



UN Environment Assembly 5.2

Nature at the Heart of Sustainable Development: A contribution to the High-Level Segment of the resumed session of the 5th UN Environment Assembly





Introduction

This note is designed to assist Member States and other high-level representatives from industry and civil society, in their preparations for the High-Level Segment planned for the resumed meeting of UNEA-5, to be held in Nairobi, Kenya, on 28 February–2 March 2022 under the theme “Strengthening Actions for Nature to Achieve the Sustainable Development Goals”.¹

Ours is a connected planet. Health, food, economies, and the wellbeing 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 percent of the planet’s land surface, 85 percent of its wetlands, and 66 percent of its oceans¹ – and in doing so undermined the very foundations of our societies

¹ This note has been structured based on the four proposed action areas highlighted in the joint meeting of the Bureau of the UN Environment Assembly and the Committee of Permanent Representatives, held 9-10 June 2020.

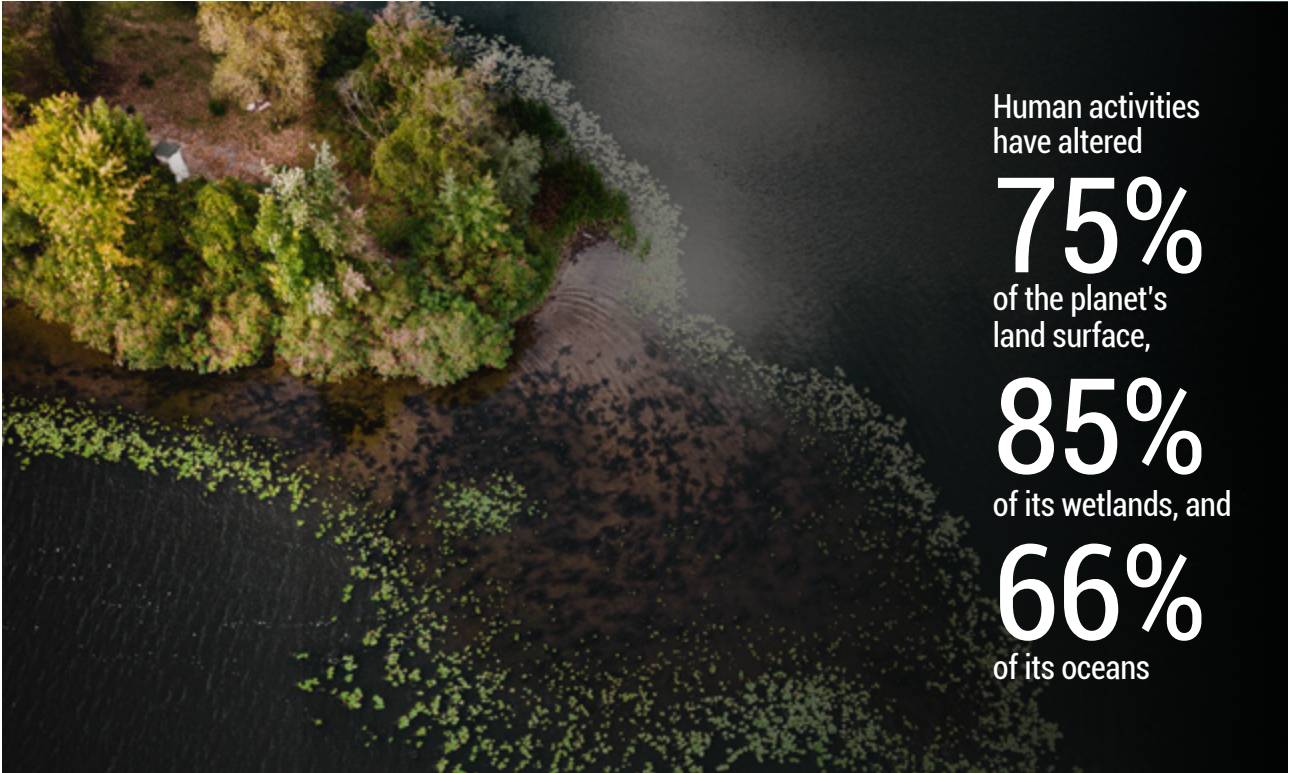


Photo: Unsplash/Ivan Bandura

and economies. Based on the current NDC commitments of Member States, the world is on a pathway to 2.7 degrees of heating. With the endorsement of the recent Glasgow Climate Pact, the world strengthened its resolve to pursue efforts to limit temperature increase to 1.5 degrees – recognizing, therefore, that humanity’s impact and dependency on nature gives us the best chance of not just surviving – but thriving – on this delicate and beautiful planet.

