THE INTERNATIONAL COUNCIL OF WOMEN

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by Wendy Rainbird, Advisor.

“Cities and Nature: Planning for the Future” UN Habitat, December 2022.

There is a saying: 4minutes without air,

4 days without water,

4 weeks without food,

We die.

It is time now for urban planning to work **with** the natural world rather than see it for exploitation. The natural world, the ecosystems around us, provides humans as well as other species with air, water and food. Well-being and aesthetics matter too.

In the executive summary of the publication “Cities and Nature: Planning for the Future”, it states: “Caring for nature would not only prevent the sixth extinction of non-human species but also **prevent the collapse of human settlements whose infrastructure fundamentally depends on the ecosystem services** that biodiversity provides.

The 2022 Global Biodiversity Framework shows the importance of the area, quality, and connectivity of green and blue spaces within urban areas but does not recognize the **role of urban land expansion as a driver of habitat loss**. “(Ref. https://unhabitat.org/sites/default/files/2022/12/white\_paper\_cities\_and\_nature\_rev2.pdf)

**“Over 90% of the cities in the world’s 36 biodiversity hotspots are expanding in direct conflict** with biodiversity and climate risk. The conversion of natural habitat for human habitation is accelerating, with **290,000 sq km of natural habitat likely to be lost to urban growth** between 2000 and 2030.

These trends are further compounded by the **‘land greedy’ nature of contemporary urban expansion patterns**, yielding a land consumption growth rate (4.84% per year) double that of urban population growth (2.18% per year); land continues to be consumed even in countries where the urban population is not increasing at all.” (ibid)

Cities are recognizing the need to protect landscapes in their vicinity, with approaches such as **extending ecological corridors and connecting green patches for** biodiversity protection and climate resilience, and the knock-on benefits of ecotourism, air purification, etc.” [Such natural places help human well-being, as many found especially during the Covid pandemic, and natural areas are aesthetically pleasing, and absorb carbon dioxide, so they have multiple benefits. My comments.]

“However, we need to shift to systematic, effective and properly **targeted interventions of biodiversity preservation and conservation** in the face of urban expansion, both present and future.

Many high-profile nature-based solutions have been applied at limited site-based scales, as retrofits to relatively wealthy, mature urban environments. This leaves a **gap in preservation-related efforts, particularly in fast- growing, resource-constrained contexts**.” (ibid)

Several **critical challenges remain**:  
• A dichotomic conception of the natural and built. [ We need to bring together our understanding the inter-dependence of people and the natural world. My comments.]

• Lack of clarity on where degradation is occurring. [ eg. Others would have seen the shocking images of plastics in some river systems yet such degradations continue!]

\*Difficulty of assigning the full value of biodiversity. [ Valuing natural places matters.]

\*Resistance to cooperating across jurisdictions. [Resisting the silos in which people manage urban “developments”.]

\*Failure to slow degradation at the peri-urban edge. [ Eg. In parts of Australia, forests that are the habitat of koalas are being cut down for urban expansion. Koalas could become extinct in those places!].

It makes sense to think about where and how urban planners and ecologists look to preserve habitats, conserve areas from further harm, restore some degraded places, and create more natural places in urban settings. For example: Restoring wetlands, or rehabilitating mangrove areas, restoring river corridors as pathways and recreational places, planting trees for reducing the heat effect of concrete and bitumen surfaces in cities.

“Local officials need to be empowered with **decision-making tools that make these benefits explicit** and easier to implement. **Multidisciplinary mapping is a cost-effective means of equipping governments to make educated decisions about where to conserve or convert habitat.**

**Spatial planning and design also require adequate regulations and financing** to deliver the change we need. Cities have enormous potential for biodiversity. Often, they are in important biodiversity hotspots near water- ways, ecozone transitions, and migration paths. While we have collectively done little to strengthen the inter- face between cities and nature, **applying proactive effort now would be extraordinarily productive**. “(ibid).

“Meanwhile, the mistakes of wasteful and dangerous land conversion near cities continue to be replicated at ever greater scales. Sawyer et al (2021) frame this as ’bypass urbanism’ that ’usually does not emanate from a coherent planning initiative...but...emerges through a convergence of interests over large areas of land at the geographical periphery of urban regions’. ‘[H]igh- ways, gated communities, condominium towers, luxury residences and other real estate projects...have been rapidly built in the past decades over huge areas that once were sparsely settled agricultural lands, wetlands, nature reserves, *terrains vagues* or even contaminated areas.’ (ibid page 7).

Several targets of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) situate biodiversity and urbanization in the same frame of reference. Target 11.3 aims to mitigate urban sprawl, target 11.7 to increase green public space, and target 11.a to support regional development planning. Target 15.9 calls for integrating ecosystem and biodiversity values into national and local planning and development processes (UN, 2015). (ibid p.12)

2023 is the start of the UN Decade for Ecosystem Restoration that states:” There has never been a more urgent need to revive damaged ecosystems than now.” Ecosystems support all life on Earth. The healthier our ecosystems are, the healthier the planet - and its people. The UN Decade on Ecosystem Restoration aims to prevent, halt and reverse the degradation of ecosystems on every continent and in every ocean. It can help to end poverty, combat climate change and prevent a mass extinction. It will only succeed if everyone plays a part.

National Councils of Women members could advocate for the more holistic thinking involved in the decision making about cities, towns, and our links to the natural world.