

Number 1
September 1999

A periodic update on the Geneva Environment Network and the International Environment House, Geneva

Networking the environment

“Synergies” and “collaboration”: these new catch-phrases are a response to the growing complexity of global environmental challenges and the institutional arrangements that have evolved for responding to them.

Twenty or 30 years ago, the overexploitation of species and other natural resources was dealt with on an issue-by-issue basis. Today, the sheer volume of consumption and pollution demands a more comprehensive approach. In an effort to integrate environmental concerns into economic activities, policymakers are turning to market-based instruments and asking the business sector to play a major role in finding solutions. Not surprisingly, as the economic implications grow, pressure to minimize the costs of environmental protection has led us to search for synergies such as “win-win” strategies.

By exploiting synergies we can buy solutions for two or more problems at the same time: planting forests to absorb carbon dioxide while combating desertification, or conserving wetlands to reduce flooding while conserving biodiversity. At the same time, we are becoming more alert to the risks of negative synergies, where solutions to one problem may undermine solutions to another. Chemical replacements for ozone-destroying CFCs, for example, are targeted as culprits in global warming, while efforts to protect intellectual property rights threaten to hinder the conservation and sustainable use of genetic resources. The list goes on.

Collaboration is the key to exploiting positive synergies and resolving negative ones. Because environmental issues are cross-cutting and are not fully invested in one intergovernmental institution (as is the case with the World Health Organization or the International Labour Organization), collaboration takes on an added urgency. Some specific environment issues are the domain of treaties serviced by

secretariats in various locations. Others are addressed through the activities of United Nations bodies specializing in various socio-economic issues. Many of course are the responsibility of the United Nations Environment Programme, which also plays a lead role in facilitating collaboration and promoting environmental interests.

Many people worry about this institutional fracturing, and indeed it does complicate our efforts to present a unified environmental front vis-à-vis financial and economic institutions. On the other hand, organizational decentralization may also present some opportunities. The demands of the coming decades will require a UN system that is increasingly responsive and flexible. This evolving UN must become even better at integrating action at the local, national, regional, and global levels and at working with civil society and non-governmental organizations. Perhaps in some ways today's environment sector provides a model for the highly networked UN of the future?

Of course, even in a highly networked workplace, face-to-face contacts remain essential. Diverse groups working on common issues must meet, educate each other about their concerns, and coordinate activities. For these reasons, worldwide efforts to exploit synergies and strengthen collaboration can only benefit from the inauguration of the International Environment House and the launching of the Geneva Environment Network (see page 8). Geneva has an important concentration of international environmental activities, and my thanks go to the Government of Switzerland for supporting these two initiatives.

– Klaus Toepfer, Executive Director,
United Nations Environment Programme

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Ministers to discuss trade, environment, and the WTO

By the International Centre for Trade and Sustainable Development (ICTSD)

The World Trade Organization's Third Ministerial Conference, to be hosted in Seattle this November, is expected to herald the start of a new "Millennium Round" of trade negotiations. Topics on the agenda include agriculture, services, market access, and intellectual property rights — all issues intersecting environmental concerns. Trade and environment *per se* will also form a part of the proceedings.

Sources of potential discord and tradeoffs are many. WTO members themselves are often in disagreement over the extent to which environmental regulations that disrupt trade are compatible with the regime's rules. Developing countries worry about the use of trade restrictions disguised as

environmental standards in the North: in an April 1999 communiqué, the Group of 77 and China voiced opposition to linking trade rules with environmental and social standards.

Meanwhile, developed country members face vociferous opposition from sections of civil society to any liberalisation that places trade before environment or labour. Environmental non-governmental organisations (NGOs) fear that plummeting trade barriers are driving down ecological standards, while the relationship between multilateral environmental agreements and WTO rules remains ambiguous.

In an effort to identify and assess the environmental impacts of trade liber-

alization, the European Union, Canada, Norway, and the US have commissioned environmental impact assessments (EIAs) on the likely ecological impacts of a new round. However, until the scope of the round and the specific sectors it will cover are clarified, it is unclear how the EIAs are to be implemented. For their part, developing countries have increasingly recognised the importance of environmental considerations in trade agreements and have been focusing on identifying their own priorities in this area.

The broadening of the trade and environment discussion results from the perception that the debate within the WTO's Committee on Trade and Environment (CTE) has reached an impasse and that other relevant actors have expertise and significant interests in trade-environment issues. Although the Committee has made important contributions, it has fallen short of producing any recommendations since the 1996 Singapore Ministerial. As a result, international organizations such as UNEP, UNCTAD and UNDP, along with a growing number of NGOs, have been increasingly active on trade and environment issues both inside and outside of the WTO.

