

**ADDRESS BY CHARLES MCNEILL, UNEP TO THE *RELIGIONS FOR PEACE* WORLD ASSEMBLY
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- It is an honor to address this group of more than 900 faith leaders from 125 countries here at the Religions for Peace World Assembly.
- The science is clear on the climate and biodiversity crisis: we are reaching, surpassing and then, ignoring global environmental tipping points that are threatening humanity and all life on the planet -- and hitting the poorest and most vulnerable the hardest.
- The recent report of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change reveals that the planet is already seeing the consequences of 1° Celsius global warming through more extreme weather, rising sea levels, melting Arctic sea ice -- and we have even less time than we thought – only 11 years – to avoid far more severe droughts, floods, fires, extreme heat and poverty for hundreds of millions of people.
- A report of an intergovernmental panel on biodiversity released just weeks ago reveals that 1 million species currently face extinction – and this time the mass extinction is being caused by us, not an asteroid. [Note: The Intergovernmental Science-Policy Platform on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services (IPBES)]
- And consider this, a recent report from WWF shows that since 1970 -- the very year that Religions for Peace was founded -- populations of animals all around the world declined by 60% on average.
- What a profound and shocking decimation of ‘God’s creation’ caused by our own overexploitation and agriculture. [
- And it is so unnecessary since the recent EAT Lancet Commission report shows that we can feed the 10 billion people expected by 2050 without cutting one more hectare of tropical forest if we take certain actions related to agricultural efficiency, reducing food waste and eating more plants.
- Human rights abuses of indigenous peoples are also on the rise.
- The Global Witness Report from last year shows that at least 164 environmental defenders, many of whom were indigenous peoples, were murdered last year for defending their lands from exploitation by extractive industries.
- We in the United Nations strongly welcome the focus on Forests by Religions for Peace at this World Assembly because it provides an extremely strategic and effective way to address these three challenges: climate change, biodiversity loss and human rights abuse.
- Take climate change -- if tropical deforestation were a country, its annual contribution to the emissions that cause climate change would be greater than those of the entire European Union.
- At the same time, protecting, restoring and sustainably managing forests offers up to one third of the climate solution to meet the goals of the Paris agreement. This is not well known and it needs to be.

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- Take biodiversity -- protecting tropical forests is vital to addressing the extinction crisis because an estimated two-thirds of all terrestrial plant and animal species live there.
- Also, conserving tropical forests is key to sustaining the culture and ways of life of indigenous peoples.
- Study after study shows that when the rights of indigenous peoples are protected, so are forests.
- And yet indigenous peoples and forest communities are on the front lines of the deforestation crisis: threatened by illegal logging and mining operators, poachers, drug traffickers, agribusiness and even certain governments.
- Unfortunately, tropical deforestation is accelerating.
- Data shows a loss of tropical forests over the past decade equivalent to the areas of Germany, France and the UK combined.
- And yet, solutions are well known: stopping deforestation comes down to public policies: that means regulations, enforcement and incentives – as well as individual action.
- In fact, Brazil succeeded remarkably in reducing deforestation by 80% from 2004 to 2012 by focusing on public policies – and at the same time they were able to significantly increase food production: showing that forest protection and food production are not in conflict.
- Tragically, Brazil is headed in a very different direction now ...
- Over the past decade, the governments of Germany and Norway have been incredibly generous and active and have been leading -- with the UN and other actors – a broad coalition of governments, civil society, indigenous peoples and businesses to protect and restore tropical forests around the world.
- But to achieve the scale and speed of change that is needed to halt tropical deforestation, we need to inspire people in new ways and to reach them on the level of faith, ethics and values -- and to mobilize vast new constituencies.
- In other words, we -- the international development community -- need your help more urgently than ever.
- And we sense that you are ready to work with us because forest protection is directly relevant to your core values: the sanctity of life; divinity of nature; human rights; environmental justice.
- But so far, no platform has existed to link up and coordinate the ongoing forest protection actors and efforts at local, national and international levels, with you: communities of faith.
- Now the Interfaith Rainforest Initiative is filling that gap through the leadership of Religions for Peace, Greenfaith, the Parliament of the World's Religions, the World Council of Churches, the Yale Forum on Religion and Ecology, the Rainforest Foundation Norway, and the Government of Norway – with UNEP.

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- Through this initiative, we are seeing an explosion of interest and action by religious communities in the 5 major pilot countries: Brazil, Colombia, Peru, Indonesia and the Democratic Republic of Congo.
- An extremely significant – and touching – dimension of this initiative is the special and precious connection being established between religious leaders and indigenous leaders – after a difficult relationship over the past 500 years.
- In each pilot country, religious leaders are valuing and respecting indigenous peoples for their vital historic role in protecting forests for humanity and all other life forms.
- Religious leaders have moral authority, as well as political and economic power and are offering to use these assets to help indigenous leaders around the world in the face of threats, attacks and incursions on their lands.
- And we are seeing that many indigenous peoples are willing to partner with faiths on this issue, overcoming generations of tensions and possibly even leading towards reconciliation.
- To conclude, the Interfaith Rainforest Initiative is fully aligned with the powerful vision for interfaith cooperation emerging from this World Assembly.
- And we believe that this effort can help turn the tide on halting tropical deforestation and thereby strongly advance progress on climate, biodiversity and human rights.
- We look forward to collaborating with all of you to deliver on our common commitment from this World Assembly to Advancing Shared Well-Being and Promoting Integral Human Development and Protecting the Earth.
- Thank you.