



*From the desk of*

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**T**he 2005 World Summit in New York is one of the most important meetings of the early 21st century. It aims to deliver a new and strengthened United Nations in areas from security to human rights. It will also take stock of how we are faring on meeting the 2015 Millennium Development Goals, which range from halving dire poverty and increasing the access to safe and sufficient supplies of drinking water to empowering women and reversing the spread of infectious disease.

### **Natural disasters**

Over recent months the environment has emerged as a crucial pillar, if not a cornerstone, upon which the Goals may well stand or fall. *A more secure world: Our shared responsibility*, the report of the Secretary-General's High Level Panel on Threats, Challenges and Change, says: "Environmental degradation has enhanced the destructive potential of natural disasters and in some cases hastened their occurrence. More than two billion people were affected in the last decade."

So the environment is not a luxury, affordable only when all other issues have been resolved, but the oxygen breathing life into all the Goals. It is the ribbon running round our common aspirations for a healthier, more stable, secure and just world.

It is also critical to economies. When New York's City Council set out to supply safer drinking water for its nine million customers, it faced a bill

for water filtration of up to \$6 billion. Instead of paying for equipment, it plumped for better management of river banks, forests, agriculture and other ecosystems to reduce pollution into the Catskill/Delaware river system. Working with nature in this way cost the city only \$1 billion to provide safe drinking water, saving up to \$5 billion.

### **Invasive species**

Such hard economic arguments are underscored in the recently published Millennium Ecosystem Assessment and its spin off reports. The work of 1,300 scientists and experts from 95 countries, the Assessment has begun to put numbers on the value of ecosystems and the services they provide. It shows that an intact wetland in Canada is worth \$6,000 a hectare, compared to \$2,000 if it is drained for intensive agriculture. Similarly, it calculates losses from damage by alien invasive species in the Cape Floral region of South Africa at around \$2,000 a hectare.

### **Recreational value**

Intact tropical mangroves - nurseries for fish, natural pollution filters and coastal defenses - are worth around \$1,000 a hectare. Cleared for shrimp farms, their value falls fivefold. The Assessment estimates that the Muthurajawela Marsh, over 3,000 hectares of coastal bog in Sri Lanka, is worth an estimated \$5 million a year though such services as local flood

control. And the annual recreational value of coral reefs in the six Marine Management Areas of the Hawaiian islands ranges from \$300,000 to tens of millions of dollars a year.

Studies from Algeria, Italy, Portugal, Syria and Tunisia estimate that the value of timber and fuelwood from a forest is worth less than a third of that of the services it provides, ranging from protecting watersheds and providing recreation to absorbing pollutants like greenhouse gases. The burning of 10 million hectares of Indonesia's forests in the late 1990s cost an estimated \$9 billion, including from increased health care costs and losses in tourism.

### **Sustainable development**

There are also new findings on the link between the spread of disease and environmental degradation. Studies in the Amazon by researchers at Johns Hopkins University in the United States have concluded that for every one per cent increase in deforestation, there is an eight per cent increase in the number of malaria-carrying mosquitoes.

So it is our sincere hope that the heads of state meeting in New York put "natural or nature's capital" right up there with human and financial capital and recognize that significant, targeted investments in the environment - including restoring and rehabilitating damaged and degraded wetlands, forests, mangroves, coral and the like - provide a high rate of return and will go a long way towards meeting the eight Goals. Anything less will undermine our attempts to defeat poverty and deliver sustainable development, short-changing current and future generations ■

#### **YOUR VIEWS**

*We would like to receive your feedback on the issues raised in this edition of **Our Planet**. Please either e-mail: [cpiinfo@unep.org](mailto:cpiinfo@unep.org) or write to:*

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