The International Centre for Trade and Sustainable Development (ICTSD) has encouraged and supported these activities as part of its efforts to provide those working on trade and environment issues with the tools they need to arrive at workable and equitable solutions. Through its *BRIDGES* information series, ICTSD provides timely analyses of trade and sustainable development affairs. Its Dialogues programme brings a wide range of stakeholders together to engage in constructive exchange, while its Research programme provides resources and supports the work of others working in this field.

ICTSD also hosts workshops and symposia, including two recent events bringing together trade and environment officials and NGOs from 19

Trade and environment secretariats seek common ground

Meeting one day before the 29-30 June 1999 session of the World Trade Organization's Committee on Trade and Environment (CTE), the secretariats of the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) and the World Trade Organization (WTO) convened the first informal workshop between the WTO and UNEP-administered convention secretariats. Some two dozen international officials shared views on key trends and priorities. Participants represented the Center for International Environmental Law (CIEL) and the secretariats of the International Labour Organization (ILO), the United Nations Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD), UNEP, several UNEP-administered and non-UNEP administered Multilateral Environmental Agreements (MEAs), and WTO.

The informal gathering had the following objectives: to enhance understanding between the UNEP-administered conventions and WTO about their respective underlying principles; to clarify institutional and operational issues; and to discuss issues of mutual interest. Participants in the workshop agreed that the trade and environment communities need to work together now to harmonize the MEA and WTO regimes to avoid any future conflict. Both regimes would benefit by developing strategies to ensure the smooth evolution of a consistent international legal regime. The participants recognized that the exchange of views facilitated through this workshop was very positive and that it may help both Secretariats to better serve their Member States. They agreed to meet again on an informal basis and to explore critical and timely issues for WTO and MEAs.



countries in Latin America and 19 countries in Africa.

The agenda-building process in the months leading up to the Third Ministerial is an important opportunity for civil society to promote the integration of sustainable development into the multilateral trade regime. ICTSD is committed to building knowledge and enhancing understanding of trade-environment linkages to ensure that a diversity of productive perspectives are brought to the table at the WTO and in other trade fora.



ICTSD
INTERNATIONAL CENTRE FOR
TRADE AND SUSTAINABLE
DEVELOPMENT

The International Centre for Trade and Sustainable Development (ICTSD or the Centre) was established in Geneva in September 1996 to contribute to a better understanding of development and environment concerns in the context of international trade. Contact:
www.ictsd.org

Connecting to the information autoroute

By Arthur Dahl, Coordinator, UN System-wide Earthwatch

Information networking was never an issue until technology made it possible to transport information globally in seconds. Now the rapid pace at which information is distributed and the sheer volume of accessible information threaten to overwhelm us. We are only beginning to understand both the opportunities and challenges that computers and the Internet mean for information exchange between producers and users. The world is truly at our fingertips, but we are still wearing mittens.

There are three significant challenges that must be overcome if the potential of global information networking is to be fulfilled:

- ways must be found to provide electronic access to all those who want it, and not just to a fortunate and educated elite;
- efforts must continue to transfer to electronic media the masses of useful information collected in the past but currently available only in archives or printed form;
- methods must be devised to organize and structure information so that users can easily find just what they need.

The first two challenges can only be addressed collectively over the long term. But a solution for the third point — the organizational challenge — is within our reach.

To participate in global networking, each organization must develop some way to select, structure and make available its own information. A quick review of web sites demonstrates that this process is already under way, with varying degrees of success. UNEP's new observing-and-assessment strategy, for instance, calls for working with its partners to construct a global environmental information meta-system within an integrated framework.

There is also a growing need now to move beyond the limits of each institution and to classify and organize the

information from multiple institutions and sites around the world. We must do so without the information overload that comes with complete word searches and other "brute force" techniques. The UN system is beginning to address such questions through structures like the Information Systems Coordination Committee and the Geneva-based UN System-wide Earthwatch. The Earthwatch web site (<http://www.unep.ch/earthw.html>) provides some examples of simple low-cost networking across the UN system.

With the launching of the Geneva Environment Network (GEN), this process can be extended to a range of like-minded partners (both inside and outside the UN system) within a limited geographic and topical area, which should make the problem more manageable. The GEN can promote common efforts to put more substantive environmental information on the web, and not just in written reports. Scientists need harmonized and quality-controlled data sets. Assessment processes need up-to-date information on trends and impacts. Assessment results need to be communicated with indicators, graphics and maps that are easy for non-specialists to assimilate.

