



**United Nations  
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Programme**

**United Nations Environment Assembly of the  
United Nations Environment Programme  
Fifth session**

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Item 8 of the provisional agenda\*\*

**Contributions to the meetings of the high-level political  
forum on sustainable development and implementation of  
the environmental dimension of the 2030 Agenda for  
Sustainable Development**

**Nature at the heart of sustainable development**

**Report of the Executive Director**

**Introduction**

1. The present report is designed to assist representatives of Member States and other high-level representatives of industry and civil society in their preparations for the high-level segment of the resumed meeting of the fifth session of the United Nations Environment Assembly of the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP), to be held in Nairobi from 28 February to 2 March 2022 under the theme “Strengthening actions for nature to achieve the Sustainable Development Goals”.<sup>1</sup>

2. Ours is a connected planet. Health, food, economies and the well-being of nearly 8 billion people and more than 8 million other species across diverse ecosystems constitute a web of life that is inextricably interlinked. Nature is that web, yet human activities have altered 75 per cent of the planet’s land surface, 85 per cent of its wetlands and 66 per cent of its oceans, and in doing so have undermined the very foundation of our societies and economies. Based on the current nationally determined contribution commitments of Member States, the world is on a pathway to an average temperature increase of 2.7°C. With the recent adoption of the Glasgow Climate Pact by the Conference of the Parties to the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change at its twenty-sixth session, the international community strengthened its resolve to pursue efforts to limit global average temperature rise to 1.5°C, recognizing the need to ensure that humanity’s impact and

\* In accordance with the decisions taken by the Bureau of the United Nations Environment Assembly at its meeting held on 8 October 2020 and by the bureaux of the United Nations Environment Assembly and the Committee of Permanent Representatives at their joint meeting held on 1 December 2020, the fifth session of the Environment Assembly was adjourned on 23 February 2021 and is expected to resume as an in-person meeting in February 2022.

\*\* UNEP/EA.5/1/Rev.2.

<sup>1</sup> The present report has been structured around the four proposed action areas highlighted in the report of the bureaux of the United Nations Environment Assembly and the Committee of Permanent Representatives at their joint meeting, held on 9 and 10 June 2020.

dependence on nature gives us the best chance of not just surviving but thriving on this beautiful and delicate planet.

3. The Rio Declaration on Environment and Development and associated 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development seek to end poverty, conserve biodiversity, combat climate change and improve livelihoods for everyone, everywhere. These objectives, encapsulated in the 17 Sustainable Development Goals, are unlikely to be met unless transformational changes occur in the way we use, value and interact with nature.

4. Noting the adoption of the Kunming Declaration, entitled “Ecological civilization: building a shared future for all life on Earth”, by the Conference of the Parties to the Convention on Biological Diversity at its fifteenth meeting, which will be formally submitted to the Environment Assembly at the in-person meeting of its fifth session, UNEP welcomes the many biodiversity- and nature-related commitments and pledges that have been made by Member States, civil society organizations, indigenous peoples and local communities, young people and the private sector. These include the United Nations Decade on Ecosystem Restoration and the Leaders’ Pledge for Nature, which brought together over 90 Member States to raise the level of ambition on restoring nature with the aim of reversing the loss of biodiversity by 2030. Such commitments are critical for driving momentum and raising the bar on ambition for nature, but they will not be sufficient until they are translated into investment and action.

5. The fifth session of the Environment Assembly provides the opportunity to bridge, build on and catalyse impact in relation to multilateral environmental efforts, including on biodiversity, climate, food systems and pollution, for people and planet. It also marks the start of a period of reflection on and celebration of the fiftieth anniversary of the creation of UNEP. In preparation for the high-level segment that will take place at the in-person meeting of the fifth session, representatives of Member States and other high-level representatives of industry and civil society might wish to consider the following:

(a) The world will be watching to see what progress is made on marine litter and plastics: the in-person meeting presents an opportunity to take decisive action by establishing an intergovernmental negotiating committee to close the gaps in existing instruments and tackle plastic pollution, including marine plastic litter, with circular solutions across the life cycle of plastic products from source to sea. Success in that regard will probably be a key headline emerging from the fifth session;

(b) Delivering on previous commitments: there are unique windows of opportunity to pass critical thresholds for change resulting in real and rapid progress to address the triple threats of climate change, biodiversity loss and pollution. A strong set of resolutions, commitments and pledges are already in place. Advancing sustainable consumption and production, ecosystem restoration, mineral resource governance, sustainable infrastructure, nitrogen and gender equality are just a few examples of the issues covered by the hard-won resolutions adopted by the Environment Assembly at its fourth session. Now is the time for that ambition to be urgently converted into policies, legislation and investments in order to realize the commitments which together can deliver new opportunities for a greener economy;

