

PRESS RELEASE

Wednesday 22 October 2008, 18.00 (GMT+2)

ICSU launches new programme to understand the human impact on Earth's life-support systems

Global scientific community approves new international research programme to fill in some of the crucial knowledge gaps identified in the Millennium Ecosystem Assessment

Maputo, Mozambique—The global scientific community has approved a new international research programme designed to understand the relationship between humans and the ecosystems that provide essential life-supporting services. The decision was made today at the General Assembly of the International Council for Science (ICSU) and should help provide the scientific knowledge needed to ensure the sustainable use of our valuable ecosystems.

Ecosystems provide benefits essential for life on Earth (food, water shelter, habitat, recovery of nutrients, soil formation and retention) as well as cultural and recreational services (spiritual, aesthetic, educational and eco-tourism). In 2005, the Millennium Ecosystem Assessment (MA) reported that, because of human actions, more than 60% of ecosystem services were degraded or being used unsustainably.

'Climate change, pollution, changes in land-use, and invasive species, coupled with population growth, increased consumption, globalization and urbanization, have put enormous pressure on the environment to provide the services that we need,' said Hal Mooney of the Department of Biological Sciences at Stanford University in California and chair of the expert group recommending the new programme.

While the MA provided a baseline of where society is at in relation to its use of the resources that support us all, there is an enormous amount of research that still needs to be done, particularly in the knowledge areas that were severely lacking when the MA was being carried out.

ICSU—along with UNESCO and the United Nations University—has taken the lead on this and will establish 'Ecosystem Change and Human Well-being', a major international programme to help fill some of those knowledge gaps. But this research needs to be done now for it to be part of a second MA, if it were to take place in the next 5-7 years.

Mooney said, 'In addition to science leaders this programme will engage people outside of the science community to set the agenda and use a participatory approach to decide on priorities. That way this programme will be well positioned to answer the policy relevant questions related to the monumental issues that society is facing in sustaining the environment that provides the goods and services that are vital for our survival.'

This programme is important not just to feed into an assessment but also because the science itself is important. It links both natural and social sciences with ecosystem services and integrates the three pillars of sustainable development—environment, economic and social.

'Taking an ecosystem services-based approach makes it clear that alleviating poverty and protecting the environment are parts of the same human development agenda, not adversaries', said Bob Scholes, a systems ecologist at the Council for Scientific and Industrial Research in South Africa.

'Developing countries, especially those in Africa, have a choice on how they raise the overall wealth of their people: once-off by destroying their abundant natural capital, or sustainably by responsible use.'

Media enquiries

Jacinta Legg, Science Communications Officer, ICSU. jacinta.legg@icsu.org, Tel: +33 1 45255777.
For journalists at the General Assembly, contact: Gisbert Glaser, Tel: +33 6 32310027.

The 29th ICSU GA and associated events are being hosted by AICIMO—the ICSU National Scientific Member in Mozambique—under the auspices of the Government of Mozambique and in cooperation with the ICSU Regional Office for Africa. For more information and details of the GA programme:

www.icsu.org/3_mediacentre/GA_29.html

About ICSU

Founded in 1931, ICSU is a non-governmental organization with a global membership of national scientific bodies (114 Members, representing 134 countries) and International Scientific Unions (29 Members). The Council is frequently called upon to speak on behalf of the global scientific community and to act as an advisor in matters ranging from the environment to conduct in science. ICSU's activities focus on three areas: planning and coordinating research; science for policy; and strengthening the Universality of Science.

About the 'Ecosystem Change and Human Well-being' programme

'Ecosystem Change and Human Well-being' is a 10-year global research initiative that will build upon and strengthen existing global change research programmes such as DIVERSITAS (an international programme of biodiversity science), the International Human Dimensions Programme on Global Environmental Change (IHDP), and the International Geosphere-Biosphere Programme (IGBP). The goal is to foster coordinated research to understand the dynamics of the relationship between humans and ecosystems. The initiative is intended to stimulate a major advance in understanding of these critical issues. The initiative would seek to answer the most fundamental and policy-relevant questions concerning factors driving changes in ecosystem services, the impacts of those changes on human well-being, and opportunities to better manage human use and impacts on ecosystems.

More information is available in the Executive Summary, from the report recommending the programme: www.icsu.org/3_mediacentre/29GA/Ecosystem_Change_Executive_Summary.pdf