

Meeting of the Bureau of the Environment Assembly
19 March 2020
17:00 – 18:30 (GMT +3 – Nairobi time)
UNEP Executive Office Boardroom
United Nations Office at Nairobi, Gigiri

Agenda Item 2 : Synergies between the 2020 “super year for nature” and UNEA-5

This note serves as a background document for consideration under Agenda item 2: Synergies between the 2020 “super year for nature” and the fifth session of the UN Environment Assembly.

The Bureau will be invited to provide further guidance on how to maximise the synergies between the relevant events and milestones in 2020 and UNEA-5.

Synergies between the 2020 “super year for nature” and UNEA-5

“I see 2020 as a year when we have the potential to fundamentally re-shape our relationship with nature.” – Inger Anderson, UNEP Executive Director

Humanity’s fundamental dependencies on nature have been recognized in numerous UN and scientific assessments, and in the UN 2030 Agenda. Nature is critical to the achievement of the 14 of the 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Over half of the world’s GDP is moderately/highly dependent on nature, such as through pollination, water quality, and natural materials. This dependency is also increasingly recognized by the business community.

Though not officially designated as such, the 2020 is widely referred as a “Super Year” for nature. Urgent, transformative and sustained action is needed over the next 10 years to address the systemic (economic, regulatory and social) threats to nature – systemic challenges which in turn enable the five drivers of biodiversity loss (changes in land and sea use; direct exploitation of organisms; climate change; pollution; and invasion of alien species). Proactively ‘improving the system’ to create better nature and biodiversity outcomes is paramount if we are to achieve the Sustainable Development Goals.

Culminating with the 5th Session of the UN Environment Assembly (UNEA-5) in February 2021, the significant number of nature-focused events convened by the UN system and partners throughout 2020 provides a critical opportunity to further leverage the necessary transformative action for sustainable development. Among others, the UN Ocean Conference in Portugal and the 4th Session of the Intergovernmental Conference on Marine Biodiversity in Areas Beyond National Jurisdiction in New York (postponed due to COVID 19), the Congress of the International Union for Nature Conservation in Marseille, the UN Summit on Biodiversity in New York, the meeting of the Parties of the Biodiversity Convention in China, the Climate Adaptation Summit in the Netherlands, and the meeting of Parties of the Climate Change Convention in the United Kingdom are all expected to set new levels of ambition and means of implementation for a Decade of Action to implement the Sustainable Development Goals

Under the theme “Strengthening Actions for Nature to Achieve the Sustainable Development Goals”, UNEA 5 will provide a unique opportunity to strategically leverage nature-focused commitments that will underpin the Decade of Action on the SDGs, the UN Decade on Ecosystem Restoration, the Decade of Ocean Science for Sustainable Development, and the UN Food Systems Summit in 2021.

The respective events during the 2020 super year leading up to UNEA 5 should collectively generate new broad political commitments to nature, underpinned by measurable and timebound targets designed to reverse the negative trends on biodiversity loss. The synergistic outcomes of these respective events will build momentum and culminate towards an impactful session of UNEA 5 where governments and stakeholders will have the opportunity to:

- commit to actions that will achieve a world in which humanity lives in harmony with nature, by conserving and sustainably using the planet’s marine, freshwater and terrestrial resources, reversing the trends of environmental degradation, to promoting ecological resilience, and reducing disaster risk.
- commit to tackle the key threats driving the decline of nature and amend sectoral and cross-sectoral policies, plans and programmes at all levels, to achieve the transformational change required across societies and economies.
- identify and mobilize targeted investments in nature-based solutions to cost-effectively address climate change, reduce pollution and protect water resources, reduce erosion and coastal inundation, and mitigate disasters, all while supporting nature conservation, restoration and sustainable use.

- fundamentally re-shape their relationship with nature, including their production and consumption patterns, as a pre-condition for Sustainable Development.

At UNEA 5, the commitments pertaining to nature that were generated during the 2020 Super Year will need to be reaffirmed and consolidated, and new actions to drive implementation conceptualized, with a view to targeting both the five direct drivers of biodiversity loss, as well as to transform the indirect drivers, i.e. the structural and systemic challenges linked to underlying economic, demographic, governance, technological and cultural issues. The 2020 super year and UNEA 5 combined present a unique opportunity to advance transformative action across four broad themes:

- **Accounting for Nature:** Reworking our economies to ensure that nature is comprehensively integrated in financial and political decision-making – by modifying the dominant economic metrics, shifting away from a sole reliance on GDP for national economic planning and solely financial profit and loss accounts for businesses, can internalize the value of the ecosystem services which is critical to creating long term jobs while achieving the Sustainable Development Goals;
- **Infrastructure for Nature:** Improving infrastructure planning and construction to meet development needs while protecting nature and maintaining ecological resilience – the planning, construction and revitalization of physical infrastructure associated with economic development should be fully integrated with holistic ecosystem management schemes, in support of ecological connectivity, environmental flow of water resources, and the prevention of pollution. Infrastructure planning should incorporate life-cycle analysis and nature-based solutions wherever possible, and be approved only after regulatory and high quality environmental impact assessments;
- **Food System for Nature:** Transforming agriculture and food systems, as the largest driver of biodiversity loss – this includes improving productivity through nature-friendly practices, taking full account of food systems, food and nutrition security and livelihoods, while at the same time conserving and enhancing the use of biodiversity in agricultural and other managed ecosystems, divesting from policies and practices that erode nature 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;
- **Conservation and Sustainable Use of Nature on Land and in Oceans:** (a) Investing in better stewardship of remaining natural areas and services from nature; and (b) Restoring degraded natural areas and productive land and seascapes – it is imperative that efforts and investments, using both public and private capital, are scaled up significantly to advance finance and other measures aimed at conserving and sustainably using nature. Such measures should, amongst other things: support nature-based solutions for mitigating and adapting to climate change; improve reporting and accountability frameworks for nature-based solutions such as carbon offset schemes; and redirect private capital from harmful agricultural and fisheries practices towards sustainable production of food and commodities and towards the restoration of ecosystems.

In summary, the 2020 super year will culminate in UNEA 5 as a ‘conversation shifting’ platform, bringing science to the policy, politics and economics of nature. Efforts throughout the 2020 super year and at UNEA 5 should aggressively pursue increased levels of ambition in line with current evidence and matched with commitments for action and resources. It will require leadership across all sectors.