The Rio Declarationⁱⁱ and associated 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Developmentⁱⁱⁱ seek to end poverty, conserve biodiversity, combat climate change and improve livelihoods for everyone, everywhere. These objectives, encapsulated in 17 Sustainable Development Goals^{iv} (SDGs) are unlikely to be met unless transformational changes occur in the way we use, value and interact with nature.

Noting that the Kunming Declaration^v will be formally submitted to UNEA 5.2, in addition, 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, youth, and the private sector, including the UN Decade on Ecosystem Restoration² and the Leaders’ Pledge for Nature, bringing together over 90 Member States to raise 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 will not be sufficient until they turn into investment and action.

² The UN Decade on Ecosystem Restoration, co-led by UNEP and FAO, has the aim of ‘prevent, halt and reverse the degradation of ecosystems worldwide’.

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UN Environment Assembly provides the opportunity to bridge, build on and catalyze impact in relation to multilateral environmental efforts, including on biodiversity climate and food systems and pollution for both people and planet, and also marks the start of a period of reflection and celebration for the 50th anniversary of the creation of UNEP.

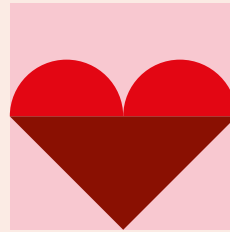
This Fifth Session of the UN Environment Assembly^{vi} provides the opportunity to bridge, build on and catalyze impact in relation to multilateral environmental efforts including on biodiversity^{vii} climate^{viii} and food systems^{ix} and pollution^{x,xi,xii} for both people and planet and also marks the start of a period of reflection and celebration for the 50th anniversary of the creation of UNEP. In preparation for the high-level segment that will take place at UNEA, Member States and other high-level representatives from industry and civil society might wish to consider the following:

- **The world will be watching to see what progress is made on marine litter and plastics:** UNEA 5.2 presents an opportunity to take decisive action by establishing an Intergovernmental Negotiating Committee (INC) to close the gaps in existing instruments and tackle plastic pollution, including marine plastic litter, with circular solutions across the lifecycle of plastic products from source to sea. Success on this agenda will likely be a key headline emerging from UNEA 5.2.
- **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 hard-won resolutions adopted at UNEA 4. Now is the time for this ambition to be urgently converted into policies, legislation and investments to realise these commitments which together can deliver new opportunities for a greener economy.
- **Ensuring a green and inclusive recovery where younger generations have a say and play an active role:** The global response to the pandemic has exposed the issues of global vaccine inequity, but it has also shown that humanity is also capable of rapid behavioural change, cooperation in the face of threats to its common future and rapid innovation, funding and action. This same approach of acting with boldness, courage, and accountability needs to be reflected in the world's COVID-19 recovery plans in a way to preserve nature, the very foundation for sustainable development. COVID-19 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 wellbeing of the next generation. In this regard, the Secretary-General's report *Our Common Agenda* is a golden thread that should be woven across this UNEA.

The success of UNEA-5.2, in catalyzing action, depends on collective leadership, creativity, determination and willingness to deliver on the commitments already taken. A successful UNEA is bound to generate ripple effects across established cooperative frameworks such as multilateral environmental agreements and efforts. The following topics intrinsically generate dividends across the three planetary crises and can guide the discussions at this meeting.



Photo: Unsplash/ Barkah Wibowo



1. Nature for Human and Ecosystems Health

1.1 Action on marine plastic litter and plastic pollution can transform our throw-away culture to stimulate innovative, circular solutions across the life cycle of plastic products from source to sea

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

Four successive UNEA resolutions^{xiii} have been agreed by governments on marine litter and plastic pollution. UNEA-4 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 this issue in the two years since. UNEA 5.2 presents an opportunity to establish an Intergovernmental Negotiating Committee (INC)

to close the gaps in existing instruments and tackle plastic pollution, including marine plastic litter, with circular solutions across the lifecycle of plastic products from source to sea.