This information will have to be tailored to specific uses such as monitoring the implementation of multilateral

United Nations
System-wide
Earthwatch



The United Nations System-wide Earthwatch is a window on United Nations efforts to observe and assess the global environment. Contact:
www.unep.ch/earthw.html



environmental agreements or providing early warning of emerging problems. The opportunity is there for real creative communication. Geneva has a unique mix of information suppliers and users that should facilitate the joint design of useful and user-friendly information products.

The GEN can also develop into a major local node in global information networking. It can facilitate worldwide access to information available in

the Geneva area. And it can provide convenient ways for Geneva-based information users to find what they need from the global networks. Participants in international meetings, staff of permanent missions and international organizations, and representatives of non-governmental organizations (NGOs) all need the access that such a node would provide.

Many potential users are barely connected to the information super-

highway, and some are virtually computer-illiterate. Introducing them to the information available and helping them to access it for themselves will need to be part of capacity-building. The Geneva area is particularly well placed to experiment with and develop information products for these "international" users. The experience gained can then be used around the world as global information networking develops.

UN Volunteers: catalysts for environmental action

By Manuel Acevedo and Trisha Riedy,
UN Volunteers

The environment has been a priority area for the United Nations Volunteers from the programme's outset. In fact one of our very first Volunteers, in 1971, worked as a wildlife conservationist in Chad. Since then, UN Volunteers have worked on a wide range of environmental and natural resource manage-

ment issues. In 1998, 8% of UN Volunteers were involved in environmental activities.

UNV is a unique multilateral programme headquartered in Bonn. Its Humanitarian Relief Unit and Liaison Office in Geneva focuses on humanitarian, electoral, human rights and peace-building activities and serves as a liaison between UNV Headquarters and the UN Agencies, permanent missions, and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) in Geneva.

UNV has attracted the service of more than 18,000 highly motivated and qualified women and men worldwide. In 1998, 3,766 volunteers from 141 countries served in 148 countries bringing an average of 10 years experience, and an average age of 39. Some 75% of UN Volunteers come from developing countries.

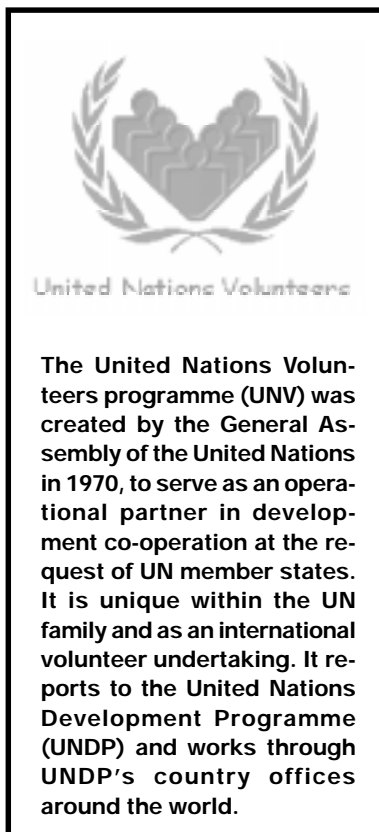
UNV's Strategy 2000 provides UNV and its partners with a frame of reference indicating overall directions for the Programme. A key area is environmental management. The focus on community work enhances UNV's unique role as an *outreach arm* of the UN System. In the context of environmental initiatives, UN Volunteers serve in various roles as technical assistance specialists, community promoters, trainers, and information/knowledge managers. They also work to strengthen civil society organizations, promote volunteerism and assist in project management.

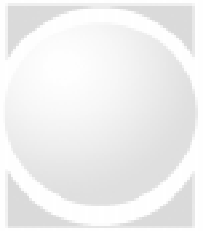
The following environmental areas have been proposed for prioritized engagement by UNV, within the context of poverty eradication programmes. They respond to some of the most problematic areas in the environmental field, and focus on areas where local action is indispensable to achieve lasting results:

- Water Resources
- Biodiversity Conservation
- Desertification and Drought
- Sustainable Agriculture
- Solid Waste Management

While UN Volunteers have traditionally participated in environmental initiatives, their activities in this area are set to increase over the next few years. As mentioned above, current institutional strategies identify Environmental Management as a thematic priority for UNV. A number of strategic partnerships, like that with the Global Environment Facility, are being established to capitalize on the unique contributions that UNVs can provide to programmes and institutions worldwide. The celebration of the International Year of Volunteers 2001 also offers great opportunities to learn from the work of volunteers, and to strengthen their involvement in local environmental protection all around the world.