(c) Ensuring a green and inclusive recovery where younger generations have a say and play an active role: the global response to the coronavirus disease (COVID-19) pandemic has exposed the issue of global vaccine inequity, but it has also shown that humanity is capable of rapid behavioural change, cooperation in the face of threats to its common future, and rapid innovation, funding and action. That same approach – acting with boldness, courage and accountability – needs to be reflected in the world’s pandemic recovery plans to preserve nature, the very foundation of sustainable development. The pandemic has deprived many young people of their imagined futures and put their lives on hold. Due consideration needs to be given to the impact of policy choices on the well-being of the next generation. In that regard, the Secretary-General’s report, “Our Common Agenda” represents a golden thread that should be woven across the proceedings of the fifth session of the Environment Assembly.

6. The success of the fifth session in catalysing action depends on collective leadership, creativity, determination and a willingness to deliver on the commitments already taken. A successful fifth session is bound to generate ripple effects across established cooperative frameworks such as multilateral environmental agreements. The following topics can intrinsically generate dividends across the response to the three planetary crises and can be used to guide the discussions at the in-person meeting of the fifth session.

## I. Nature for human and ecosystems health

### A. Action on marine plastic litter and plastic pollution can transform our throwaway culture to stimulate innovative, circular solutions across the life cycle of plastic products from source to sea

7. The scourge of plastic pollution is pervasive – from rivers, forests and mountains to the remote Arctic and the hadal depths, it poses risks to the economy, human health, wildlife, ecosystem services and climate stability.

8. Resolutions on marine litter and plastic pollution have been adopted at four successive sessions of the Environment Assembly. The fourth session provided a critical focus on marine plastic litter, but also on the broader issue of plastic pollution, triggering a dramatic shift in the global conversation on that issue in the two years since. The in-person meeting of the fifth session presents an opportunity to take decisive action.

9. The aim should be for systemic change, for solutions applied throughout the entire plastic value chain, for the rethinking of how plastics are produced, used and disposed of, with the double-dividend of not just delivering on a greener planet, but providing new employment opportunities. It requires ambitious, bold, and measurable action by Governments, civil society and the private sector at all levels.

10. At the in-person segment of the fifth session, representatives are invited to consider the following:

(a) **Call to action:** Process, funding and multilateral coordination set in motion to successfully implement the Environment Assembly resolutions that have been adopted at the last four sessions of the Environment Assembly in the period since 2014;

(b) **Opportunity in action:** The value of the global plastic market in 2020 has been estimated at around \$580 billion, while the monetary value of the losses of marine natural capital is estimated to be as high as \$2.5 trillion per year. Furthermore, if no action is taken greenhouse gas emissions from the production, recycling and incineration of plastics could account for 19 per cent of the Paris Agreement's total allowable emissions in 2040 to limit global warming to 1.5°C. Action on that front is a prudent investment in nature and climate, as well as a socioeconomic opportunity;

(c) **Guiding question:** What combination of incentive and control mechanisms are needed to reduce marine litter at source and achieve greater circularity across the life cycle of plastics?

### B. Investing in nature can limit the impact and emergence of zoonotic diseases and other health hazards

11. The health of humans, animals and the planet are intertwined. Our approach should be the same: weaving the expertise of each sector into a united effort.

12. The emergence of zoonotic diseases is driven by unsustainable human activities, including an increasingly intensive and industrialized food system, constant encroachment on natural habitat and the illegal and overconsumption of wildlife. The impact of these activities is exacerbated by climate change, which is also contributing to the spread of pathogens. At the same time, significantly fewer resources and less capacity have been invested in considering human, animal and environmental health in a synergistic manner.

13. The interdependence of human, animal, plant and ecosystem health was recognized by the Environment Assembly in its resolution 3/4 on environment and health, particularly in part III on biodiversity and part IV on antimicrobial resistance. The "One Health" approach is also included in the proposed medium-term strategy for the period 2022–2025 and the programme of work for the biennium 2022–2023, under the sections related to nature and chemical and pollution actions. Enhanced, proactive and sound conservation practices and the sustainable use of ecosystems and their biodiversity can contribute to the prevention of accelerated pathogen pathways while also addressing other health issues linked to pollution, unhealthy diets and food insecurity. Additional investment in science to better understand health risks in a holistic manner, including establishing scientific baselines and modelling and testing potential prevention measures, is also important. The urgent adoption of a "One Health" approach to collaboration across human, animal and environmental health expertise and policy is essential to address the root causes of zoonotic diseases and other health hazards.

