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UN Goodwill Ambassador Edward Norton outlines benefits of biodiversity



Edward Norton

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Humanity is wreaking havoc with Earth's capacity to sustain life through destructive exploitation of natural resources and decimation of the planet's biodiversity, the United Nations Goodwill Ambassador for Biodiversity, acclaimed actor and conservationist Edward Norton said today.

"We are disrupting the natural systems of our planet in ways that will cause havoc for our way of life," Mr. Norton told the UN News Centre in an interview on the eve of the [International Day for Biological Diversity](#), which falls on 22 May each year.

"The UN is providing a forum for countries big and small to work together on how we can put into policy issues like environmental sustainability, protection of biodiversity, protection of forests, combating desertification," he said.

He said his commitment to promoting the principles of the Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD) was spurred by the realization that many people considered biodiversity an abstract concept.

"I think there is a very important communication challenge – it's very important to find ways to articulate to people why biodiversity should matter to them. I am a storyteller by profession. I spent a lot of years working on conservation issues. I feel it is something that I can talk to people about. That's why it was a privilege and responsibility," said Mr. Norton.

Stressing the importance of forests in preserving biodiversity, mitigating the consequences of climate change and alleviating poverty, Mr. Norton deplored the fact that forests are being cleared to make way for commercial activities that benefit a few at the expense of the majority, mostly the poor.

“We are cutting them [forests] down to make room for the production of beef, the production of soy, the production of palm oil.”

“Forest ecosystems represent an enormous uncalculated GDP [Gross Domestic Product], especially for poor people around the world, so when we clear a forest to create ‘economic gain’ of a certain kind of industry, you actually wipe out an enormous GDP that poor people are extracting in sustainable way from the forests. In pursuit of short-term economic gains, we can see more and more clearly we are creating a certain kind of impoverishment when we clear forests.”

He pointed out that deforestation is responsible for close to a fifth of all greenhouse gas emissions into atmosphere. Destroying forests was also responsible for loss of biodiversity, which he described as “this enormous treasury of species that has lots of specific values to us. It is a genetic database we are losing.”

Referring to a three-day trip he made to Rwanda with CBD Executive Director Ahmed Djoghlaif in February, Mr. Norton praised the African country’s “pioneering” conservation efforts.

“Rwanda, a very small and densely-populated country – from studies, they concluded that it was economically long-term much better for the country to protect watersheds, lakeshores and they instituted a policy of 50- to 150-metre buffer zones of no development on any watersheds, on any wetlands, rivers, lakeshores and they implemented that policy within a year,” he said.

Mr. Norton also attended the Governing Council meeting of the UN Environment Programme ([UNEP](#)) in Nairobi, and visited a rural renewable energy project in central Kenya, intended to provide a community with an alternative to the use of firewood.

“This biogas project with small dairy farmers around the slopes of Mount Kenya [is] reducing, even eliminating, their use of fuel wood from forests by taking these digesters, putting the waste from their dairy cows, and producing so much methane that they power their whole houses, their farms and everything.

“There was a guy, the project manager – you could see his face shining as he talked about how they developed these systems to become very efficient providers of waste energy.”

Mr. Norton’s family has long been involved in sustainable development issues, with his father being a conservation advocate and his maternal grandparents having founded an organization to help provide affordable housing in the United States.

He has been active in garnering support for conservation efforts, serving as a board member of the Maasai Wilderness Conservation Trust in Kenya, and took part in the launch of an innovative social networking platform called Crowdrise to boost participation in charitable work.

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