

Dialogue on Forestry in the Context of Eco-Civilization
Guiyang, Guizhou Province, China
19 July 2013

“Challenges and opportunities facing global forests and ecosystems”

Statement by Mahendra Joshi
United Nations Forum on Forests (UNFF) Secretariat, New York

*Honourable Vice Minister of the State Forestry Administration, Madam Yin Hong,
Excellencies,
Distinguished Participants,
Ladies and Gentlemen,*

It is a great pleasure to be here, and a true privilege for me to address you at this important international dialogue on forestry in the beautiful city of Guiyang. .

At the outset please let thank the State Forestry Administration (SFA), the Asia Pacific Network for Sustainable Forest Management and Rehabilitation (APFNet) and Guizhou Provincial Forestry Department and the International Union for the Nature Conservation (IUCN) for convening the event.

This morning we have heard a number of excellent presentations from several distinguished speakers on the role of forests and forestry in eco-civilization, green growth and sustainable development. Indeed, the interlinkages and interdependencies between human civilization, its economic, social and cultural developments on one hand and nature and ecological integrity on the other are strong. However, due to the human desire for growth the sustainability of forests has become a big question mark during the past decades.

What is the state of forest ecosystems and their services today?

We all depend on forests for the numerous goods and service they provide. In fact, forests are the only major renewable natural resource system (other than food crops) upon which humankind has consistently depended for centuries and probably will continue to depend on for centuries to come. Healthy forest ecosystems are critical for the life-support systems of the planet.

Just to give you a few examples: over 1.6 billion people living in and around forests worldwide depend directly on forests for their livelihoods. Forests provide employment to 14 million people in the formal sector, and generate a gross global value added of 468 billion dollars per year. The values of non-cash, non-wood forest products are equally impressive and are estimated to be 3-5 times greater than cash contributions.

Even more so are the broad range of goods and services that forest ecosystems provide – for example, watershed services, oxygen production, carbon storage, wildlife habitat and other biological diversity, scenic landscapes, health and medicinal benefits. Many of these goods and services are traditionally viewed as free benefits to society, or “public goods”. They are often difficult to quantify and monetize and not reflected in public and private balance sheets.

Since forests provide a wide range of benefits to society, they therefore also have an equally large number of interest groups. This includes, among others, the forest industry, subsistence farmers, agri-business, environmentalists, aquaculturists, wildlife conservationists, the pharmaceutical industry and eco-tourists. Interests and expectations of different stakeholders may create conflicts among the stakeholders for their demand for different goods and services from forests, thus leading to challenges in forest management and use. Management is therefore not just a simple technical exercise, but a process to balance the interests and needs of different stakeholders.

Distinguished Participants,

Deforestation and forest degradation are serious problems today in many parts of the world, with far-reaching consequences. Forests continue to be under tremendous stress, mainly due to alarming rates of deforestation and forest degradation.

I believe the most critical issue we are facing today is how to conserve and sustainably manage this natural resource, so that the stream of benefits from forest ecosystems continues to flow and meet the needs of current and future generations. Another critical issue is how forests can increase their contributions to other sectors, to poverty eradication, to the broader sustainable development, and to challenges related to climate change.

In this respect, I would like to highlight some challenges that have direct and strong relation with the two fundamental issues I mentioned.

First is population growth. The global population is expected to increase to 9 billion people by 2050 – adding around two billion in the next 37 years. The Earth’s capacity to sustain such growth and its increasing demands remains a serious challenge for forests and the planet as a whole.

Next is the trend of production and consumption. With the general improvement in peoples’ income levels, the demand for products and services from forests and agriculture, as well as other sectors, will continue to rise. A need to produce more food for a growing population would pose more pressure for forest lands to be converted into farmlands, pasturelands and other infrastructure. If production and consumption are not managed properly, the planet’s life-support system will be under serious strain. Over 30% of all food produced worldwide is wasted every year. The world leaders in Rio also

recognized that sustainable production and consumption require urgent attention and fundamental changes.

Another challenge is the valuation of ecosystem services from forests and developing markets for such services. How are we to take account of such benefits from forests and reflect them in national accounting systems? It is a big question and still remains complex.

