

**UNITED NATIONS EDUCATIONAL,
SCIENTIFIC AND CULTURAL ORGANIZATION
(UNESCO)**

**Address by
Mr Walter Erdelen**

**Assistant Director-General
for Natural Sciences**

**on the occasion of the 22nd International
Coordinating Council of the Programme
on Man and the Biosphere (MAB)**

UNESCO, 31 May 2010

Mr Chairman of the MAB Council,
Distinguished members of the International Coordinating Council of MAB,
Excellencies,
Ladies and Gentlemen,

It is an honour and a pleasure to welcome you today to UNESCO Headquarters for the 22nd session of the International Coordinating Council of the Man and the Biosphere Programme.

In 1971, Mr René Maheu, Director-General of UNESCO, informed the First International Coordinating Council (ICC) session that the General Conference had decided that the MAB Programme should focus “on the general study of the structure and functioning of the biosphere and its ecological regions, on the systematic observation of the changes brought about by man in the biosphere and its resources, on the study of the overall effects of these changes upon the human species itself and on the education and information to be provided on these subjects”. This MAB vision is as valid today as it was back in the early seventies.

Our understanding of the “changes brought about by man in the biosphere and its resources” and the “overall effects of these changes upon the human species itself” are perhaps broader and deeper today than in 1971. For example, climate change and global warming consequences are better understood, and their implications for the future of human-environment relations better appreciated today than in the late 1960s when MAB was conceived. Sustainable development has attained consensus as a global priority for international cooperation. MAB, which emphasized an integrated approach to natural resource use and conservation, can be counted among those UN initiatives that conceptually, many years ago, anticipated the currently accepted concept of sustainable development.

However, the architecture of international environmental relations has considerably changed since the early 1970s: the number of UN and UNESCO Member States has nearly tripled; the role of civil society organizations, including non-governmental organizations, the private sector, and location-specific stakeholder participation in addressing issues and problems of environment and development, has been encouraged and promoted.

The MAB Programme itself, as it prepares to commemorate its 40th anniversary at the time of the 23rd session of the ICC in 2011, has undergone changes. The original 14 projects that covered ecosystem ecology, conservation of natural areas, impacts of large infrastructure, as well as pollution and other human interventions on the environment, have coalesced around two principal operational pillars as established by the 21st session of the ICC in May 2009: first, networks promoting interdisciplinary scientific cooperation in drylands, mountains, urban areas, coastal zones and small islands, forests and other

natural and human-modified ecosystems; and secondly the World Network of Biosphere Reserves (WNBR), currently comprising 553 sites in 107 countries.

The concept of the biosphere reserve, originally applied to promoting community involvement in the management of conservation areas, has evolved into covering land and seascapes that contribute to addressing regional sustainability issues, as outlined in the Madrid Action Plan. Sustainable development is foreseen as a relationship between the three functions of a biosphere reserve: biodiversity conservation, socio-economic well-being of human communities, and research and monitoring dedicated to learning and knowledge building for promoting sustainable and mutually beneficial interactions between these two.

The Madrid Action Plan, adopted under the leadership of the MAB-ICC Chair, H.E. Mr Henri Djombo, has laid out a “road map” for the World Network of Biosphere Reserves for 2008-2013 that fully takes into account the changes that I have outlined above and recognizes the potential of biosphere reserves to contribute to sustainable development.

In reviewing the progress in the implementation of the Madrid Action Plan, this MAB Council will give significant attention to the World Network of Biosphere Reserves and the progress made in the implementation of the associated Madrid Action Plan. Not only will you have the pleasant task of adding new sites to the World Network of Biosphere Reserves but also explore more difficult questions concerning the transformation of pre-Seville, i.e. pre-1995 biosphere reserves, to modern ones that are dedicated to illustrating sustainable development principles and practices. It is therefore a most timely ICC session because biosphere reserves around the world are being called upon to address an increasing range of issues, concerns and opportunities, such as in the areas of climate change and the building of green economies.

On behalf of the Director-General, Ms Irina Bokova, who is a staunch advocate of MAB and the World Network of Biosphere Reserves, let me assure you that UNESCO will do its utmost to assist its Member States to address these challenges through a strong MAB Programme and to seize the opportunities provided by the WNBR for promoting sustainability and international cooperation, and that we are looking forward to the results of your deliberations during the 22nd MAB-ICC, which we trust will be very successful.

Thank you.