14. To be successful, more inclusive, equitable and participatory spaces need to be created that recognize the varied knowledge, innovations, practices, institutions and values of scientists, government, industry and indigenous peoples. Increased investment is needed to address the consumption challenges that are driving up health risks, specifically tied to a global overreliance on antimicrobials that are polluting the air, water and soil and contributing to over 700,000 deaths annually. Shifting the way societies produce, consume and manage waste in livestock and food systems will also reduce health risks, address inequalities and contribute to securing a sustainable future on this planet.

15. At the in-person segment of the fifth session, representatives are invited to consider the following:

(a) **Call to action:** Deliver “One Health” policies, institutions and practices that improve human, animal and ecosystem health outcomes and reduce pandemic risks in 20 high-risk regions;

(b) **Opportunity in action:** Before the current pandemic, the World Bank and UNEP estimated that an annual investment of \$1.9 billion to \$3.4 billion in strengthened “One Health” systems would yield an annual global public benefit of over \$30 billion annually. The projected cumulative losses from the COVID-19 pandemic during 2020 and 2021 have been estimated at nearly \$8.5 trillion, with projected cumulative losses at \$22 trillion. There is clearly a strong and compelling economic incentive to invest in “One Health”;

(c) **Guiding question:** How can multi-ministerial, multidisciplinary collaboration be incentivized to achieve improved impacts for human, animal and environmental health?

## II. Nature for jobs, poverty eradication and economic prosperity

### Building back better from the pandemic by investing directly in nature

16. Nature underpins economies and societies on many levels. Ecosystem services worldwide are worth an estimated \$125 trillion annually, and they support industries (like farming, fishing, forestry and tourism) that employ 1.2 billion people. More than half of the world’s GDP is moderately or highly dependent on nature and its services. About 1.6 billion people rely directly on the world’s forests for food, income and livelihoods, while 3.3 billion people rely on fisheries and aquaculture. Healthy ecosystems also enhance humanity’s resilience to future shocks by strengthening food security, protecting humans from climate impacts, mitigating climate change and improving human health.

17. Ecosystem restoration – the changes needed to conserve and manage nature to enable it to thrive and recover – is an economic and social opportunity, not a cost.

18. A restoration economy – one that threads together the blue, green and biodiversity economies – means jobs and growth, it means harnessing nature-based and ecosystem solutions to ecological problems, and it means the recovery of biodiversity. It is an essential component for closing the financing gaps necessary to achieve the commitments made in the Rio conventions. With the right funding, imagination and political will, a restoration economy can be addressed through collaboration, by bringing in stakeholders from the health as well as trade, finance and labor communities.

19. The total annual international public financing for nature is significantly less than the subsidies that lead to its degradation, which is neither sustainable nor does it make economic sense. Showing the courage and logic necessary to assess and redefine agriculture and fossil fuel subsidies as well as COVID-19 recovery funds towards pro-poor, socially equitable outcomes and the restoration economy, rather than an outdated grey economy, will align the global economic recovery with the Paris Agreement, the Glasgow Pact and the post-2020 global biodiversity framework, kickstarting the required change.

20. Marginalized and vulnerable communities have been proven time and time again to be custodians of nature, while suffering disproportionately from biodiversity loss and environmental degradation. They provide the backbone of a socially just economic transition. As such, with Sustainable Development Goal 5 (Achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls) as an anchor, the essential and often overlooked role for indigenous peoples and local communities, regional authorities, and women and youth groups in scaling up effective action from the grassroots to the local, regional and national levels needs to be prioritized and meaningfully integrated in the design and implementation of nature-based solutions. Achieving gender and generational equality and the involvement of these important stakeholders as crucial co-leaders and allies will be essential to countries meeting existing commitments and scaling up action at various levels.

21. At the in-person segment of the fifth session, representatives are invited to consider the following:

(a) **Call to action:** At least 10 flagship initiatives – exemplar, scalable restoration projects with high socioecological impact – are financed and launched in 2022. These flagship initiatives should comprise commitments to significant restoration of priority ecosystems, including freshwater, marine and coastal ecosystems, using fully integrated approaches that engage all stakeholders, including those from communities and the private sector to government and non-governmental organizations. These initiatives should support the achievement of the targets in the post-2020 global biodiversity framework, once agreement has been reached thereon;

(b) **Opportunity in action:** Together, the business opportunities associated with transforming our food, land and ocean-use-systems could generate almost \$3.6 trillion of additional revenue or cost savings by 2030, while creating 191 million new jobs. The emerging flagship initiatives of the United Nations Decade on Ecosystem Restoration provide a tangible example of a bold new approach, as demonstrated by the Great Green Wall for the Sahara and the Sahel Initiative. That initiative is on its way to meeting its restoration targets, providing food security for some 20 million people, creating around 10 million jobs and sequestering approximately 250 million tons of carbon in the process;

(c) **Guiding question:** What are some of the barriers/opportunities you see in your own region with regard to supporting the recovery of nature as a basis for the recovery and resilience of people and economies?