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 new employment opportunities. It requires ambitious, bold, and measurable action by governments, civil society, and the private sector at all levels.



A CALL TO ACTION:

Process, funding and multilateral coordination set in motion to successfully implement UNEA resolutions agreed and in place since 2014.



THE OPPORTUNITY IN ACTION:

The global plastic market in 2020 has been estimated at around \$US 580 billion while the monetary value of losses of marine natural capital is estimated to be as high as \$US 2.5 trillion per year. Further, 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^{xiv}. Action on this front is a prudent investment in nature and climate, as well as a socio-economic opportunity.^{xv}



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?

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

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.

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 over-consumption of wildlife. All of this is exacerbated by climate change – which is contributing to the spread of pathogens. At the same time, significantly less has been invested in bringing together the aspects of human and animal health, with environmental health.

The interdependence of human, animal, plant and ecosystem health was recognized by UNEA-3 in its resolution 3/4 on environment and health, particularly

Before the current pandemic, the World Bank and the UN Environment Programme estimated that an annual investment of

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in sections III on biodiversity and IV on antimicrobial resistance^{xvi}. One Health is also part of the proposed Medium-Term Strategy (MTS) 2022-2025 and Programme of Work, under the sections related to nature and chemical and pollution actions. Enhanced, proactive and sound conservation practices, and sustainable use of ecosystems and their biodiversity can contribute to 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 of potential prevention measures, is also important. The urgent adoption of a One-Health approach to collaborate across human, animal and environmental health expertise and policy is essential to address root causes.

To be successful, more inclusive, equitable and participatory spaces need to be created – recognizing 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^{xvii}. Shifting the way societies produce, consume and manage waste in livestock and food systems will also reduce health risks, address inequalities and secure a sustainable future on this planet.



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.



THE OPPORTUNITY IN ACTION:

Before the current pandemic, the World Bank and the UN Environment Programme estimated that an annual investment of 1.9-3.4 billion USD in strengthened One Health systems would yield an annual global public benefit of over 30 billion USD annually. The projected cumulative losses from the COVID-19 pandemic during 2020 and 2021 has been estimated at nearly \$8.5 trillion^{xviii}, with projected losses at 22 trillion USD^{xix}. There is clearly a strong and compelling economic incentive to invest in One Health.



GUIDING QUESTION:

How can multi-ministerial, multi-disciplinary collaboration be incentivized to achieve improved impacts for human, animal and environment health?



Photo: Unsplash/Justin Lim



2. Nature for Jobs, Poverty Eradication and Economic Prosperity

2.1 Building back better from the pandemic by investing directly in Nature.

Nature underpins economies and society on many levels. Ecosystem services worldwide are worth an estimated \$125 trillion per year 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



Senegalese plant circular gardens in Green Wall defence against desert. Photo: REUTERS/Zohra Bensemra

food security, protecting humans from climate impacts, mitigating climate change, and improving our health^{xxii}.

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.

A restoration economy - 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 of closing the financing gaps necessary to achieve commitments under the Rio Conventions. With the right funding, imagination and political will, this can be addressed through collaboration, by bringing in stakeholders from the health as well as trade, finance and labor communities.

The total annual international public financing for nature is significantly less than the subsidies leading to its degradation. This is neither sustainable nor does it make economic sense. Showing the necessary courage and logic to assess and refine agriculture and fossil fuel subsidies as well 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/Glasgow Pact and the Post-2020 Global Biodiversity Framework^{xxiii}, kickstarting the change that is needed.

Marginalized and vulnerable communities have 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 SDG 5 as an anchor, the essential and often-overlooked role for indigenous peoples and local communities, regional authorities, women and youth groups in scaling up effective action from the grassroots to the local, regional and national levels – needs to be prioritised 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.



CALL TO ACTION:

At least 10 Flagship Initiatives – exemplar, scalable restoration projects with high socio-ecological impact – are financed and launched in 2022. These Flagships should comprise commitments of significant restoration of priority ecosystems, including freshwater, marine and coastal, using fully integrated approaches that engage all stakeholders – from communities and the private sector to government and non-governmental organizations. These Initiatives should support the targets in the post-2020 Global Biodiversity Framework, once agreement has been reached.



