

The World Conservation Congress crystallises priorities



Outgoing IUCN President Yolanda Kakabadse, congratulates Valli Moosa from South Africa on his election as the new IUCN President in November. IUCN / M. Raimondo

The 3rd IUCN (World Conservation Union) World Conservation Congress held in Bangkok in November 2004 showed promisingly how reliable information and scientific know-how, passion for healthy ecosystems, and powerful collaboration across society can improve the well-being of the world's six billion people and the 15 589 species identified in the IUCN latest Red List of Threatened Species.

Held once a decade, the Congress is the most comprehensive gathering of conservation and development-related interests. The 4899 delegates included almost 1000 of the world's leading scientists, over 200 business representatives, more than 40 Ministers of Foreign Affairs, Environment, Agriculture, Tourism and Fisheries, as well as hundreds of environmental activists, and community and religious leaders.

The world's latest scientific knowledge was presented, landmark initiatives were launched, and delegates ran high-level debates, signed a number of agreements, and voted on over 100 resolutions on critical conservation issues.

The agenda underlined the concrete benefits of conservation action and the effectiveness of our current approaches and tools.

'The decisions taken in Bangkok have the power to affect every single one of us,' said the IUCN's Director General, Achim Steiner. 'They have demonstrated the role of conservation in peace building, poverty eradication, food and water security, health and spirituality, and economic development. The global environmental agenda ... is more than just a manifesto; it is a concern of global relevance and collective responsibility.'

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'In the 1950s we predicted that the world's natural resources and biodiversity were showing signs of serious degradation. Today, we have a body of evidence that is irrefutable and validates our hypothesis that the planet's resources are used well beyond the levels of sustainability,' said Mr Steiner.

The Congress applauded successes in the conservation of coral reefs, wetlands

and the southern white rhino, tabled agreements for concrete action, and recognised individuals and institutions for their contributions.

New findings set the stage for the debate at the Congress, including:

- more than 300 bird species in Asia are threatened due to logging, farming and development.
- the Millennium Ecosystem Assessment – the largest study of its kind involving over 1000 scientists and policymakers – tells us that only four of 22 assessed ecosystem services, such as water purification, have been enhanced through human action, whilst more than half have been degraded.
- the monetary value of freshwater ecosystems has changed management decisions in 29 cases, including in the Muthurajawela Marsh in Sri Lanka and the Luang Marsh in Lao PDR. In both cases the marsh provides an equivalent of US\$5 million worth of water purification infrastructure.
- energy experts agreed that reliance on fossil fuels is not an option and highlighted that less than 4% of the annual US\$240 billion global energy subsidies is allocated to renewable energy sources compared to about two-thirds spent on fossil fuels.
- poor people are most reliant on natural resources, which provide up to 50% of household income. Asia has half the world's population and two-thirds of the world's poor.

The Congress showed an unprecedented level of business sector participation. 'We moved from the "dialogue of the deaf" to a collaboration with entrepreneurs and business. This shows that biodiversity and sustainability is as important to business as it is to us,' said Joshua Bishop, IUCN Senior Advisor.

New initiatives unveiled included:

- an agreement between NASA and IUCN on the use of satellite data to advance worldwide conservation efforts.
- a US\$3 million donation from Oracle to the Species Information Service will transform environmental decision-making through better information systems.
- a commitment from business and conservation to prevent the globe warming beyond a 2°C threshold, with the impacts of the current 0.6°C increase in global temperature already evident.
- a public commitment signed by Vietnam and Lao PDR to address the

- illegal wildlife trade across their border, and leading Asian lawmakers discussed strengthening cooperation.
- an unprecedented meeting of Mekong Region Ministers and civil society representatives that saw an open dialogue about the challenges of transboundary water politics and reported signs of increasing cooperation.
 - the strengthening of business-conservation associations with the One Planet Living initiative, a proposal to create major new sustainable communities whilst conserving and recovering thousands of hectares of woodland and wildlife habitat.

