



October 1, 2019

Mr. Alexander Juras  
Chief, Civil Society Unit

Mr. Isaiah Otieno  
Civil Society Support Officer

UN Environment  
Governance Affairs Office  
Civil Society Unit  
UN Environment (UNEP)  
P.O. Box 30552 – 00100  
Nairobi, Kenya

Via email

RE: Feedback on proposed themes for UNEA 5

Dear Mr. Juras and Mr. Otieno and UN Environment Colleagues:

Brighter Green appreciates the UNEP Civil Society Unit's invitation to provide input to the proposed themes for UNEA 5. We are pleased to submit our thoughts and analysis in this letter. But first, I would like to take the opportunity to thank you for traveling to the Africa Animal Welfare Conference in Addis Ababa in early September. Your elucidation of UNEA and the opportunities for and experience of civil society participation in the Assembly and UNEP more broadly was extremely helpful. As a board member in the U.S. of the Africa Network for Animal Welfare, I want to express my sincere appreciation for your time and your important role in helping make the conference a success and, we hope and expect, advancing animal welfare and environmental protection across Africa and indeed the world.

Now, to our feedback on the UNEA 5 themes. Of the three existing themes, we would most strongly support the first of those proposed, Nature-based Solutions for a Clean Environment and Sustainable Development. We see this theme as providing an over-arching theory of change that would provide: (1) room for considerable specificity about interventions that have worked; (2) the space to enhance ambition to "scale" these and other policy and program innovations; and (3) the context to explore in-depth the values, approaches and commitments that are essential to creating the planet we want and urgently need. Brighter Green has just participated in a number of Climate Week events at and after the UN Climate Action Summit, including the nature-based solutions thematic group on September 22.

Overall, we find the “nature based” framework brings together effectively the climate change, biodiversity, and sustainable development agendas. However, we do have concerns that “nature-based solutions” can mask some of the key drivers of both climate change and biodiversity loss, including large-scale animal agriculture and feed production (e.g., in the Amazon region). It can also promote an overly instrumental view of nature, i.e., it’s good to protect natural systems for the economy, human survival and carbon sequestration. But what about the intrinsic value of nature and the rights of other species to exist on Earth, whether they are useful to human endeavors or not?

I can imagine one of my mentors, Prof. Wangari Maathai, asking that same question and also joining me in urging that UNEA 5, whatever theme it adopts, does not promote so-called “win-win” solutions that, with critical examination, may be anything but where ecosystems and other species are concerned. We have strong concerns about corporate pledges going unmet (like those in the New York Declaration on Forests), private sector “greenwashing” and the continuation of business as usual which, we know, and Greta Thunberg and others have reminded us, are fantasies.

We would like to see UNEA 5 be a place for evidence-based action. We would also like to see it be acceleration point – even a crucible for –the bold policies and practices required in the “super decade” of 2021-2030 if global goals for the climate, biodiversity and sustainable development are to be met. What we would suggest, therefore, is that the nature-based solutions theme be adopted but be made stronger, more urgent, and also more grounded, by linking it with a term like “ambition”, “commitment”, or even something like “planetary survival.” This is particularly relevant since UNEA 5 will be taking place soon after the conclusion of the “super year” of 2020 and it will be crucial to hold accountable governments, the private sector, civil society, and others for the actions they’ve taken and the commitments they’ve made (or not), including, to finance.

Here I would like to invoke Wangari again. She would have been 80 years old on April 1, 2020 and surely would have been marching with the youth climate activists in recent weeks as well as advocating forcefully and gracefully at the UN in both New York and Nairobi. These words from Wangari capture the ethical imperative of action and the urgency and persistence that’s required:

“Those of us who witness the degraded state of the environment and the suffering that comes with it cannot afford to be complacent. We continue to be restless. If we really carry the burden, we are driven to action. We cannot tire or give up. We owe it to the present and future generations of all species to rise up and walk!”

We fully agree and conclude our input by asking: Could UNEA 5 incorporate the substance of this message in its overarching theme?

Thank you, too, for your work for all current and future generations, and your receptivity to this feedback. Please let us know if Brighter Green can help in other ways to the UNEA 5 theme development process or other ongoing initiatives of the Unit.

With good wishes from New York City on an unseasonably warm, albeit beautiful, day.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in dark ink, appearing to read "Mia MacDonald", with a horizontal line underneath.

Mia MacDonald  
Executive Director