For more information please visit UNV's website at: <http://www.unv.org/activs/idxenvir.html>.





Protecting biodiversity in Europe

By Sipi Jaakkola, Senior Scientific Officer,
UNEP/Regional Office for Europe

According to the Dobris+3 report by the European Environment Agency, the major changes in Europe's biological diversity are due to intensive development in economic sectors such as agriculture, forestry, transport, and tourism. Over most of Europe, the land-use-related impacts of economic development have led to the decline and loss of diversity in numerous natural and semi-natural habitats.

In response, the environment ministers of 54 countries met in Sofia in 1995 to launch and endorse the PanEuropean Biological and Landscape Diversity Strategy. PEBLDS thus became the coordinating framework for efforts to conserve and enhance nature and landscape throughout Europe.

The principal aim of the Strategy is to ensure the sustainability of the natural environment, in large part through concerted European action under the Convention on Biological Diversity. The Strategy is being implemented by national authorities, donors, international organizations, non-governmental organizations, the research community, and the general public.

The secretariat for the implementation of PEBLDS is provided by the United Nations Environment Programme (through its Regional Office for Europe in Geneva) and the Strasbourg-based Council of Europe.

UNEP's role has included initiating, promoting, and facilitating a work programme and a declaration on the enhancement of biological diversity in European forests for adoption by two European Ministerial Conferences, one on Forests and the other on Environment for Europe. UNEP also focuses on ensuring the Strategy's integration with other environmental policies in Europe.

Still another UNEP focus is assisting countries with economies in transition within the framework of the Strategy. Together with its partners, the Gland-based IUCN, the Netherlands-based European Centre for Nature Conservation, and the Hungary-based Regional Environment Centre, UNEP

has launched a Service for Implementing National Biodiversity Strategies and Action Plans. The Service aims to stimulate the true integration of efforts to implement national, regional, and global instruments for the conservation and sustainable use of biodiversity in the countries of Central and Eastern Europe. On request, this joint service will provide expert and advisory assistance, policy recommendations and guidelines, best available information, the exchange of experience, and training.

The Service for Implementing National Biodiversity Strategies and Action Plans was presented in the Third Meeting of the PEBLDS Council on 20-21 April 1999 as one of PEBLDS's key activities. The need for assistance in implementing national biodiversity strategies was clearly articulated, and the idea of the Service was supported by a number of Central/East European and Central Asian countries. It was

Biodiversity-related conventions establish joint web site

By Dwight Peck, Executive Assistant for
Communications, Ramsar Convention Bureau, Gland

Over the past several years, governments have become increasingly convinced of the need for collaboration amongst the global environmental conventions. The 1997 Special Session of the UN General Assembly, for example, which marked the first five years of Agenda 21, concluded that greater progress could be made on all fronts if these agreements were implemented cooperatively rather than in isolation. It also noted the importance to sustainable development of enhancing capacities for gathering and managing information.

While the biodiversity-related treaties all have different mandates and



consequently approved by the Council.

The Council also decided to prioritize the PEBLDS activities by restructuring the current 11 Action Themes into five Super Themes. Further, the organization of a meeting to serve as the regional preparatory forum for the May 2000 Conference of the Parties (COP-5) of the Convention on Biological Diversity was proposed by representatives of the Netherlands and the UK. This proposal too was adopted by the Council.

strengths, their linkages are particularly strong. In particular, these conventions — the Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD), the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora (CITES), the Convention on Migratory Species of Wild Animals (CMS), the Convention on Wetlands (Ramsar Convention), and the Convention Concerning the Protection of the World Cultural and Natural Heritage (World Heritage) — all promote information exchange by their contracting Parties. Inventories of biological resources, indicators of sustainable use, indigenous knowledge, and a great deal of



The joint web site of the Biodiversity-Related Conventions is located at:

<http://www.biodiv.org/rioconv/websites.html>

other information is generated and shared through these conventions.

However, the information that governments must organize in order to respond to the reporting requirements of each treaty is complex and demanding. In 1997, the Cambridge-based World Conservation Monitoring Centre (WCMC) was commissioned to study the information and reporting practices of each convention and suggest how to make these practices more efficient and, most importantly, better integrated.

