

EDITORIAL

The 19th special session of the Governing Council of the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) and the Global Ministerial Environment Forum (GMEF) took place at the beginning of February 2006. Due to the extensive UN/GA report in this issue, there was not enough space for an in-depth report on the UNEP meeting, which will follow in the next issue.

Two very remarkable things occurred at the UNEP/GMEF meeting: The first was that over 120 ministers of the environment participated in the meeting, something that has never happened before. The second was that this was the last time that Prof. Klaus Töpfer would act as UNEP's Executive Director at the Governing Council. Both facts had a strong impact on the whole proceedings. Not only in the final plenary, but also during the conference, there was not one delegation that did not praise Klaus Töpfer's achievements but there is a general feeling of uncertainty on what will follow.

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Another development within the UN system was the announcement this month by Kofi Annan of the formation of a high-level panel to explore how the UN system could work more coherently and effectively in the areas of development, humanitarian assistance and the environment. This action follows the call in the Outcome Document adopted at the 2005 World Summit for the UN Secretary-General to commission work on how to improve United Nations system-wide coherence across the various areas mentioned. The 15-member panel is expected to complete its work by mid-2006, to allow for presentation of its recommendations to the UN General Assembly in September 2006.

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We are glad to report that with the ratification in January by Hungary, the Carpathian Convention has now come into force. The Slovak Republic, Ukraine and the Czech Republic had previously ratified. UNEP has played a key role in developing the Convention, which is aimed at balancing the economic needs of the people with the need to conserve the environment, and also covers Poland, Romania and Serbia and Montenegro.

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Readers may have been following the dispute in the US media on the story that the politically appointed public affairs people at NASA HQ were "rejecting" the interpretation of climate data gathered by scientists working for NASA. The main scientist involved, Jim Hansen, had noted in a well-received presentation that, given the newest data on global warming, there was perhaps only another 10-year window of opportunity to tackle rising growth rates of carbon dioxide before the planet would be committed to a "dangerous" anthropogenic climate change. It is the same scientific problem world-wide. But the apparent desire of some vested interests to limit the flow of climate information is probably counter-productive and will only succeed in alienating those scientists who are at the forefront of the fight against global warming.

Wolfgang R. Steury -

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