

and, with his high sense of duty and ethics, knowing precisely what he felt had to be done. He will be missed by many people from different nations and of all ages, and will leave us with glorious memories. He was in many ways comparable with the great encyclopaedists of the Renaissance, and was a true citizen of the world.

MICHEL BATISSE
Senior Environmental Adviser, UNESCO
7 Place de Fontenoy
75352 Paris 07-SP
France.

Convention on Biological Diversity

Barely 18 months after its signing at the June 1992 'Earth Summit' in Rio de Janeiro, the Convention on Biological Diversity became international law on 29 December 1993. The Executive Director of the United Nations Environment Programme has hailed the occasion as 'one of the most significant recent developments in international law and in international relations relating to environment and development.'

In the face of the greatest extinction of species for 60 million years, mostly of late as a result of human activities, the treaty commits nations to protect biological diversity — ecosystems and genetic resources as well as species. The treaty pledges them to use sustainably the world's plants, animals, and all other organisms, and seeks to ensure the fair and equitable sharing of the benefits that result from the use of genetic resources, particularly for developing countries.

The benefits reaped from biodiversity can be found almost everywhere. Thus a plant found only in the Madagascar rain-forests has proved of enormous value in combating childhood leukaemia, while the bark of a tree growing in the northwestern United States is being used to combat certain forms of cancer, and more than a quarter of all prescriptions in modern Western medicine contain active ingredients that have been extracted from wild plants. Varieties of wheat grown in Canada contains genes that have been introduced from as many as 14 other countries, while a 'useless' wild wheat plant from Turkey is used to give commercial wheat crops resistance to disease and a wild species of coffee from Madagascar does the same for that crop.

Our planet's food supply also depends on diversity — the genetic uniformity of some crops has allowed pests to sweep across countries, causing crippling damage and, at times, enormous loss of life. Habitat destruction is a major threat to biodiversity, which is also lost through over-harvesting, chemical pollution, and the inappropriate introduction of foreign plants and animals. Climate change threatens to accelerate the current destruction.

* In chronological order of their ratification, the following countries were the first 36 to ratify the biological diversity treaty by mid-December of 1993: Mauritius, Seychelles, Marshall Islands, Maldives, Monaco, Canada, China, Saint Kitts and Nevis, Ecuador, Fiji, Antigua and Barbuda, Mexico, Papua New Guinea, Vanuatu, Cook Islands, Guinea, Armenia, Japan, Zambia, Peru, Australia, Norway, Tunisia, Saint Lucia, Bahamas, Burkina Faso, Belarus, Uganda, New Zealand, Mongolia, Philippines, Uruguay, Nauru, Nepal, Czech Republic, and Barbados.

The ratification that made the Convention international law came from Mongolia on 30 September. Ninety days later — actually on 29 December 1993 — the treaty became a binding legal document for the countries that have ratified it, 36 to date.*

By mid-December of 1993, 167 States had signed the Convention, including the ratifiers. Many Governments that have signed are in the process of securing ratification, including the United States and countries of the European Union. It is to be hoped that States which have signed made New Year resolutions to ratify the biodiversity agreement early in 1994, while another resolution would be to start implementing it. The Convention's commitments need to be integrated into national laws and policies and into countries' plans for managing their resources of plants, animals, and natural habitats.

The first meeting of Governments that have ratified the Convention (the first Conference of Parties) is tentatively scheduled for 28 November to 9 December 1994, to take some of the fundamental decisions for advancing the Convention's provisions. Under the treaty, countries promise to develop national plans for the conservation and sustainable use of biodiversity, through making inventories of resources and integrating such plans into development strategies. They are also required to enact laws to protect threatened species and habitats and expand natural protected areas.

Developed countries are to assist poorer nations in carrying out their conservation programmes through the use of appropriate technologies and the provision of new financial assistance. The treaty also says that developed countries shall 'provide new and additional financial resources' to developing countries, so that the latter can carry out their treaty obligations.

Agreements for access to genetic resources and the transfer of biotechnologies are to be promoted. Countries are encouraged to preserve the traditional knowledge of indigenous communities in the conservation and use of biological diversity. According to the Convention, this should be done with the active involvement of indigenous peoples who possess such knowledge, so that all can benefit from its use.

ANGELA CROPPER, *Executive Secretary*
Convention on Biological Diversity
c/o United Nations Environment Programme
15 Chemin des Anémones, CP 356
1219 Châtelaine, Geneva, Switzerland.

Small-island States and Low-lying Coastal Areas Especially Vulnerable to Climate, Global Warming, and Sea-level Changes

In his opening address to the World Coast Conference held recently in The Hague, Netherlands, the Secretary-General of the World Meteorological Organization (WMO), Professor G.O.P. Obasi, emphasized how 'small island states and coastal areas are very vulnerable and

sensitive to climate and atmospheric changes which result in global warming and sea-level change'. He also said that these areas are prone to suffer from the devastating effects of storms, whose frequencies and intensities might be altered as a result of climate change. The Government of