It is also of utmost importance to develop and promote markets for other products from forests other than “timber”. There is a need to expand “payment for ecosystem services (PES)”, regulatory and market-based frameworks. The climate change process has brought some innovative some carbon offset mechanisms to the forefront, including REDD+. More needs to be done in other areas, such as for water, biodiversity, eco-tourism and other services generated from forests. Some of these can be developed within a country, while others may require international efforts.

Cross-sectoral coordination, cooperation among different stakeholders at the national, regional and global levels is needed. Good governance and effective institutional frameworks to promote such governance are equally important.

I cannot stress enough the importance of knowledge, education, research and development. Technological innovation is much in demand to address basic and emerging problems of forest management, such as fires, droughts, pests and diseases, which may be further exacerbated by climate change, and others that are due to the changing demands of society. Persistent data gaps and lack of proper monitoring are among the challenges ahead. We need sufficient and timely data on resources in order to have a solid base for decision-making.

Finance has remained a critical challenge for a proper and consistent management regime on forests. Forests are long-term endeavours which require continued investment for their maintenance, whereas decision-makers with financial resources (both public and private) are generally guided by short-term considerations. As many forest products and services are still not compensated for the reasons I mentioned earlier, attracting sufficient finance for sustainable forest management has remained a challenge in most parts of the world, and a constant issue of discussion at international policy fora, including at UNFF.

These challenges are, of course, inter-related.

I am sure the presentations we are going to have right after mine will elaborate more on the evolving methodologies and frameworks to capture the values of ecosystem services from forests.

We have a number of technical, institutional and policy tools available that can help address the challenges with which we are faced. There are new insights and formats for valuing and considering economic value of forest ecosystem services, such as the payment for ecosystem services (PES), voluntary forest carbon markets, and REDD+. New technologies are coming up and new institutional arrangements for cooperation and partnerships are growing at the national, regional and international levels.

Distinguished Participants,

Now allow me to say a few words about the United Nations Forum on Forests, and its role and potential for international cooperation and action on forests.

The United Nations Forum on Forests (UNFF) is an intergovernmental body of the United Nations to promote sustainable forest management in all types of forests and strengthen political commitment for sustainable forest management, UNFF provides a global platform for policy dialogue and cooperation and coordination on forest issues among the Member States. It is open to major group participation and involvement of intergovernmental organizations.

The Forum addresses all aspects of forests, balancing economic, environmental, social, and cultural aspects.

UNFF10, held last April in Istanbul, Turkey, addressed a number of issues surrounding forests and economic development. In its resolution, the Forum recognized the role that forest ecosystem services play in economic development, and invited countries and organizations to develop valuation methodologies, to integrate such values into national accounting systems and to address information and data gaps on the values and contributions of forest goods and services. This definitely demonstrates global-level recognition and an urgency for action for reflecting more accurately the values that forests and ecosystem services provide to society.

It is timely to also note that, in year 2015, UNFF will review the effectiveness of the international arrangement on forests, which includes UNFF itself. The year is also important for the international development context as it will review the progress in MDGs and chart a new development agenda beyond 2015.

Distinguished Participants,

Sustainable development or ecologically sensitive, compatible civilization implies a comprehensive, integrated approach to address environmental, social and economic challenges. In light of the rapidly changing global environment and world economy, there is a growing interest in a new, holistic and people-centric paradigm of development. In the broader context, there is a growing interest in building and strengthening knowledge platforms and partnerships for sharing experiences and

lessons learned: on sustainable forest management and its role in sustainable development, green economy, as well as in other priority areas. This is one of the many areas where this Dialogue can contribute from on-the-ground experiences.

Let me conclude by saying that in this room we all know that action is needed; we have the tools, we have the people, expertise, and institutions, but what we are still need is to enhance worldwide awareness of the importance and vitality of forests and their ecosystems to the survival of mankind, stronger political commitment and a true global collective effort to overcome the challenges. In this regard, public awareness programmes and campaigns such as the International Year of Forests 2011, and the new International Day of Forests (on 21 March every year) are highly useful mediums. Similarly, the UNFF is the only global body addressing all aspects of forests, promoting sustainable forest management and strengthening political commitment worldwide. Its potential for policy deliberations and international cooperation should be fully utilized and further enhanced.

Thank you for your attention.