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UN calls for better management of fish stocks

Rising demand for seafood and other marine produce will lead to a collapse of today's commercial fish stocks by 2050 unless better management is introduced, exemplifying the challenges facing Governments in a globalized world, according to a new United Nations report released Monday.

"If rising living standards and inefficient methods of production and consumption intensify pressure on nature's natural resources, from fish, freshwater and the atmosphere to forests and fragile lands, globalization could become a spectacular failure rather than a savior," UN Environment Programme (UNEP) Executive Director Achim Steiner said.

The UNEP Global Environment Outlook (GEO) Year Book 2007 notes that climate change may aggravate the fishery situation by increasing the acidity of oceans and seas and bleaching coral reefs, important nurseries for fish, and one management technique for countering the collapse includes a dramatic expansion of marine protected areas.

Experts have found that such areas, which currently cover just 0.6% of the world's oceans, increase numbers of fish species by over a fifth and can boost catches in waters nearby, and governments at the World Summit on Sustainable Development, WSSD in 2002 backed a plan to develop a network of marine reserves by 2012.

But the GEO Year Book, written to inform the debate being held by Environment Ministers attending UNEP's 24th Governing Council/Global Ministerial Environment Forum in Nairobi, Kenya, this week, stresses that the pace at which new marine reserves are being listed means the goal will be achieved three decades after the collapse of today's commercial fisheries.

"At the current rate of designation, the target will not be reached until 2085," it adds.

"Globalization is one of the defining issues of our time. Wealth is being generated on an unprecedented scale and millions are being lifted out of poverty. But a big question mark hangs over its future and its sustainability for current and future generations," Mr. Steiner said.

"The question is not whether globalization is good or bad but whether we have in place the regulations, creative economic instruments, guidelines, rules and partnerships that ensure it delivers the widest

possible benefits at the minimum price to the planet and thus to its people – in other words do we have the international environmental governance structures in place, firing on all cylinders, to match and guide the powerful engine of globalization.”

That is the question ministers at this week’s meeting must answer, Mr. Steiner added.

The Year Book outlines a range of options to steer globalization onto a more intelligent, environmentally, economically responsible and sustainable course if more widely deployed and acknowledges the importance of responsible business and the power of consumerism to direct globalization.

Measures cited include expanding a system of certification of forestry, now covering some 10.5 million hectares, 3%, of natural production forests, to other natural resources and complimenting it by green procurement policies.

Environmental accountability by lending institutions can also help by predicating loans on higher environmental, agricultural and social standards.

The Year Book also underlines how relatively small amounts of well-targeted and creative financial support can radically propel markets onto a more sustainable track, citing the case of a three-year-old partnership between organizations like UNEP and two Indian banks aimed at promoting solar power on the Indian sub-continent.

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