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Ambassador and Head of the Delegation of the European Commission to Singapore

Opening remarks

*Check Against Delivery
Seul le texte prononcé fait foi
Es gilt das gesprochene Wort*

**Partners' Forum
ASEAN Conference on Biodiversity 2009
21 OCTOBER 2009, Singapore**

Ms. Grace Fu, Senior Minister of State for National Development and Education, Singapore

H.E. Dato' Misran Karmain, Deputy Secretary-General, ASEAN

Mr. Rodrigo U. Fuentes, Executive Director, ASEAN Centre for Biodiversity

Dr. Aaron Bernstein (Keynote address), Faculty Member at Harvard Medical School

Excellencies,

Distinguished guests,

Ladies and gentlemen,

It is with great pleasure that I join you here today in the launching of the ASEAN Conference on Biodiversity. I would like to extend the European Commission's sincere congratulations and thanks to the government of Singapore and to the ASEAN Centre of Biodiversity for organizing this important Conference.

Biodiversity is vitally important for all human beings. At least 40% of the world's economy and 80% of the needs of the poor are derived from biological resources. Biodiversity benefits people through more than just its contribution to material welfare and livelihoods. Biodiversity contributes to security, resilience – inter alia – against climate change , social relations, health, and freedom of choices and actions. We are stewards of a wonderful natural legacy that we need to pass on intact to future

generations. But, sadly, biodiversity loss continues at alarming rates, with serious potential consequences for sustainable livelihoods and sustainable economic growth.

As we all well know, South East Asia is one of the Earth's most important biodiversity hotspots. The true value of all this biological diversity defies conventional methods of quantification. With specific regard to the poor, half a billion poor people in the ASEAN region depend on natural resources as their primary source of income.

Annually, ASEAN loses 1% of its forest cover, a percentage four times higher than the world average. Deforestation represents an important source of CO₂ emissions and there are more than 150 endangered species in the Philippines alone. The underlying causes of biological diversity loss include extensive deforestation and habitat loss; widespread conversion of land for agriculture; population growth; introduction of invasive species and trafficking in animals.

Biodiversity conservation is increasingly recognized by South-East Asian governments and the world community as extremely important for human development, and thus, governments of the countries in the region have taken numerous individual and national measures to preserve their biodiversity resources. There are, however, a number of issues that can more effectively be

addressed through actions at regional level. This is why the ASEAN nations decided to create the ASEAN Centre for Biodiversity, or ACB, which is the main institution behind the organization of the Conference which we are launching today. The European Commission, acknowledging the importance of establishing this regional centre of excellence, signed a Financing Agreement with the ASEAN Secretariat in April 2005 granting a contribution of €6 million to support the creation of the ACB.

The results of the ACB are impressive. The ACB has enhanced policy collaboration on biodiversity in the ASEAN region to strengthen the institutional capacity on regional and global biodiversity issues and boosted public awareness of biodiversity values and conservation needs. I would like to take this opportunity to thank the many people who have played a role in achieving these results. In particular let me single out Mr Rod Fuentes, who, in his role as ACB Director, together with his staff, has worked hard for these outcomes.

Of course, our assistance to the ACB is not an isolated initiative. The EU has been involved in efforts to protect the natural heritage in South East Asia for the past 20 years, through a variety of programmes and projects in areas such as promotion of community-based forest management; strengthening protected areas policies and legislation; biodiversity research; agricultural diversification; marine conservation and many more.

Over the last 25 years, together, the EU countries have built up a vast network of over 26,000 protected areas covering all the EU Member States and a total area of around 850.000 km², representing more than 20% of total EU territory. This vast array of sites, known as the Natura 2000 Network - the largest coherent network of protected areas in the world, shows the importance that EU citizens attach to biodiversity.

As a global leader on environmental issues, and in recognition of its commitment to contribute to a significant reduction in the worldwide rate of biodiversity loss by 2010, the EU has a special responsibility towards the preservation of biodiversity and ecosystem services in its development cooperation. In 2006, the EC, through its communication on 'Halting the loss of biodiversity by 2010—and beyond' reaffirmed the need to enhance funding earmarked for biodiversity and to strengthen measures to mainstream biodiversity in development assistance. A EU Biodiversity Action Plan accompanied this Communication.

The EU acknowledged that, while targeted measures under EU nature legislation have proven capable of reversing the declining trends of species and habitats of EU conservation concern, we are unlikely to meet our target to halt biodiversity loss in the EU by 2010.

