

Marc Chardonens Opening Statement Rethinking Nature Conservation for the 21st Century

Excellencies, M. State Councilor of Republic and Canton of Geneva, dear friends

We celebrate today the “World Environment Day”.
Do we really have to celebrate something?
Can we be proud of the state of the environment?
Did we enough in recent years for nature conservation?

The title of today’s event “Rethinking Nature Conservation” certainly gives us a hint.
When do we rethink a concept, a plan, a strategy? Most probably when we come to the conclusion that we are not exactly on the right track.
Do we have reasons for concern?
What track do we talk about?

The UN decided that the years 2011 – 2020 should be the Decade on Biodiversity.
If the United Nations dedicated not only a day or a year to Biodiversity then this means in my eyes 3 things:
1) Nature Conservation is important for mankind and should be a priority on our environment policy agenda.
2) to enhance Nature Conservation and halt Biodiversity loss needs time
3) the decade is ongoing. And so should our engagement to strengthen biodiversity and to achieve the goals by 2020.
If the decade on biodiversity is still ongoing, are we too early to start rethinking nature conservation?

Let me be clear: The contracting parties to the Convention on Biological Diversity CBD - the entire international community beside the Vatican and the US - agreed on the Strategic Plan for Biodiversity and its 20 Aichi Targets.

We accepted an obligation to develop National Biodiversity Strategies and Action Plans (NBSAPs), the principal instruments for implementing the Convention at the national level. The idea was that the addition of all measures taken on a national level would help - as a collective effort – to protect species and ecosystems.
Will we be successful? Will we achieve the 20 Aichi targets by 2020? Is every contracting party doing its share?

We don’t know. We don’t know because we are still on our way.
But we also don’t know because we often lack exact figures, we don’t apply the same indicators and we get incomplete reports. Therefore we cannot compare policies and efforts.

Braulio Dias, the CBD Executive Secretary until February of this year, was very clear when he left office and was asked, what in his eyes was missing to successfully implement the convention: Implementation – and transparency through standardized reporting and a thorough compliance regime.

As in the UNFCCC process we have to accept that no country should be left behind.

But likewise no country should stay behind and avoid to take measures and implement a biodiversity policy. No country should take advantages of its inaction.

I know that there can be difficulties in implementing international environment policy on a national level. My own country Switzerland has to do its “mea culpa” and admit that we lag behind in developing our national Biodiversity Action Plan.

We cannot explain our delay with lack of capacity or resources. But we have to witness that a broad discussion with all stakeholder to develop a coherent and realistic Action Plan takes time. We also have to admit that in a country with a relatively high population density the conflict of interest in how to best use the surface is a fact. It is certainly not always easy to combine economic growth and the extension of protected areas. In the political debate it is a challenge to explain and integrate the Economics of Ecosystems and Biodiversity. What is the economic value of a National Park or a recreation area along a lake shore?

My government is not the only one that faces challenges in adopting and implementing NBSAPs (National Biodiversity Strategies and Action Plans). No wonder that a midterm evaluation of the Aichi Targets in the 4th Global Biodiversity Outlook came to the conclusion that we might fall short in several targets if we are not able to increase our commitment to conserve nature. To use language commonly used in sports: A final sprint is needed!

The IUCN’s Red List of endangered species is unfortunately still increasing. We have to agree that our common endeavor to stop biodiversity loss was not successful enough in the past. With regard to some specific products like ivory, rhino horn or shark fins, we have to understand that – despite the excellent work of CITES – the economic driver to harvest – or to poach – certain species is so strong that ordinary measures will not be sufficient to tackle the problem.

So what is needed to be successful in nature conservation? If we rethink biodiversity policy and action in the 21st century, how should it be designed?

I won’t be able to give you a clear and easy answer. But I am glad that the round table with eminent experts on nature conservation will discuss this question today in the framework of the Geneva Environment Network, which my Department is proud to support.

I know also know that the time is right to start such a discussion. CBD is aware that reflection has to start now if we want to be able to adopt a new strategy, new goals in 2020 when the actual strategic plan will expire.

Let me just finish my key-note with some ideas as food for thought and food for discussion, what elements a new conservation strategy post 2020 might include:

Political relevance: all biodiversity related agreements and their secretariats as well as conservation organizations like IUCN or WWF should strive for a higher ranking of biodiversity on the political agenda. Cristiana Paşca Palmer, the new CBD Executive Secretary defines her ambition as follows: “the need for biodiversity to be recognized for its critical importance as a global public good supporting life and our livelihoods.”

Synergies: the international governance of biodiversity is fragmented. The Secretariats of the MEAs, UNEP and all contracting parties should coordinate their work, should facilitate the use of synergies, should develop common tools like a modular reporting system, where data can be used for several conventions. The post-2020 biodiversity regime needs to be a common strategy for all biodiversity related conventions, developed together & implemented in a complementing manner.

Mainstreaming: biodiversity policy can only be successful when relevant sectors recognize the need of integrating conservation guidelines into the sectorial policies, be it in agriculture, forestry, fishery, mining, tourism, infrastructure or spatial planning.

Having said this it should be clear that conservation is not just protection of ecosystems and species, it is certainly also sustainable use. We have to establish protected areas where protection is the main purpose. But we can't put the whole world under a – as we would say in Switzerland – cheese dome.

SDGs: the UN sustainable development goals clearly proof that not only nature itself but also human action and development is interlinked. Many species are directly affected by climate change. But the biological diversity is also a part of the solution to adapt to global warming and to develop crops, livestock that are able to cope with rising temperatures and offer food security to vulnerable populations.

We have to step out of sectorial silos and develop holistic approaches and nature based solutions.

But this also means that we do not have to reinvent the wheel and should avoid to build up a heavy SDG mechanism. The 2030 Agenda must take advantage of existing bodies, and programs. SDGs are political goals and the process in the UNGA in New York should be a strategic one, collecting overarching data and get an overview over the different policy areas.

The work to reach the goals and its targets however has to be done by the existing MEAs. The biodiversity related conventions like CBD, CITES, RAMSAR, CMS, and organizations including UNEP, FAO or UNESCO have an extraordinary level of expertise. We, the parties, have to make use of this knowledge while developing our own national policies and measures.

And this enormous amount of expertise – I am glad to assess that many of this knowledge is located in the Geneva area - is the reason that I am optimistic.

Science, review mechanism and policy recommendations will allow us to develop a modern conservation strategy able to tackle the challenges of the 21st century in the field of biological diversity. This will be done in a process with many different actors.

The following round table is one element in this process. And I am eager to learn what the experts we have on the podium today will recommend.

Thank you.