### III. Nature for climate

#### Action to match commitments regarding nature-based solutions and biodiversity

22. Nature plays a central role in regulating the climate and in contributing to the resilience of human society to climate impacts. Currently, the degradation of nature, caused in part by climate change, threatens to undermine that role. However, by working with nature in protecting, managing and restoring natural and modified ecosystems we can strengthen its role in climate adaptation and mitigation. Moreover, these nature-based solutions will deliver additional benefits, including for biodiversity, human health and jobs.

23. The high social and environmental integrity of nature-based solutions is of paramount importance. Such solutions need to be accompanied by strong safeguards that are rigorously implemented in a transparent fashion. More than 10 years of implementation of reducing emissions from deforestation and forest degradation and the role of conservation, sustainable management of forests and enhancement of forest carbon stocks in developing countries (REDD+) under the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change have shown the importance of placing people and human rights at the heart of nature-based solutions. In particular, the free, prior and informed consent of indigenous peoples and local communities is essential. Without such safeguards, fairness and justice cannot be guaranteed and the sustainability of solutions will be undermined. The REDD+ experience also informs a critical review of nature-based solutions assessed through the single lens of carbon benefits. In certain cases, this has led to tunnel vision on forests, discounting their sacred, social, pharmaceutical and regulating services, among others. While acknowledging their role in providing climate solutions, it is of critical importance that all ecosystems also be seen through the lens of the people that protect, use and benefit from them. In that sense, poverty as a driver of ecosystem degradation and loss needs to be given centre stage in responses that support a fair and just share of responsibility.

24. Nature-based solutions can make a major contribution to climate adaptation. The restoration of upland forests and watersheds could save water utilities in the world's 534 largest cities an estimated \$890 million each year and is critical to regulating water flows and managing the more extreme floods we will experience in the future. Restoring mangrove forests that offer protection from rising seas and storm surges is two to five times cheaper than building engineered structures, as well as improving water quality and local fisheries.

25. With regard to climate mitigation, nature-based solutions implemented across all ecosystems can deliver emission reductions and removals of at least 5 gigatons (Gt) per year by 2030. By 2050 this could rise to at least 10 Gt per year, representing a significant proportion of the total mitigation needed. The contribution from nature-based solutions must be accompanied by a massive and rapid decarbonization of our economies. With over 152 countries having embedded net-zero targets in their

nationally determined contributions, this dual approach is crucial, partly because decarbonization alone will not allow us to limit global average temperature rise to 1.5°C, but also because without decarbonization the consequent temperature rise will further degrade ecosystems, thereby undermining their mitigation potential and resilience.

26. Nature-based solutions for adaptation and those for mitigation are mutually supportive as well as providing other social and environmental benefits. At its fifth session, the Environment Assembly can play a key role in the process of building consensus on the safeguards that must accompany the use of nature-based solutions for both adaptation and mitigation and on the means for ensuring that the necessary public and private finance is made available to support those solutions.

27. At the in-person segment of the fifth session, representatives are invited to consider the following:

(a) **Call to action:** Fully harness the power of nature to tackle multiple crises (climate change, biodiversity loss and social inequity) through nationally determined contributions, adaptation plans and scaling up public and private investments by 2025 and beyond;

(b) **Opportunity in action:** Protecting, managing and restoring forests and other ecosystems could lift one billion people out of poverty and create 80 million green jobs, creating resilience and closing up to one third of the emissions gap;

(c) **Guiding questions:** How can safeguards and other instruments ensure a high quality and adequate volume of pro-poor investment for nature-based solutions, while fully respecting the rights of indigenous peoples and local communities and delivering on multiple ecological services?

## IV. Nature for sustainable food systems

### Reducing agriculture's impact on nature: nourished people on a thriving planet

28. Collective action must be taken to transform agriculture and food systems, as a significant driver of biodiversity loss, pollution and greenhouse gas emissions. Actions to achieve such a transformation should include the establishment of food production systems that are based on ecosystem-friendly practices, taking full account of planetary resource boundaries, food and nutrition, security and livelihoods, and encouraging contextually relevant sustainable consumption patterns, which may include dietary changes, and behaviour that leads to zero food waste. At the same time, these actions should be aimed at conserving and enhancing the use of biodiversity in agricultural and other managed ecosystems; divesting from policies and practices that erode ecosystem services and emit pollutants; rehabilitating degraded lands and seas to halt incentives to convert more habitat; and working along the full supply chain of global commodities to eliminate environmentally harmful practices.

