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**Message from Mr Koïchiro Matsuura,
Director-General of UNESCO
on the occasion
of World Environment Day 2008**

5 June 2008

Every year, on 5 June, World Environment Day is an occasion to raise awareness of the close interdependence between the environment and human well-being.

The powerful slogan of World Environment Day 2008 – “CO₂: Kick the Habit! Towards a Low Carbon Economy” – reminds the international community of its duty to strive for a carbon and climate-neutral society.

This slogan resonates particularly strongly in this International Year of Planet Earth (IYPE), which UNESCO is celebrating throughout 2008 together with UNEP and the International Union of Geological Sciences, as well as other partners worldwide. The aim of this UN-declared Year is to promote the essential role that the Earth sciences can play in fostering a safer, healthier and more sustainable Planet. Through the IYPE, we are working to draw the attention of decision-makers and the general public to the wealth of environmental knowledge built up by the world's geosciences. Toward this end, some 70 IYPE national committees have been established. These committees are helping to build capacity, improve public information and stimulate greater geoscience research, including on carbon sequestration. They are putting the issue of CO₂ and greenhouse gases at the centre of national debates.

The message I would like to send on World Environment Day 2008 is that we understand enough today, in terms of the nature, scope and impact of environmental degradation and climate change, to know that we must act – and now.

A new culture of consciousness is emerging – one that unites the nations and peoples of the world in a common fight for sustainability. We must look at the current climate crisis as an opportunity for finally doing the right thing and for taking ownership of our future. However, to this end, we must first kick the bad habits of the past and, in particular, the CO₂ habit.

Knowledge is the first step towards awareness. We have built a sound knowledge basis on climate change, notably through the work of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change. The challenge in front of us now is twofold.

First, we must conceive and apply educational tools to communicate the practices, values and principles of sustainability. This is the main goal of the UN Decade of Education for Sustainable Development (2005-2014). As lead agency for this educational effort, UNESCO is seeking to encourage changes in attitude and behaviour that will lead to a more sustainable future. We are mobilizing toward this end our network of UNESCO Chairs and several thousand UNESCO Associated Schools around the world.

The second main challenge is how climate change and other environmental pressures impact upon the international development agenda. While we work for a better future, we must also think about the present. The current global food crisis reminds us of the vulnerability of our social and ecological systems. Therefore, as we work to mitigate environmental degradation and climate change, we must also adopt measures to adapt to their impact. Assessments of conditions and trends of geomorphologic features, ecosystem services and institutional and individual capacity to adapt to climate change must be strengthened, with a particular focus on those areas and communities that are most at risk.

For example, the Millennium Ecosystem Assessment has shown that mountain and dryland systems and communities are particularly vulnerable to climate change. Small Island States are equally susceptible. Due to the unpredictability and the increased frequency and intensity of climate change-driven disasters, early warning systems for events such as storm surges, cyclones, floods, landslides and droughts, must be established on a regional basis with the goal of ensuring satisfactory global coverage in the shortest possible term.

Kicking the habit of exceeding CO2 emissions will require establishing living laboratories for sustainable development. This means setting aside entire portions of the landscape devoted to testing adaptation programmes for climate change, where solutions are designed and implemented in a transparent and participatory manner. Kicking the CO2 habit implies addressing the ethical dimension of climate change and facing the injustice of the 'climate divide', notably, the differentiated capacity of countries and peoples to deal with global warming. Differences in cultural context must also be taken into account, and efforts made to better harness local knowledge and practices to ensure sustainability.

The UN system, with its ensemble of competencies addressing different sectors and parts of society, is a powerful platform and vehicle for channelling action to combat climate change and environmental degradation at all levels – local to global. The coherent action of UN agencies will allow us to address the multiple dimensions of climate change and to identify adequate solutions. The harmonization of international agendas as related to trade, environment, science and technology, communication, finances, humanitarian affairs and social rights etc. to respond to climate change is an essential condition without which this challenge cannot be overcome. We are facing yet another test for humanity as a whole: will humanity be in a position to overcome this global challenge as it has done with others in the past? One thing is sure, it is only through a concerted multidisciplinary approach that we shall be able to achieve environmental sustainability and finally kick the CO2 habit!



Koïchiro Matsuura