THE OPPORTUNITY IN ACTION:

Together, the business opportunities associated with transforming our food, land and ocean-use-systems could generate almost US\$3.6 trillion of additional revenues or cost savings by 2030, while creating 191 million new jobs.^{xxiv} The emerging Flagship Initiatives of the UN Decade on Ecosystem Restoration,^{xxvi} as demonstrated by the Great Green Wall, are a tangible example of a bold new direction. The Great Green Wall initiative is on its way to meeting its restoration targets, providing food security for 20 million people, creating 10 million jobs and sequestering 250 million tons of carbon in the process.^{xxvii}

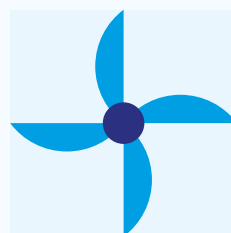


GUIDING QUESTION:

What are some of the barriers/opportunities you see in your own region, with regards to supporting the recovery of nature as a basis for the recovery and resilience of people and economies?



Photo: UN



3. Nature for Climate

3.1 Action to match commitments on nature-based solutions and biodiversity.

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 itself, threatens to undermine that role. However, by working with nature, by protecting, managing and restoring natural and modified ecosystems we can strengthen the role of nature in addressing the challenges of climate adaptation and mitigation. Moreover, these nature-based solutions will also deliver additional benefits, including for biodiversity, human health and jobs.

High social and environmental integrity for 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 REDD+ under the

Restoring upland forests and watersheds could save water utilities in the world's

534

largest cities an estimated USD

890 million



French firefighters extinguish a fire in a burning field of wheat during harvest season in Aubencheul-au-Bac, France. Photo: REUTERS/Pascal Rossignol

Climate Convention 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 (FPIC) of Indigenous peoples and local communities is essential. Without such safeguards, fairness and justice cannot be guaranteed and the sustainability of these solutions will be undermined. This experience also drives a critical review of nature-based solutions assessed through the single lense 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 for 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 center-stage in responses that support a fair and just share of responsibility.

Nature-based solutions can make a major contribution to climate adaptation. Restoring upland forests and watersheds could save water utilities in the world's 534 largest cities an estimated USD 890 million each year and is critical for regulating water flows and managing the future's more extreme floods^{xxviii}. Restoring mangrove forests that offer protections 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^{xxix}.

With regards to climate mitigation, nature-based solutions, implemented across all ecosystems can deliver emission reductions and removals of at least 5 Gt per year by 2030. By 2050 this could rise to at least 10Gt per year^{xxx}. This is a significant proportion of the total mitigation needed. This 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 NDCs^{xxxii}, this dual approach is needed, partly because decarbonization alone will not allow us to limit temperature rise to 1.5 degrees – but is also necessary because without decarbonization, the consequent temperature rise will further degrade ecosystems, thus undermining their mitigation potential and resilience.

Nature-based solutions for adaptation and mitigation are mutually supportive. Each contributes to the other, as well as providing other social and environmental benefits. UNEA 5.2 can play a key step in the process of building consensus on both 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 these solutions.



A CALL TO ACTION:

Fully harness the power of nature to tackle multiple crises (climate change mitigation and adaptation, biodiversity and social equity) through NDCs, adaptation plans and scaling up public and private investments by 2025 and beyond.



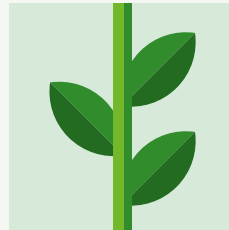
THE OPPORTUNITY IN ACTION:

Protecting, managing and restoring forests and other ecosystems could lift one billion people out of poverty and create 80 million green jobs^{xxxii}, create resilience, and close up to one third of the emissions gap^{xxxiii}.



GUIDING QUESTIONS:

How can safeguards and other instruments ensure a high quality and adequate volume of pro-poor investments for nature-based solutions, while fully respecting the rights of indigenous peoples and local communities – and delivering on multiple ecological services?



