

# World Wide Web of Life

The theme of this year's observance of World Environment Day was *Connect with the World Wide Web of Life*. A choice, in the words of the UN Secretary General, that reflects the need for each of us to recognise our role in preserving our fragile planet and the ecosystems, resources and natural processes that bind us all together.

Cuba's capital Havana, and the old Italian capital of Turin, were the hosts of this year's celebrations. Klaus Töpfer, Executive Director of the United Nations Envi-

ronment Programme (UNEP) said that for the first time, "our two main hosts will be bridging the needs and environmental aspirations of the developing and developed world." This year, there will also be links with Hue in Vietnam and Nairobi, Kenya.

One of the activities in Havana was a workshop, organised by UNEP, on developing guidelines covering the import and export of genetically modified organisms, known as living modified organisms (LMOs) under the

Biosafety or Cartagena Protocol of the Convention on Biological Diversity.

The Meeting discussed ways in which developing countries could acquire the scientific skills to assess whether a shipment of gene-modified animals, plants or microbes is safe and suitable for their country.

Jorge Illueca, Director of UNEP's Division of Environmental Conventions, said: "It is appropriate that a workshop on capacity building takes place in Cuba. The issue of genetically modified organisms has become a global one involving all sectors of society from governments, industry and farmers to consumers and environmental groups. The debate surrounding this new biotechnology is very much at the heart of this year's World Environment Day theme."

While many developing countries still lack the expertise to make judgements on LMO imports, Cuba is one of the developing countries at the forefront of the biotechnology revolution. Jorge Illueca said that, "its Institute of Biotechnology, one of the finest in the world, employs close to 2,000 professional staff. Exports, mainly in the field of pharmaceuticals, but also in agricultural biotechnology, have been worth some US\$ 900 million in recent years."

"We want to learn from developing countries like Cuba and others active in this field, including Thailand, China and Argentina, so that all developing countries have the

expertise to accept or reject imports of LMOs on sound scientific and environmental grounds."

Klaus Töpfer, Executive Director of UNEP, said that as our view of the world is continually challenged by new information, and as we become more aware of the consequences of our collective actions, it becomes harder for us to ignore the quality of our surrounding environment. "Indigenous peoples recognised that the relationship between humans, plants, animals and all life forms was sacred. They lived within a community that nurtured relationships, strengthened communications and created bonds between people and the natural world. Globalisation is not synonymous with uniformity. We learn from nature that diversity is a precondition for stability."

"Human beings are a part of a vast web of interconnected species and systems that fit together in intricate ways," he said, "enabling the whole system to continue." However, he added that, "there are limits to how much our population can grow, and how much we can alter our surrounding environment, without causing changes that will reverberate throughout that web and jeopardise our own future."

The most important initiative marking World Environment Day was the launch of the Millennium Ecosystem Assessment in Turin, which will provide vital information on such questions. (For details, see page 220.) (MJ)

