



Media release

UNEP study confirms DR Congo's potential as world environmental powerhouse but warns of critical threats

Social entrepreneurs hold key for job creation and 'green economy' transformation in DR Congo

Kinshasa, 10 October 2011 – With half of Africa's forests and water resources and trillion-dollar mineral reserves, the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) could become a powerhouse of African development provided multiple pressures on its natural resources are urgently addressed.

A major Post-Conflict Environmental Assessment of the DRC by the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) underlines the global significance and extraordinary potential of the country's natural and mineral resources.

However, the study warns of alarming trends including increased deforestation, species depletion, heavy metal pollution and land degradation from mining, as well as an acute drinking water crisis which has left an estimated 51 million Congolese without access to potable water.

The outcomes of the two-year assessment have been released today in Kinshasa, by UNEP's Executive Director, Mr Achim Steiner, and the DRC's Environment Minister, Mr José Endundo.

Conducted in conjunction with the DRC's Ministry of Environment, Nature Conservation and Tourism, the assessment highlights successful initiatives and identifies strategic opportunities to restore livelihoods, promote good governance and support the sustainability of the DRC's post-conflict economic reconstruction, and reinforce ongoing peace consolidation.

The study's good news is that most of the DRC's environmental degradation is not irreversible and there has been substantial progress in strengthening environmental governance.

For example, through steps such as regular anti-poaching patrols, the Congolese Wildlife Authority has secured the Virunga National Park, which at the peak of the DRC's crisis was losing the equivalent of 89 hectares of forest each day due to illegal fuelwood harvesting.

However, the country's rapidly growing population of nearly 70 million people – most of whom directly depend on natural resources for their survival – and intense international competition for raw materials are adding to the multiple pressures on the DRC's natural resource base.

Key findings include:

- The DRC has the highest level of biodiversity in Africa, yet 190 species are classified as critically endangered, endangered or vulnerable on the IUCN Red List of Threatened Species. Elephants and mountain gorillas are among the species under threat.
- Up to 1.7 million tonnes of bushmeat (mainly antelope, duiker, monkey and wild boar) are harvested annually from unregulated hunting and poaching, contributing to species depletion.
- The DRC's tropical rainforests extend over 1.55 million km² and account for more than half of Africa's forest resources – making them a critical global ecosystem service provider and a potential source of up to US\$900 million in annual revenue up to 2030 through REDD+.

- The DRC has the largest artisanal mining workforce in the world – around two million people – but a lack of controls have led to land degradation and pollution. Its untapped mineral reserves are of global importance and are estimated to be worth US\$24 trillion.
- Around 15 tonnes of mercury are used annually in the DRC’s artisanal gold mining operations, making it the second largest source of mercury emissions in Africa.
- The Congo basin supports Africa’s largest inland fisheries with an estimated production potential of 520,000 tonnes per year. While at the national level this resource is under-exploited, there are many instances of serious over-fishing pressures at the local level.
- The most alarming climate change-related issue is the vulnerability of rain-fed small-scale agriculture. For example, as of 2020, the duration of the rainy season in the drought-prone region of Katanga is expected to reduce from seven months to five months.
- There is a remarkable rise of ‘people-based’ social enterprises, most of which rely on natural resources. Yet with a fragile banking system and limited incentives to formalize transactions, the informal sector’s growth has become a critical structural problem as businesses can operate beyond environmental and labour laws.
- As it is still emerging from a long period of State decline and protracted crisis, the provision of basic services, including energy and water supply, and environmental problems in urban centres remain key challenges for the DRC.
- To support the DRC’s development challenges, a doubling of aid is urgently needed, including an estimated US\$200 million per annum for the environment.

Achim Steiner, UN Under-Secretary General and UNEP Executive Director, said the assessment highlights strategic opportunities that can support the sustainability of the DRC’s post-conflict economic reconstruction and serve to accelerate peace consolidation efforts.

“This assessment confirms the DRC’s unique endowment of natural resources and how they can contribute to sustainable economic growth, but also reveals the legacy of using these resources in fuelling much of the conflict and human tragedy that has plagued its people for too long,” he said.

“It is UNEP’s hope the assessment’s outcomes will galvanize action and greater support from the international community and help set the nation on a more sustainable course, capitalizing on the opportunities offered by a green economy in the DRC,” the UNEP Executive Director said.

The assessment aims to support the creation of enabling conditions for a transition to a ‘green economy’ in the DRC and promote a fundamental rethinking of the country’s ‘frontier’ approach to the use of its natural resources.

Speaking at the launch, the Environment Minister, Mr José Endundo, said the government welcomed the assessment which sheds light on important issues and opportunities, including the potential of the carbon market and ecotourism as sources of large-scale financing.

“We know from this two-year joint study that the DRC’s vast mineral reserves are again the object of intense foreign competition and that this is placing great pressures on our forests, wildlife and water resources,” Minister Endundo said.

“The REDD+ scheme in which the DRC is already engaged could potentially generate the necessary funding to address a wide range of development and environment challenges and we look to such mechanisms to support a sustainable recovery in the DRC,” the Minister said.

Funded by the Government of Norway, the UNEP post-conflict environmental assessment covers all of DRC, not only conflict-affected areas, and provides 70 recommendations covering 15 sectors and 13 environmental degradation 'hot spots'.

Key recommendations include:

- Engaging in a 'green economy' transition whereby sustainable reconstruction in the DRC includes capitalizing on the DRC's emerging social economy to generate 'green jobs' and other employment, including for former combatants.
- Diversifying energy sources as a basis for restarting economic activity. The DRC has a hydropower potential of 100,000 megawatts – or 13% of the world's hydropower potential – which could meet domestic needs and generate export revenue from the sale of electricity.
- Overcoming the considerable environmental liabilities of a century of mining – with immediate action to remediate mining pollution 'hotspots' in Katanga – by introducing a new, modern mining approach and formalizing the artisanal mining sector to introduce better environmental and occupational health standards.
- Promote trans-boundary collaboration for sustainable fisheries management in the internationally shared Great Rift Valley Lakes.
- Strengthening institutional capacities for disaster preparedness – such as epidemics, volcanic eruptions, floods and forest fires – including early warning systems.
- More detailed surveying and mapping of natural resources and integrating the economic valuation of ecosystem services into all development planning.

UNEP's *Post-Conflict Environmental Assessment of the Democratic Republic of Congo: Synthesis Report for Policy Makers* is available online at: www.unep.org/drcongo. The study includes input from more than 50 partners including NGOs, universities and the UN family.

Notes to Editors

The ***Synthesis Report for Policy Makers*** summarizes the main findings and recommended policy actions arising from UNEP's two-year Post-conflict Environmental Assessment. The synthesis publication and a technical study on water (also part of the assessment) are available in French and English online at: www.unep.org/drcongo.

The assessment focuses on the most urgent environmental and natural resource management issues confronting the DRC, including the links between conflict and natural resources, the environmental impacts of population displacement, forestry resources, protected areas, water resources, fisheries, climate change, mining and environmental governance. The main assessment report is due to be published in early 2012.

With this comprehensive study, UNEP sets the stage for long-term international assistance to support the DRC in the sustainable use of its natural resources. UNEP proposes to actively support its main government partner, the Environment Ministry, in leading this effort. A key step will be to prioritize the assessment's recommendations in a National Environmental Action Plan.

For more information please contact:

Nick Nuttall, UNEP Spokesperson / Head of Media +254 733 632 755 or nick.nuttall@unep.org

Silja Halle, UNEP Programme Officer +243 995 686 207 or +41 79 634 0899 or silja.halle@unep.org