



Woodrow Wilson  
International  
Center  
for Scholars

*Environmental Change and Security Program*

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

Tuesday, July 1, 2008

Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars

*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

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'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].

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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 10<sup>th</sup>, 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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