The IUCN Members Business Assembly voted on over 100 Resolutions and Recommendations on critical conservation measures. Some of the major decisions were:

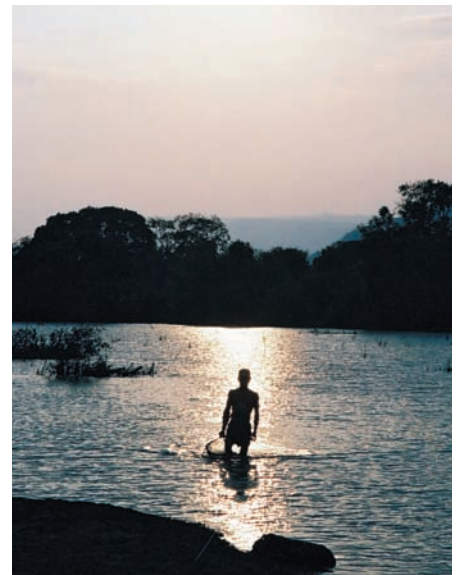
- a call for a moratorium on the further release of genetically modified organisms;
- to establish the World Conservation Learning Network to build capacity of

conservation and development professionals;

- to pursue activities for the conservation of biodiversity in the degraded Aral Sea basin;
- to commence greater actions to combat poverty through nature conservation; and
- to better address the conservation and management of high seas biodiversity.

Kofi Annan, through the Under Secretary General of the United Nations, Dr Kim Hak-Su, stressed the importance of the Congress and welcomed its views on ways to attain the United Nations Millennium Development Goal on environmental sustainability. 'Every country, and every individual, has a responsibility to change – to move from an era of exploitation to an ethic of stewardship. We have the science and the green technologies to begin the job today.'

In closing remarks, the IUCN's newly-elected President, Mr Valli Moosa, said 'We need to engage, involve and reach out to more people: young, old, rich, poor, urban, rural, scientist and layperson. It is from



A lone fisherman silhouetted at Nom Long, Thailand. Asia's threatened wetlands were a focus of conservation attention at the Congress. Mekong Wetlands Biodiversity Programme/PJM

diversity that we gain our strength and political niche, and our unique moral authority.'

Moves to more widely protect deep ocean habitats

Australia will support the United Nations' recent agreement to strongly protect 'high seas' areas of significant biodiversity from destructive fishing practices in waters beyond the national jurisdiction.

Under the UN Convention on the Law of the Sea, the government has committed to take practical steps to reduce the risks to these sensitive marine areas, and has called for improved international governance on the high seas to protect sites and combat illegal, unreported and unregulated fishing.

Discussions are taking place with New Zealand to set an international example in identifying and protecting the most biologically important international waters in the Tasman Sea, and to find ways to control damaging fishing practices.

Australia's Environment and Heritage Minister, Senator Ian Campbell, has acknowledged wide concern about the environ-

mental impact of less responsible forms of bottom trawling, which can damage the ocean floor and undersea mountains.

'Seamounts are recognised by science as the nurseries for productive fisheries and are abundant in diverse marine life', he said. 'The Howard Government has already moved to protect seamounts within the national 200 nautical mile zone to the south-east of Tasmania.'

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There are more than 100 000 known seamounts in the world, including many in the Tasman Sea. Several Australian commercial fisheries, including that of the Orange Roughy, are based on seamount populations

and several prospective fisheries are being assessed by the Australian fishing industry around seamounts in the Indian Ocean.

Referring to national fisheries responsibilities, Fisheries Minister, Senator Ian Macdonald said Australia would continue to fish and trawl responsibly in its

surrounding oceans and to develop legitimate fisheries. He said that while Australian fishing operators used modern gear and low-impact trawl techniques on the high seas, they would continue to be required to use observers and to contribute to the scientific knowledge of the area.



The Orange Roughy is fished around deep seamount habitat. There are wide scientific concerns about the long-term effects on marine ecosystems of trawling in seamount regions. CSIRO Publishing