WCMC completed its "Feasibility Study for a Harmonised Information Management Infrastructure for Biodiversity-related Treaties" (available at <http://www.wcmc.org.uk/convent/treaties.htm>) in August 1998. The Study proposed an ambitious programme of long- and short-term actions that could help to "harmonize" information handling and national reporting among the five conventions. Some of the proposals — such as a "meta-database" of the resources of all the conventions and a "lessons-learned network" of case studies — would require much more study and significant funding.

Other proposals, however, promised early results. In October 1998, technical officers from the convention secretariats met in Bonn to consider low-cost actions that could be launched quickly. A beginning was made on a number of promising ideas, such as an agreed thesaurus of keywords to be used for searches of the convention web sites, and a standardized form for document cover sheets to

facilitate searches for physical documents in the secretariats' archives.

The first tangible product of this common effort has been the development of a joint web site for the five conventions. Presently hosted on the CBD's server in Montreal, the joint web site went on-line in March 1999 and offers users a convenient hyperlinked map of related parts of each treaty site. This is useful for navigating in general but also for comparing elements of each convention and their approaches to promoting the conservation and sustainable use of biodiversity.

Using an agreed framework of 21 common features that all the web sites "should" have — including contact information, the convention text, mission statement, conference resolutions, lists of staff and Parties, national reports, subsidiary bodies, upcoming meetings, and links to other resources — the joint site provides direct links to the relevant pages on all the sites. A Spanish-language version was unveiled in May 1999, and a French version will be announced soon.

The joint web site of the Biodiversity-Related Conventions is located at <http://www.biodiv.org/rioconv/websites.html>.

The Convention on Wetlands, signed in Ramsar, Iran, in 1971, is an intergovernmental treaty which provides the framework for national action and international cooperation for the conservation and wise use of wetlands and their resources. There are presently 116 Contracting Parties to the Convention, with 1001 wetland sites, totalling 72.3 million hectares, designated for inclusion in the Ramsar List of Wetlands of International Importance.

Basel Convention celebrates 10th anniversary

The Fifth Session of the Conference of the Parties of the Basel Convention on the Control of the Transboundary Movement of Hazardous Wastes and Their Disposal will be hosted in Basel, Switzerland from 6-10 December 1999.

COP-5 will also mark the Convention's tenth anniversary. Ministers and other high-level officials will attend the Session during a special segment.

One of the key agenda items for the COP will be the conclusion of a protocol on liability and compensation for damage resulting from transboundary movements of hazardous wastes and their disposal.

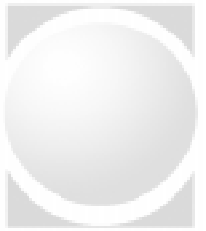
The meeting will also address issues related to the 1995 Ban Amendment prohibiting the export of hazardous wastes from developed to developing countries; the problem of illegal trade in hazardous wastes; the listing and classification of various types of wastes; technical guidelines for the sound management of plastics, tyres, and biomedical and health care wastes; and international cooperation and information exchange.

MOU signed by the World Heritage and Ramsar Conventions

On 14 May, Director Mounir Bouchenaki of the Paris-based UNESCO World Heritage Centre and Secretary General Delmar Blasco of the Gland-based Ramsar Convention on Wetlands signed a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) formalizing the rapidly growing cooperation between the two treaty secretariats.

The MOU provides for greater coordination of information and work programmes in several areas of mutual interest. In particular, it will facilitate coordination between WHC's List of World Heritage in Danger and Ramsar's Montreux Record of threatened wetland sites.

The MOU is available at http://ramsar.org/key_world_heritage_mou.htm.



New partnership sustains GRID-Geneva into the future

By Ron Witt, Regional Coordinator,
DEIA&EW, Global Resources Information Database, Geneva



Geneva community, and Switzerland at large into developments in the international environmental arena.

Over the past several years, GRID-Geneva has embarked on a process to forge stronger institutional relationships with its traditional partners. A formal "Partnership Agreement" was signed on 15 June 1998 between UNEP, the Swiss Agency for the Environment, Forests and Landscape (SAEFL), and the University of Geneva.

This initiative should be seen in the context of UNEP's drive to revitalise its role as the world's "environmental conscience", which depends largely on its ability to bring together a wide range of actors and stakeholders under common platforms for action. UNEP's strategy of "encouraging partnerships", as called for in its mission statement, has taken on a heightened sense of urgency with the marked decline in financial resources throughout the 1990s and the ever-growing list of environmental issues that are demanding action.

