



Woodrow Wilson
International
Center
for Scholars

Environmental Change and Security Program

Washington, DC, Launch of *Africa: Atlas of Our Changing Environment*

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Edited Transcript – Ashbindu Singh

Good afternoon. I want to extend my personal thanks to a number of people in this room. One is Geoff, who always help us to have [unintelligible] meetings. John Townshend is the chairman of the advisory committee. He's always available for advice. Whenever I have doubts, I go to him. Barb Ryan from USGS, and Eric, who flew all the way from Sioux Falls to come here, and actually, the host, the Center, there. Woody Turner -- I saw him here; maybe he's somewhere else -- from NASA, who has been very supportive. And also, Carrie is here, Carrie Stokes from USAID. Dan Tunstall from WRI, and our old friend, Guy Lund. If I send an email to him, forgetting some writer, I know within 24 hours Guy will send me something; he's very dependable. Thanks to all of them, and Tim Foresman, my ex-boss. The idea of the atlas came through him. That's what we did this *One Planet, Many People*. Thanks a lot.

As you know, I -- I'm sure most of you know that UNEP has this mandate to keep the state of environment under review -- [low audio] -- and bring to the attention of the government. Really, that's our -- one of the mandates we got from the General Assembly. However, UNEP alone is not trying to get the attention of policy makers, so we must need to compete in the crowded marketplace for ideas. So that's one of the challenges for competing that. The challenge is how do we get our message across. How do we get -- connect local to global? I mean, the changes -- most of environmental changes are taking place at local level. How do we connect to the global audience so something is done?

We did this atlas three years back, and it was a huge success, and what we did in that one -- we wanted to answer a simple question: what is happening where? Then why -- because one of the things we found that the -- if the change trend over time, which is the most compelling information for public. If you tell them, "Air quality is this much," they don't understand, but if you say, "Air quality is going up," or "down," they try to pay attention. "Forests are



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disappearing,” or “not,” then they start paying attention. And picture is worth thousand words, as Dan said.

So we tried to build this story of environmental change using 35 years’ record of Landsat data. One of the innovations we brought was we brought the ground photograph, we built this story. So there were a lot of actually actual change in that. And those who are in this field know that there are a lot of satellites revolving around the earth, and we can get data now from one meter -- actually lower than that -- up to one kilometer, and so there a lot of data flowing.

However, those who have done the motion thing, like me, know that -- people ask me, “What is value added from UNEP?” So the motion thing people get the image like this, then they go and try to -- which normal person will not understand what it is. And it takes us about, actually, more than a month sometimes to get to this -- actually from there, to build a story.

So this is an image of Guatemala and Mexico border, and you can see the deforestation. Actually you can do the country boundary -- you can see it because of deforestation. So what we do is really we process it so it’s more understandable. We see where this place is there; where is this place in Mexico and Guatemala border, location one? Then we bring some ground photographs so people connect with that. And then we write 150-word story. Actually UNEP should thank our patenting head because we spend lot of time getting the technique patented.

In this atlas, the basic question we tried to answer was, “What is the status and trend of environment in Africa? What are trans-boundary issues, which need international cooperation between more than two countries? What are important environmental issues in each country? What is happening to the Millennium Development Goal Seven, related to environmental sustainability? And what are the scientific evidence of local changes taking place?” And we also tried to get some interesting facts and figures so it becomes a little bit interesting, not a boring, scientific document.

The atlas became little bit bigger and heavier than when we thought of doing that. Now it’s 390 pages. You can see lot of satellite images: 316. We got the data for almost every country, 106 places, 319 ground photographs, 151 maps. We printed simultaneously both in English and French. And we tried to use all the non-copyrighted materials. In fact even for





ground photographs, we spend lot of time on Yahoo!, Flickr, and all that to get the pictures these people can use it free of charge.

So Chapter One is basically an introduction to Africa, if you call it. And then we tried to put a graphic -- this is basically came from [unintelligible] when he thought of that, how the Africa population is growing and how the Africa is becoming smaller and smaller in terms of the population, if you see per capita availability of land.

This comes from NASA and the USGS, actually. They monitor the lake level at Lake Victoria. And you can see it's slowly going down. And they have no way of knowing this it is happening if we didn't have this technological asset to measure that.