But even if the biodiversity targets are missed, this must not mean that we should give up or slow our efforts. Quite the opposite: by stepping up our efforts we can replicate the successes we have already achieved on a larger scale. Political leaders have to make

"unprecedented efforts" to significantly reduce current rates of global biodiversity loss by 2010, and bring us as close to the 2010 target as possible.

The EU continues to place international biodiversity high on its agenda and aims to develop in between now and the spring 2010 its own key strategic principles regarding the objectives to attain beyond 2010. This will be the one of the EU's contributions to the international debate which should aim at agreeing upon the future Strategic Plan of the Convention on Biological Diversity and a vision for biodiversity beyond 2010.

Work is underway both on EU and on global level towards a vision and target, which will address biodiversity and ecosystems services and fully consider the climate change biodiversity linkage.

Ladies and gentlemen,

The Conference that we are launching today will focus its attention on three main themes, the selection of which, I believe, reflect extraordinarily well the current global and regional priorities on biodiversity conservation: These themes are:

Biodiversity and Climate Change;

Access to Genetic Resources and Economics of Biodiversity.

Let me share with you why we do believe, in the EU, that these themes are so important, and what we are doing about them.

Climate change represents one of the greatest environmental, social and economic threats facing the planet. The European Union is committed to working constructively for a global agreement to control climate change, and is leading the way by taking ambitious action on its own. Climate change impacts on biodiversity. It is one of the causes of biodiversity loss and interacts and often exacerbates other pressures. On the other hand Biodiversity and ecosystem services play a fundamental role to mitigate climate change and to adapt to its effects. Coral reefs and mangroves provide natural shoreline protection from storm and flooding. Marine and terrestrial ecosystems currently absorb half of anthropogenic CO₂ emissions. This means climate change will accelerate further if biodiversity and ecosystems are not effectively protected.

Tropical deforestation is a major source of the greenhouse gas emissions that are causing global warming, so action on this is essential under the global climate agreement which the international community must conclude in Copenhagen, in December. The EC proposes that the future global climate agreement should aim to reduce the total forested area lost in the

tropics by at least half of current levels by 2020, and then to halt global forest cover loss completely by 2030 at the latest. To reward developing countries in their efforts to reduce emissions from deforestation, the Commission has suggested the creation of an international financing mechanism, the Global Forest Carbon Mechanism. This could become the pilot for "Global Ecosystem Carbon Mechanism(s)". Ecosystem-based approaches for adaptation and mitigation have the potential for multiple benefits. They can contribute to biodiversity conservation, combating climate change and poverty reduction.

Access to Genetic Resources will also be a priority topic during the ASEAN Conference of Biodiversity that we are launching today. As you all know, one of the key objectives of the Convention of Biodiversity is the sharing of the benefits derived from the use of genetic resources in a fair and equitable way. Benefit sharing is inextricably linked to appropriate access to genetic resources, the transfer of relevant technologies, information exchange, and scientific co-operation. The issue of access and benefit-sharing has been the subject of the European Commission Communication on how to implement the Bonn Guidelines. A network for access to genetic resources and benefit sharing has also been established in Europe, to raise awareness of users' obligations under the Convention of Biodiversity.

Economics of Biodiversity is the Conference's third theme. .

The European Commission together with Germany and with the support of several other partners have jointly initiated this global study, which is named 'The Economics of Ecosystems and Biodiversity'. The study is evaluating the costs of the loss of biodiversity and the associated decline in ecosystem services worldwide, and comparing them with the costs of effective conservation and sustainable use. The final results will be presented at the Conference of Parties of the Convention of Biodiversity, in 2010.

Ladies and gentlemen,

The South East Asia region has to deal with a number of emerging issues closely related to biodiversity which are making headlines in the world media: climate change, the balance between bio-fuels and food security, the spread of new diseases and many more. These are matters of more than ordinary importance nowadays, and biodiversity has a role in all of them. We shall also not forget other ongoing processes related to biodiversity that, although not subject to that same massive media coverage, are very important as well, such as the promising policies in many South East Asian nations regarding community-based natural resources management, the boom in eco-tourism, the issue of extraction of non-timber forest products, or the challenge of social and environment-friendly sustainable mining.

You are our key partners in the process of developing and shaping policy and the Conference that we are launching today gives us a chance to focus political attention on the critical issue of protecting nature in South East Asia.

Thank you all for participating. I wish you a very successful and enjoyable conference.