Unique among the worldwide network of Global Resource Information Database centres, GRID-Geneva's "Partnership Agreement" integrates organisations operating at several scales: UNEP at the international level, a national government's environment agency as represented by SAEFL, and a locally-based academic institution. By consolidating the competitive advantages of the three institutions, this tripartite set-up substantially reinforces the role of GRID-Geneva as a centre of excellence in environmental data assessment and information technology. It also strengthens its abilities to provide early warning on emerging environmental issues.

SAEFL stands to gain from GRID's international network of partners and by having direct recourse to its expertise in environmental data manage-

ment and related information technologies. The participation of the University of Geneva not only enriches the partnership with technical expertise but helps to catalyse the involvement of Geneva's civil society in the day-to-day life of the international organisations. The GRID partnership provides a "window" for national staff, the



GRID

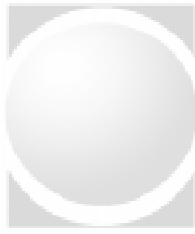
The Global Resource Information Database is a clearinghouse of environmental data and information. Its mission is to provide timely and reliable geo-referenced environmental information and access to a unique international data service to help address environmental issues at global, regional, and national levels. This map was downloaded from the web site (www.grid.unep.ch). It shows selected sites vulnerable to environmental damage as a result of the conflict in the Balkans region. The UNEP/Habitat Balkans Task Force surveyed many of these sites in July.

WHO and UNEP sign agreement

A new WHO-UNEP Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) is to be signed by Klaus Toepfer of UNEP and Gro Harlem Brundtland of the World Health Organization (WHO) on the occasion of the 10th anniversary of GRID Arendal (Global Resource Information Database) in Norway on 23 August 1999.

The purpose of this new agreement is to strengthen cooperation in areas where MOUs between UNEP, WHO,

and other organizations are already in force, such as chemical safety, air and water pollution, vector control, and information networks. Collaboration will also be strengthened in other fields, including biodiversity and human health, strategic environment and health impact assessments, transport, air pollution and health in urban areas, climate and health, environment and health, and emergency response.



Geneva Environment Network launched

Launched at the beginning of 1999, the Geneva Environment Network is a partnership of like-minded institutions that seeks to promote the interests of the earth's natural environment. Its 25-plus members include organizations and secretariats belonging to the United Nations system as well as non-governmental organizations (NGOs) with an international scope. Some are hosted at the International Environment House, others are located elsewhere in Geneva and in the

neighbouring canton of Vaud.

The Network provides a forum for sharing ideas and cooperating on projects. It allows environmental groups to pool their resources to achieve common goals. The initial emphasis is on working together to promote awareness of the global environment and the steps people can take to protect it. Some of the Network's earliest initiatives are therefore focusing on building an effective communications infrastructure.

International Environment House to be inaugurated

The Swiss Government, together with the State Council of the Republic and Canton of Geneva, will inaugurate the International Environment House (currently the Geneva Executive Center, in Châtelaine) on Tuesday, 14 September, from 18h00. Members of the international environment community of the Geneva area are cordially invited to a reception.



Environment House News

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This bulletin is available in English and French and is distributed on the Internet at:

<http://www.EnvironmentHouse.ch>

Environment-related meetings and events in Geneva

Date	Event (Organizer/contact)
30 Aug.-3 Sept.	Ad-Hoc Working Group of Legal and Technical Experts to Consider a Protocol on Liability and Compensation for Damage under the Basel Convention (Basel Convention secretariat, Tel : 917 82 13)
6-11 September	Persistent Organic Pollutants (POPs) INC-3 (UNEP/Chemicals, Email : jwillis@unep.ch or Fax : 797 3460)
13-15 September	Committee on Human Settlements (Economic Commission for Europe [UN/ECE], Tel : 917 12 34 or Fax : 917 0123)
14 September	Inauguration of International Environment House, Geneva (The Government of Switzerland, www.EnvironmentHouse.ch)
20-24 September	Committee on Environment Policies (UN/ECE, Tel : 917 12 34 or Fax : 917 01 23)
21-23 September	Committee on Sustainable Energy (UN/ECE, Tel : 917 12 34 or Fax : 917 01 23)
12-13 October	WTO Committee on Trade and Environment (World Trade Organization, Fax : 739 56 20)
24-29 January 2000	CLEAN ENERGY 2000 Millenia Conference and Exhibition in Geneva (www.cleanenergy2000.com)