

Preface



The world is again on the Road to Rio, almost 20 years after the Earth Summit of 1992 that laid out the treaties, policies and principles towards sustainable development.

The intervening years have witnessed an extraordinary explosion in scientific understanding of the impacts of human activity on the planet and atmosphere.

That science has informed policymakers on the options and choices for change and has assisted in evolving responses, such as the greenhouse gas emission reduction treaty—the Kyoto Protocol—or more recently a decision to establish an International Regime on Access and Benefit Sharing of Genetic Resources at the Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD) meeting in Nagoya, Japan last year.

The UNEP Year Book 2011 underlines some of the successes achieved when science is fully brought into service for sustainable development. Yet, it also spotlights that many of the international responses to the challenges remain at best a patchwork: at worst, often far behind the scale and pace of environmental change being witnessed today.

The 2011 Year Book showcases and explains three emerging issues. The first—the wider impacts of phosphorus use in food production, pointing to concerns over the future availability of phosphorus supplies—in contrast with the millions of tonnes of fertilizer washed from the land into the seas triggering algal blooms and damage to fish stocks and tourism-based industries.

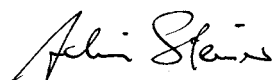
It also spotlights growing scientific concern over the chemical and material impact of marine litter on wildlife and the human food chain, as well as the crucial role of biodiversity in maintaining healthy forests.

With the right public policies and enabling conditions, these challenges can be addressed in ways that reduce humanity's environmental footprint while generating new kinds of business and employment, for example in sustainable waste management—one of the ten sectors identified as key to catalysing a transition to a low carbon, resource efficient Green Economy.

The window for action is narrowing. As the Year Book underlines, persistent issues are in many cases becoming more acute, whilst new ones are emerging.

Next year at Rio+20, governments need to urgently address the gap between science and how to form a decisive response as part of an overall package that finally aligns the economic pillar of sustainable development with the social and environmental ones.

The UNEP Year Book 2011 is a snapshot of the world 15 months before Rio+20—perhaps future Year Books may reflect a different story as a result of the evolutionary decisions taken in Brazil in 2012.



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