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Investing in ecosystem services can boost food security, raise incomes – UN



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Investing in healthy ecosystems can boost food security, improve resilience to climate change and provide economic benefits for poor communities, says a new report by the United Nations Environment Programme ([UNEP](#)) and its partners.

“An Ecosystems Approach to Water and Food Security,” launched during World Water Week in Stockholm, Sweden, advocates managing and investing in the connections between ecosystems, water and food, through diversifying crops, planting trees on farmland and improving rainwater collection and other practical steps.

“This could help avoid water scarcity and meet the growing food demands of a global population set to reach 9 billion by 2050,” states a [press release](#) on the report, produced by UNEP and the International Water Management Institute (IWMI), in partnership with 19 other organizations.

One of the main challenges in boosting current levels of food production, says the report, is the availability of water, which is needed for livestock, crop irrigation and fisheries and other agricultural uses.

Groundwater levels, for example, are declining rapidly in several major breadbaskets and rice bowl regions such as the North China plains, the Indian Punjab and in the Western United States.

“Maintaining healthy, resilient ecosystems to ensure water availability for agriculture and other ecosystem services is thus essential for long-term food security,” the news release points out.

The report, written by over 50 contributors and using case studies from China, Guatemala, Jordan and other communities, recommends changes to three specific areas – environmental protection, water resources management and food production – that are needed to improve food security and reduce stresses on water supply.

It also sets out recommendations for drylands, wetlands, crop systems, fisheries and livestock systems.

Water scarcity and land degradation are the most prominent constraints for food production in drylands, which support one third of the world’s population, up to 44 per cent of its cultivated systems and about 50 per cent of its livestock.

Among its recommendations for drylands, the report suggests creating corridors to promote the movement of livestock, which can reduce overgrazing and land degradation caused when animals are confined to small areas, as well as cultivating local plants better adapted to dry conditions.

In addition to boosting food security, the report notes that an ecosystem services approach to agriculture can also help raise living standards and income. The Peruvian Amazon, for example, is home to indigenous communities that rely on forest ecosystem services for their food supply, livelihoods and cultural practices. Recently, conservation groups have been working with local people to develop agricultural and economic resources.

Through better ecosystem management, some 600 families saw their incomes increase, mainly through revenues from more productive fish farms and agroforestry. Increased food production came hand-in-hand with conservation plans, which were developed for 16 forest communities.

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