4. Nature for Sustainable Food Systems

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

Collective action must be taken to transform agriculture and food systems, as a significant driver of biodiversity loss, pollution, and greenhouse gas emissions. This includes food production systems that are based on ecosystem-friendly practices, taking full account of planetary resource boundaries, food and nutrition, security and livelihoods. It also includes encouraging contextually relevant sustainable consumption patterns which may include dietary changes, and behavior towards zero food waste. At the same time, these actions work towards conserving and enhancing the use



UNEP's recent report on direct support to food producers found that there is already USD

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a year that could be redirected into less polluting, nature-friendly farming.

Photo: Unsplash/Wilsan U

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.

The last 18 months have seen the UN's Food Systems Summit (UNFSS) 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^{xxxiv}. The 2030 Agenda recognizes that the world can no longer look at food, livelihoods and the management of natural resources separately. From ending poverty and hunger to responding to climate change and sustaining natural resources, food and agriculture lies at the very heart of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development^{xxxv}.

In the context of the Decade of Action for Sustainable Development^{xxxvi}, the UNFSS was a catalyst for global public mobilization and drew commitments from diverse stakeholders—including Heads of State and Governments, and other constituency leaders including the UN System, scientists as well as farmers, indigenous people and local communities and the private sector — to turn momentum from the Summit into action. One hundred plus national food

systems pathways have been submitted by countries, all of which include environmental impacts from current food systems as key concerns.

The world stands at a crossroads 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. UNEP’s recent report on direct support to food producers^{xxxvii} found that there is already USD \$470 billion a year that could be redirected into less polluting, nature-friendly farming.



THE CALL TO ACTION:

Commit to nature-positive food systems that actively contribute to implementing national food systems pathways resulting from the UNFSS; repurpose existing agricultural support to those that support nature-positive outcomes; progress on the agreement of the principles of nature-positive, net-zero agriculture; and progress the need for more sustainable and healthy diets with all stakeholders – for healthy people and planet.



THE OPPORTUNITY IN ACTION:

The majority (87%) of USD \$540 billion of support to agricultural producers is either price distorting or harmful to nature and health. Working with other UN agencies such as FAO and UNDP, UNEP can help in repurposing this support to transform food systems and achieve the SDGs.



GUIDING QUESTION:

How can countries aim to move towards repurposing environmentally harmful subsidies to those that support regenerative nature-positive agriculture and equitable livelihoods? What are the barriers to achieve this – and how could these barriers be overcome?



Photo: Unsplash/ Hu Chen

Expected outcomes: breaking through boundaries

Across all 4 thematics, Member States and other high-level representatives from industry and civil society are invited to address the following overarching questions:

- **Bolder leadership with new alliances:** UNEA-5.2's success demands a new commitment to working through shared global challenges with an open heart and an open mind. World leaders will be judged on the action they collectively take, 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 these efforts and who else should be brought along? What shifts in leadership and governance are required for citizens to be empowered to effect change?
- **A new paradigm of accountability and action:** Experience shows that policies do not always lead to action. What specific new measures have governments taken since UNEA-5.1 and what new actions are planned to follow UNEA-5.2? UNEA 5.2 will endeavor to celebrate those



UNEA 5.2

will endeavor to celebrate those who have taken concrete steps towards addressing the triple threat of climate change, biodiversity loss, and pollution, with the outlook of scaling up what works in pursuit of the Sustainable Development Goals

The Kegon no Taki falls are surrounded by Mongolian oak, maple, azalea and other trees whose leaves have turned yellow and red in the Oku-Nikko area
Photo: REUTERS/ Ryohei Moriya

who have taken concrete steps towards addressing the triple threat of climate change, biodiversity loss, and pollution, with the outlook of scaling up what works in pursuit of the Sustainable Development Goals ^{xxix}.

- **Resources required for success:** Resolutions and commitments are strong mechanisms to raise awareness around emerging issues, but they need funding to become reality. What financial support will be brought to the table to support local, national and multilateral action on this agenda so that public finance is realigned with nature's needs?
- **The role of UNEP:** What role should UNEP and the United Nations play in supporting action, in light of the new UNEP medium-term strategy and programme of work and budget?
- **Considering the impact on Future Generations and realizing Our Common Agenda:** UNEA 5.2 coincides with Stockholm+50 and UNEP at 50 and provides a springboard for redesigning how governance can consider future generations and build on the 12 recommendations made in Our Common Agenda^{xxxviii} prepared by the Secretary-General. How can we improve global cooperation and reinvigorate inclusive, networked, and effective multilateralism?

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