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Forest policies in Rwanda, United States and Gambia win UN-backed awards



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Rwanda today won a United Nations-backed gold award for its forest promotion policies, an event that former United States track and field star Carl Lewis, himself a nine-time Olympic gold winner and now UN Goodwill Ambassador, called more important than the many medals he has garnered.

Policies from the United States and Gambia were runners-up, winning joint silvers in the Future Policy Award announced at UN Headquarters in New York by the World Future Council (WFC), a group of 50 respected personalities from all five continents representing governments, parliaments, the arts, civil society, science and business world.

The annual awards celebrate policies that create better living conditions for current and future generations, and seek to raise global awareness and speed up action towards just, sustainable and peaceful societies. This year's topic was forests, with 16 entries from 20 countries, and the

announcements took place under the sponsorship of the UN Food and Agriculture Organization ([FAO](#)).

“Despite the genocide and continuing population and land pressures, Rwanda is one of only three countries in Central and Western Africa to achieve a major reversal in the trend of declining forest cover and is on course to achieving its goal of forest cover of 30 per cent of total land area by the year 2020,” WFC Director Alexandra Wandel said in announcing the gold medal for the country’s national forest policy, initiated in 2004.

“The Government of Rwanda has taken a lead in developing visionary forest policy but also biodiversity conservation, ecotourism, green jobs.”

Forest cover has increased by 37 per cent since 1990, massive reforestation and planting that promote indigenous species and involve the local population have been undertaken, and new measures such as agro-forestry and education have been implemented.

“I kind of know about awards, I’ve had a few myself and I think it’s much more important that we talk about this award because it affects everyone,” said Mr. Lewis, a Goodwill Ambassador for FAO who in his sporting career won 10 Olympic medals, nine of them gold, and 10 World Championships medals, eight of them gold.

“It talks about reforestation and overcoming hunger. So I’m delighted to make the Future Policy Award more well-known and to carry out some of the inspiring energy of the Olympic spirit that I’ve had in the past. So I hope that all of you can be inspired to do what you can in your communities and in your forests to make your worlds a better place.”

One silver award went to the US Lacey Act amendment of 2008 which prohibits all trade in wood and plant products that are knowingly illegally sourced from a US state or any foreign country, forcing importers to take responsibility for their wood products.

The second silver went to Gambia's Community Forestry Policy, put in place with FAO support, the first in Africa to provide local populations with secure and permanent forest ownership rights.

Transferring forest tenure from state ownership to management by local communities enables them to reduce illegal logging and forest fires, slow desertification and benefit from the forest products.

“The success of the Gambia's Community Forest Policy proves that even in the world's poorest countries, with the right policies and legal framework in place, rural populations can benefit economically from forests and significantly improve their food security and environment,” FAO's Assistant Director-General for Forestry Eduardo Rojas-Briaies said of the tiny West African country.

The Director of the Secretariat of the UN Forum on Forests, Jan McAlpine, noted that the awards come “at a really critical time” because of the downturn in the economy, the needs of dealing with development goals and the complexity of dealing with natural resources and adverse impact of unsustainable exploitation on climate, biodiversity and livelihoods.

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