 (COP 14) and the consideration of post 2020 strategies and arrangements at COP 15 (in 2020), there has never been a better opportunity to engage the challenge of biodiversity loss with the same vigour you have applied to climate change.

In closing,

It is said that Saint Francis of Assisi believed that Nature is the mirror of God, in all his beauty, majesty, and complexity. One verse from the Canticum of the Sun is particularly striking in this respect:

Be praised, my Lord, through our sister Mother Earth, who feeds us and rules us, and produces various fruits with coloured flowers and herbs.[17]

Saint Francis, Pope Francis and the Holy Church, the world needs your help. The World needs an Ecological Holy Grail for the salvation of biodiversity.

The depth and complexity of living Nature still exceeds human imagination, and most of the world around us remains unknown, and such rich diversity offers a compelling moral argument for preserving God's Creation. We live a crisis of values with deeply negative consequences for the way humans relate to nature and all other forms of life. The Holy Church is in a unique position to lead a moral defence of biodiversity and halt the sixth event of Mass Extinction taking an ethical stance to restrain the ecological footprint of humanity and to ensure biosafety limits to human attempts to manipulate Life on Earth in its attempt to play God.

Thank you.

End Notes

[1] The Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD) was opened for signature on 5 June 1992 at the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development (the Rio "Earth Summit"). The Convention entered into force on 29 December 1993.

[2] *The Nagoya Protocol on Access to Genetic Resources and the Fair and Equitable Sharing of Benefits Arising from their Utilization to the Convention on Biological Diversity* is an international agreement, which aims at sharing the benefits arising from the utilization of genetic resources in a fair and equitable way. It entered into force on 12 October 2014, 90 days after the date of deposit of the fiftieth instrument of ratification. Learn more about the Nagoya Protocol at: <https://www.cbd.int/abs/about/default.shtml/>

[3] The *Cartagena Protocol on Biosafety to the Convention on Biological Diversity* is an international agreement which aims to ensure the safe handling, transport and use of living modified organisms (LMOs) resulting from modern biotechnology that may have adverse effects on biological diversity, taking also into account risks to human health. It was adopted on 29 January 2000 and entered into force on 11 September 2003.

[4] <http://www.smithsonianmag.com/smart-news/worlds-first-climate-change-refugees-were-just-granted-residency-new-zealand-180952279/> and <https://en.ird.fr/the-media-centre/scientific-newsheets/386-the-first-climate-change-refugees-from-vanuatu-still-under-threat> and <http://igps.victoria.ac.nz/publications/files/f25928e2182.pdf>

[5] Lands and waters traditionally occupied or used by indigenous and local communities.

[6] Refer to www.iucnredlist.org/amphibians

[7] Refer <http://amphibiaweb.org/declines/declines.html> - Amphibians have existed on earth for over 300 million years, yet in just the last two decades there have been an alarming number of extinctions, nearly 168 species are believed to have gone extinct and at least 2,469 (43%) more have populations that are declining. This indicates that the number of extinct and threatened species will probably continue to rise (Stuart et al. 2004).

[8] "Anthropocene"—from *anthropo*, for "man," and *cene*, for "new"—because human-kind has caused mass extinctions of plant and animal species, polluted the oceans and altered the atmosphere, among other lasting impacts is now the main driver of change in the Planet.

[9] <https://www.cbd.int/sp/>

[10] United Nations General Assembly resolution A/RES/65/161.

[11] <https://www.cbd.int/sp/>

[12] United Nations General Assembly resolution A/RES/65/161.

[13] <http://www.undp.org/content/undp/en/home/sustainable-development-goals.html> In 2015, more than 190 world leaders committed to 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) to help end extreme poverty, fight inequality & injustice, and fix climate change.

[14] By 2020, at least 17% of terrestrial and inland water, and 10 per cent of coastal and marine areas, especially areas of particular importance for biodiversity and ecosystem services, are conserved through effectively and equitably managed, ecologically representative and well connected systems of protected areas and other effective area-based conservation measures, and integrated into the wider landscapes and seascapes.

[15] The Convention on Biological Diversities' thirteenth meeting of the Governing Body, referred to as CBD COP 13, occurs on 4-17 December, in Cancun, Mexico, shortly after UNFCCC COP 22.

[16] http://www.unep.org/newyork/Portals/129/docs/earthbook/assi_dec_eafadec.pdf

[17] *Laudato si, mi Signore, per sora nostra madre Terra, la quale ne sustenta et governa, et produce diuersi fructi con coloriti fior et herba.*