



Press Release

Mediterranean forests under threat due to climate change

Greece, April 2008 - Rapid and abrupt land-use changes, mainly due to development pressures and urban sprawl, habitat fragmentation due to transport infrastructures, resource overexploitation and pollution, are few of the main factors impacting upon Mediterranean forests and driving their degradation. Once climate change is added upon those, accompanied by heat-waves, drought and overall temperature rises, the resilience and adaptation capacity of forests is exhausted.

The above is included among the many conclusions of the international workshop entitled "Adaptation to Climate Change in Mediterranean Forest Conservation and Management" and co-organized by WWF and IUCN in Athens, Greece, between April 14-17/04/2008.

Forests figure prominently among the most important ecosystems of the Mediterranean, so much due to the high biodiversity they are hosting, as much as due to the environmental services they are providing. Soil stabilization and reduced soil erosion, improved catchment of surface waters and enrichment of underground reservoirs, stabilization of urban microclimates, production of biomass and direct economic gains through improved tourism options, are only a few of the latter.

Forest wildfires are among the most direct and immediate consequence of climate change upon Mediterranean forests. Climate change impacts, such as extended periods of high temperatures, the extreme meteorological phenomena (heat waves and strong winds), combined with land uses changes encourage the increase of frequency, intensity and extent of fires. The described conditions are mainly observed in the northern areas of Mediterranean (Portugal, Greece, and Spain). If these conditions are extended in the southern areas, the consequences regarding the forest ecosystems of the entire Mediterranean basin will be dramatic.

*Even though the lack of scientific data often hinders decision-making with regard to forest protection activities against climate change, the single most important barrier still remains the lack of political understanding of the problem and will to deal with it, states **Pedro Regato, representative of IUCN**. He adds, *Such a will would also include the development of a structure of motives to land users and owners, for the adaptation of their practices.**

The most vulnerable forest ecosystems in Greece are those which are in the limits of their natural spread. The forests of the islands and the coasts, as well as the mountainous forests of Southern Greece, such as Taygetos and Parnonas, constitute some severely threatened such ecosystems. Equally, forests of Northern Greece are also threatened by changing climate conditions, as sadly demonstrated during the last summer.

Regarding the protection of Greek forests, an overall new forest protection approach is essential. This must be based in three fundamental axes: (i) forest management articulates at the landscape level, encompassing better coordination of services sharing competence, (ii) improvement in the role and capacity of the forest service and material support to applied forest research, and (iii) development of an integrated nature protection system through a network of functional protected areas, ensuring the conservation of the most valuable forest habitats.

In what regards fire-management and suppression policies, it is deemed essential to accentuate measures for the proper management of forests and the implementation of fire prevention measures. In the field of forest fire suppression, a culture of continuous training and development of know-how, the formation of modern, equipped and specialized forest fire-fighting units within the Fire Brigade and the effective co-ordination between forest services, scientific institutions and fire-fighting units is essential. It is worth mentioning that WWF Greece is completing an overall proposal regarding the necessary improvements to the forest protection system in Greece. The conclusions of this workshop will also feed into this process to be concluded soon after the orthodox Easter.

*In the face of climate change, the forests of our country are becoming all the more vulnerable and important. Side-by-side with efforts to counter the root causes of climate change it is imperative that we take immediate measures to face this reality and conserve our forest wealth. WWF Greece consistently labours to this direction, states **Demetres Karavellas, CEO of WWF Greece**.*

Notes to editors:

The international workshop "Adaptation to Climate Change in Mediterranean Forest Conservation and Management" took place within the framework of WWF Greece program "Forests for the future», which constitutes an effort to counter the root cause of forest degradation in the country. The program commenced in January 2008 and is financially supported by the Institutions of I. Latsis, A. G. Leventis and Bodosakis, as well as by the organization's individual supporters.

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About IUCN

IUCN, the International Union for Conservation of Nature, helps the world find pragmatic solutions to our most pressing environment and development challenges by supporting scientific research; managing field projects all over the world; and bringing governments, NGOs, the UN, international conventions and companies together to develop policy, laws and best practice.

IUCN is the world's oldest and largest global environmental network. IUCN is a democratic union with more than 1,000 government and NGO member organizations, and some 10,000 volunteer scientists in more than 150 countries. IUCN's work is supported by 1,100 professional staff in 62 countries and hundreds of partners in public, NGO and private sectors around the world.

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