

A Keynote by Her Excellency Razan Al Mubarak on 22 June 2021 for the opening of the International Conference on Forests, Trees and Agroforestry in Kunming, China.

Thank you all for joining what seems to be a sunny day in Kunming.

Thank you, Prof. Xu, for this opportunity to help open the Kunming conference on Forests trees and Agroforestry in 2021.

My name is Razan Al Mubarak. I am the founding Managing Director of the Mohammed Bin Zayed Species Conservation Fund, a global organization dedicated to the conservation of plants, animals, and fungi based in Abu Dhabi, U.A.E.

It is truly an honor to participate in this seminal conference, preceding the CBD and advocating the fundamental status of plants for the conservation agenda. In fact like many of you here I see plants as an integral focal point in the overall Sustainable Development Agenda and in the next few minutes I will highlight some of the reasons why:

1- **First and foremost: People**

We have learned over centuries from Ancient China to Mesopotamia that to ensure a place where both nature and people thrive, we need to conserve plants. They are the photosynthetic mesh that keeps life intact.

Plants feed us, clothe us, and delight us.

They are the green wedge between plenty and poverty. They provide building material, charcoal, forage, food and medicine. As such, the conversation, restoration, and rehabilitation of plants is existential to our survival.

- 2- **Second:** As we enter the “Decade of the Ecological Restoration” **Plants and Fungi are at the heart of this restoration** and a key component in ensuring the successful implementation of both the CBD and the UNFCCC. That is IF we rebuild landscapes at scale not only to sequester huge volumes of carbon but as importantly to repair watersheds, shelter communities from floods and landslides and allow biodiversity to recover.

3- **Third: Our Diet**

A vital part of our new relationship with carbon is the balancing of our diets: we need to reduce our overdependence on meat as well as increasing our adoption of a largely plant based diet. The substrate of the global transition is our collective heritage of food and wild crop relatives.

The revival of this heritage by crop breeders, geneticists, community groups and botanists should be recognized as one of our greatest conservation achievements. We need to celebrate that rescue and continue to engage, across disciplines on what the future of food could look like.

4- Lastly: The extinction crisis:

The ongoing Red Listing of the world's plants is showing us that extinction is accelerating. A recent Red List study of the endemic dryland trees of Madagascar has revealed that 982 species are threatened with extinction; similarly, a study of East African endemic plant species found over 200 species at the highest level of threat.

To reverse this extinction trend there is a need to bolster in-situ and ex-situ conservation programmes. And it is clear that this conference, elegantly curated, addresses the importance of trees and forests to the conservation of biological diversity as a whole.

Conclusion:

Ladies and gentlemen, for too long plant conservation has been overlooked as a background issue. If we want a green "regrowth" after COVID and we want to implement the vital goals of both the CBD and the UNFCCC, we need to fully incorporate plants into our conservation and low carbon planning.

It is time that the extraordinary diverse community of plant and fungi conservationists are brought into the heart of conservation and the Sustainable Development Agenda. This conference held here today only months before the CBD is evidence that this is clearly happening.

Thank you.