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Remarks

of

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Global Environment Facility

Biodiversity Strategy in the Mediterranean Basin:
Regional Capacity-Building Workshop

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Thank you, Mayor Mandroux, for opening your beautiful city to this important conference, and thanks you all for being here today to address the biodiversity challenges of the Mediterranean. Having spent the early part of my life in Morocco and Tunisia, I am very happy to say a few words today about this remarkable region.

The Mediterranean is truly unique – both as the prime theater for a significant portion of humanity's history, and for the very history of biodiversity on this planet. My remarks will focus on the unique place of the Mediterranean in the global biodiversity priority map, the challenges facing biodiversity for the future – including those deriving from increased urbanization – and some of the ways we can respond to these challenges.

The basin's location at the junction of three continents has spawned a wealth of biodiversity. With 22,500 plants, 52% of them found nowhere else in the world, the Mediterranean contains more than four times the number plants found in all the rest of Europe. The Mediterranean sea is also a marine biodiversity hotspot, home to more than 17,000 described species, about a third of which are found nowhere else on the planet. Marine food has been

an elemental part of life in this region going back to pre-history, and today forms a key component of the internationally-acclaimed "Mediterranean diet." Finally, international tourism is responsible for 30% of the economies of the Mediterranean coasts, with much of that activity driven by the spectacular scenery and by unique biodiversity found here.

Despite it extreme importance to global biodiversity, the challenges are immense, some deriving from the past - the human footprint on the Mediterranean being among the oldest in the world - while others, such as increased urbanization, looming worryingly into the future.

Present-day Mediterranean landscapes result directly from the co-evolution between human and natural systems. In this sense, the typical strategies employed in other parts of the world to conserve terrestrial biodiversity, involving, for example, the protection of samples of pristine areas, will not alone get the job done here. To be sure, many countries in the region have created systems of protected areas that represent the backbones of conservation action, many of these funded by the Global Environment Facility. Because of the uniqueness of the habitats they contain, protected areas will increase in value over time. However, it is estimated that today

less than 2% of the region is pristine, and less than 20% remains in an uncultivated, semi-natural state. This points to the need for integrated strategies spanning all different land uses.

The situation on the coasts and oceans is not as dramatic as on land, but is serious all the same. The exploitation of marine species, pollution, eutrophication, coastal erosion and loss of coastal wetlands are among the human-caused threats to both the endemic species as well as those that people depend on for their livelihood. Here the importance of expanding the coverage of marine managed areas, essential to restore healthy fisheries, becomes vital, particularly in the southern and eastern shores.

Because of the interplay between natural and human-driven processes in the Mediterranean, people will have to be central to any viable biodiversity strategy, with the active management of land and oceans becoming paramount. In such a context, the traditional subdivision of protected and unprotected land loses some of its meaning, action being needed across a variety of settings – in cities, in suburban areas, and in productive landscapes and oceanscapes.

Investments by the GEF in this region have brought together the different themes under our mandate - biodiversity, climate change, land degradation, international waters and chemical pollutants – into integrated strategies. A key example of this is the Sustainable Med Program. The environmental challenges of the Mediterranean Basin cross local, regional and national boundaries, and the GEF has programmed some $30 million for this Program, attracting over $700 million in cofinancing, to address the costs of environmental degradation, estimated to be up to 4.8% of the GDP of the countries in the region.

The Sustainable Med Program aims to integrate environmental commitments into the economic development agenda of the Mediterranean, following a widely shared approach. It also recognizes the direct linkages between what happens on the land, the coast and the oceans, and is helping to establish a proper platform to ensure an adequate governance structure – one that takes into consideration the sensitive nature and the interaction among freshwater resources, the coast, and the biodiversity of the sea, as well as activities and communities on the land.

This brings me to the topic of cities. Nearly half of the world's population lives in urban centers today, and the trend points to greater urbanization over the next decades. In the Mediterranean, urbanization rates now exceed 65%, and most urban centers are along the coast. As we are learning here and through hundreds of GEF-funded initiatives, sustainable land and ocean practices can have direct positive impacts on the urban areas – through the provision of clean water, fresh air, access to fisheries, stable shorelines, and a host of other ecosystem services. What hasn't been that obvious is that what happens in cities can also negatively affect natural habitats, biodiversity and the flow of ecosystem services. Globally, cities occupy just two percent of the Earth's land but account for 60 to 80 percent of energy consumption and 75 percent of carbon emissions. One of the key steps, therefore, is to introduce more sustainable urban practices that can reduce the footprint of cities over the natural environment – that is, the amount of land and ocean resources needed to sustain cities. Coastal Mediterranean cities are prime examples of this tension and the need for resolution.

If left unchecked, urban centers can become natural resource black holes. But they may also help ease the immediate pressure over natural habitats through the reduction in human population density in rural areas. We don't

quite know yet how to balance out this equation, but through the rapidly accumulating wealth of experience funded by the GEF we are learning that we cannot think about this problem by segmenting and isolating these highly interconnected features of land, coast and ocean. In the Mediterranean, sustainability models will have to be tailored across the spectrum of land, freshwater and ocean uses, while weaving together the existing interdependencies.

This workshop is part of a critically important effort to change our understanding of the relationship between cities and our natural environment in this region. To conclude, I would suggest fleshing out the following topics as essential elements for an effective biodiversity strategy for the Mediterranean basin:

1. The need to keep what you have. Protected areas play a vital role in conserving rare and threatened biodiversity in national protected area systems. Their management effectiveness need to be strengthened so as to cope with emerging threats coming from pressure over land and natural resources, including climate change.

2. The need to integrate human-managed landscapes, including cities and agriculture land, into the overall biodiversity conservation strategy.
3. The need to address coastal and marine management to ensure healthier fisheries and more secure coastlines, together with expanding the size of marine managed areas.
4. The need to look into the role of cities in affecting how biodiversity is used on land and oceans, and introduce practices that reduce their overall footprint.
5. And finally, the need to examine sustainable development of the Mediterranean from a green economy perspective, given the interdependency between tourism revenue, fisheries and agriculture, biodiversity and ecosystem services. There if probably no other region where these links are stronger than in the Mediterranean.

Thank you very much, and I look forward to our discussion.