This came interesting; again it's from NASA. It's "Africa: A Lightning Center of the World." If you see, Africa gets more lightening than any place in the world, which I was surprised, to be frank. And that's no wonder [unintelligible] come from the University of Maryland that Africa get lot of forest fires. I mean, there are other reasons as well. Africa throughout the year is a composite for 2006, I believe -- yes. Lot of forest fires, if you see, get it throughout the year.

Chapter Two looks at trans-boundary issues in terms of ecosystem, in terms of pollution. Everybody thinks of Africa -- dust storm from Africa. Whereas this is one where if you see this is a effect of forest fire which happened in Greece. How the continent is being affected because of the pollutant coming from the Greece. So it's just blaming everything for Africa and not correct. Africa also get impacted by [unintelligible].

The Chapter Three is over 300 pages, actually. The idea is really where we covered all the countries, all 53 countries in Africa. And we thought of doing almost six pages for each country. So we have a Country Profile -- that's Rwanda -- very simple description of the country, and then we have the graph showing the Millennium Development Goals indicators. The other side, we picked up three environmental issues from the literature, really. And then we put some nice photograph and some nice facts and figures so people really find it interesting to read it. And then we put two places where we can see some change. So idea was six page for every country.

So for example, this is, if you see, one of the places in Rwanda where you can see the green color, how the deforestation is taking place in Rwanda. And you see the difference between





'78 and 2006, how much deforestation has taken place. This lake, which Executive Director said, in Mali actually, be discovered in maybe the first time that brought to the public attention, that this lake has totally disappeared within '78 and 2006. Similarly -- actually, I lived in Kenya, but I didn't know that Uganda has a glacier mountain. So this is one of the new things we picked up while that mount Rwenzori in Uganda, where the glaciers are melting even there; so just if you look that side...

This is example -- more positive -- we are also looking for more positive examples. Not everything is gloom and doom. This is effect of restoration of wetlands in Mauritania. You can see all the dark colors; that's where the wetlands have come back. This one is an example of how the tree cover has increased in some part of Niger. So there were try to get some nice examples.

By literature review and looking all the Internet and all we found that these are the major environmental issues in African countries. And the most interesting we found is that deforestation threat to biodiversity is still the main, the high problem in highest number of countries. I mean the climate change is a driver to lot of them, but that's really the big -- came out of this thing.

Some of the findings -- yes, deforestation is a major environmental issue in most of countries, but we did not find any major frontiers of deforestation like you find Amazonia in South African country -- South American countries, really. Africa they not a big commercial thing where thousands [unintelligible].

Africa, lightning center of the world. As the Executive Director said, there are some very successful stories, like in Niger, in Mauritania, where things are happening in a positive way. And we found some interesting examples in country, like in Botswana: for 14 people, there's one elephant. Basically, that's the highest number of elephants. We didn't want to say repeat same thing. So we wanted something interesting so people pay attention. So there are a lot of elephants in Botswana and that.

atlas is available na.unep.net/AfricaAtlas. Actually, it's free of charge; anybody can download it -- all the PowerPoints, all the .pdf file, high-resolution file, .pif file; everything is there. We have also created a blog -- first time in UNEP, I believe. We are working with Google Earth right now, actually; we will release on Google Earth on 15th July. There are some technical problems, but we will release on Google Earth on 15 July. We are printing





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CDs and distributing it, mousepads, to get to more and more people. And we also planning for some capacity building workshop in environmental monitoring and visualization tools. And we got lot of media coverage since it was released on June 10th, actually. It become huge success to big time. Every day we are getting requests for more material, either by media, by textbooks, so we are already getting that.

We brought a lot of visiting scientists, actually, from Africa to work on this in Sioux Falls, South Dakota. It's not that everything wasn't here; we brought lot of people to work on it from the continent, and they contributed to that. Actually I would say that most of work was done by these visiting scientists and some of the staff we have in Sioux Falls, South Dakota.

So thank you very much. What we need is how do we bring younger and old and put this technology really together, and that's what we need for Africa. Thank you.

The other thing: we are now planning really to take all this information now at the country level so we can make some difference in the country. I mean that is what the whole idea that because people want to see what is happening in my backyard. Now we have information. So we package it and take to the countries in terms of capacity building and mobilize some action there. So that's really ultimate goal. So it's not just a coffee table book; it has to make some impact. And that's what we are trying to do that.



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