29. The last 18 months have seen the United Nations Food Systems Summit engage hundreds of thousands of people from around the world, and across all constituencies, to accelerate action to transform global food systems in pursuit of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. The 2030 Agenda recognizes that the international community can no longer look at food, livelihoods and the management of natural resources in silos. From ending poverty and hunger to responding to climate change and sustaining natural resources, food and agriculture lie at the very heart of achieving the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development.

30. In the context of the Decade of Action for Sustainable Development, the Food Systems Summit was a catalyst for global public mobilization and drew commitments from diverse stakeholders, including Heads of State and Governments; other constituency leaders, including from the United Nations system; scientists; farmers; indigenous people and local communities; and the private sector; to turn momentum from the Summit into action. Over 100 national food systems pathways were submitted by countries ahead of the Food Systems Summit, all of which included environmental impacts from current food systems as key concerns.

31. The international community stands at a crossroads. It is crucial to reflect on the cooperation and choices needed to tackle the systemic risks and challenges across food and agricultural systems and how societies can be reshaped as part of a sustainable and resilient recovery from the pandemic. The recent report by UNEP, the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) and the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO) on direct support to food producers, *A multi-billion-dollar opportunity: Repurposing agricultural support to transform food systems*, states that \$470 billion annually could be redirected into less polluting, more nature-friendly farming.

32. At the in-person segment of the fifth session, representatives are invited to consider the following:

(a) **Call to action:** Commit to nature-positive food systems that actively contribute to the implementation of improved national food system pathways emanating from the Food Systems Summit; repurpose existing agricultural support to support nature-positive outcomes; achieve progress on the agreement with all stakeholders of the principles of nature-positive, net-zero agriculture and on the need for more sustainable and healthy diets – for healthy people and a healthy planet;

(b) **Opportunity in action:** The majority (87 per cent) of the \$540 billion of support to agricultural producers around the world either distorts prices or is harmful to nature and human health. Working with other United Nations entities, such as FAO and UNDP, UNEP can help in repurposing that support to transform food systems and achieve the Sustainable Development Goals;

(c) **Guiding question:** How can countries aim to move towards repurposing environmentally harmful subsidies to support regenerative nature-positive agriculture and equitable livelihoods? What are the barriers to achieving that and how could those barriers be overcome?

## V. Expected outcomes: breaking through boundaries

33. At the in-person segment of the fifth session, representatives of Member States and other high-level representatives of industry and civil society are invited to address the following overarching questions:

(a) **Bolder leadership with new alliances:** The success of the fifth session of the Environment Assembly depends on the international community making a new commitment to working through shared global challenges with open hearts and open minds. World leaders will be judged on the action they take collectively, or indeed the opportunity they squander. How can delivery on the many commitments already in play be achieved? What other parts of government need to be harnessed to sustain those efforts and who else should be included in those efforts? What shifts in leadership and governance are required for citizens to be empowered to effect change?

(b) **A new paradigm of accountability and action:** Experience has shown that policies do not always lead to action. What specific new measures have Governments taken since the online meeting of the fifth session and what new actions are planned to follow the in-person meeting? At the in-person meeting of the fifth session, positive examples will be celebrated of effective steps taken to address the triple threat of climate change, biodiversity loss and pollution with a view to scaling up what works in pursuit of the achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals;

(c) **Resources required for success:** Resolutions and commitments are strong mechanisms to raise awareness around emerging issues, but they need funding to transform words into action. What financial support will be brought to the table to support local, national and multilateral action so that public finance is realigned with nature's needs?

(d) **The role of UNEP:** What role should UNEP and the United Nations system play in supporting action in the light of the UNEP medium-term strategy for the period 2022–2025 and programme of work and budget for the biennium 2022–2023?

(e) **Considering the impact on future generations and realizing our common agenda:** The in-person meeting of the fifth session of the Environment Assembly coincides with the fiftieth anniversary of the United Nations Conference on the Human Environment, “Stockholm+50”, and the fiftieth anniversary of the establishment of UNEP, “UNEP@50”. These landmark anniversaries provide a springboard for redesigning governance to better consider the health and well-being of future generations of humankind and building on the 12 recommendations set out in the Secretary-General's report, “Our Common Agenda”. How can we improve global cooperation and reinvigorate inclusive, networked and effective multilateralism?