

REFERENCES TO OTHER TOPICS

Polar Bears in the Spotlight

The five polar-bear Range States (United States, Canada, Russia, Norway and Greenland), signatories of the International Agreement on the Conservation of Polar Bears and their Habitat, came together again in Tromsø (Norway) to consider ways to help the world's polar bears in a rapidly warming Arctic. The discussions were opened to NGO participation, although the member states had originally sought to hold the meeting behind closed doors, as a means of avoiding interventions that might force the discussions beyond their mandate. Prior to the meeting, several NGOs had actively lobbied for the meeting to address "climate-change-related" impacts on polar bear populations, an expansion which some feared would side-track the specialist interactions of the polar bear meeting into a broad discussion of controversial climate issues being negotiated in other fora. Polar bears have already been a sensitive and controversial topic, given the threat they pose to indigenous populations. No formal report of the meeting is yet available, however the news indicates decisions included the need to "send a clear message to the climate meeting in Copenhagen" about the urgency of reversing the loss of polar ice.

Assessment of Beijing Olympics

During the UNEP Governing Council meeting, UNEP released a 139-page report. It indicates that the Games met or exceeded many of the host city's environmental pledges. Nonetheless, the report adds that more could have been done to engage NGOs and to cut the Games' carbon footprint. UNEP's assessment, in addition to assessing Beijing's achievements and challenges, also provides key recommendations for organisers of future Olympic and other sporting events. (http://www.unep.org/publications/search/pub_details_s.asp?ID=4018). (ATL)

State of the World's Forests 2009 Report

The FAO Report *State of the World's Forests 2009*, released last month, focuses on "The dual challenges [that] economic turmoil and climate change are bringing to the management of forests". The Report emphasises the need to reform some forestry institutions and increase investments in science and technology as key components of addressing these challenges – activities that will place a significant demand on national budgets in the short term, but may shore up resources and proceeds from their use over the longer term. On the other hand, it notes that the economic crisis is expected to have a long-term impact on wood industries, where global demand is thought to have peaked in 2005–6.

Whales and Whaling under Scrutiny

Following on from the challenging results of previous meetings and in preparation for the coming International Whaling Commission meeting, key international discussions have further examined the issues. One meeting brought together a group dubbed the *Small Working Group on the Future of the IWC*. The Commission also sponsored a meeting on Climate Change and Whales, following up on a forward-looking process started more than 12 years ago to address this question. Another important meeting brought together the *Pew Commission on Whale Conservation in the 21st Century*. (Detailed report in the next issue of *EPL*).

CITES COP-15 Postponed

The Government of Qatar has informed the CITES Secretariat that it is no longer able to host the 15th COP in January 2010. The Secretariat is in discussions with Qatar to find new dates for the meeting. It will announce the new deadlines for the submission of documents as soon as these are known. (http://www.cites.org/eng/news/sundry/2009/CoP15_postponed.shtml). (ATL)

EU: Ministers Support GMO Ban

The majority of the EU Council of Ministers for the Environment have voted with Austria and Hungary against the European Council's proposal to make these two countries lift their bans on the cultivation of two types of genetically modified sweetcorn. This will allow those two countries, together with France and Greece, to continue to ban GMOs within their own national territory. The move responds to a World Trade Organization (WTO) decision which held that the bans were not sufficiently supported by scientific and other data, and called for their removal.

Australia: Oil "Disaster" Hits Prime Beaches

The Government of Queensland Australia has declared dozens of beaches to be a "disaster zone" after 40 miles of once-pristine sands were fouled by an oil slick, threatening local wildlife. The Queensland premier, Anna Bligh, has been quoted as describing it as "[possibly] the worst environmental disaster Queensland has ever seen". The government will be presenting the owners of the Hong Kong-flagged, British-owned ship with a very large compensation claim. The ship was detained in port, still leaking oil. In addition, the owner faces fines of up to Australian \$2 million.

Mexico: Amendments Would Allow Experimental Planting of GM Corn

A decision of the Mexican government will allow the planting of genetically modified corn and maize for scientific research purposes. Under a former law, it was illegal to bring GM corn and maize specimens into the country, or to plant them in controlled situations. The law will not prevent separate action by states and localities to ban GM corn, in which case even research-related activities would be banned. See: http://www.cibogem.gob.mx/NORMATIVIDAD/CODIGO_PENAL_FEDERAL.pdf.

The change was made closely following the release of a scientific study conducted by scientists from Mexico, the Netherlands and the United States which found that GM corn strains had, in fact, contaminated native corn varieties growing in southern Mexico.

Sierra Leone: Gola Forest a National Park?

President Koroma has called for the revocation of all mining licences covering the Gola Forest Reserve, with no new licences to be issued. The actions are the strongest signal of President Koroma's commitment to declaring the Gola Forest a National Park. The action is taken with the support and involvement of UN Secretary General Ban Ki-moon, whose executive representative, Michael von der Schulenburg, underlined that there is indeed an international, national and local interest in the conservation of the Gola Forest and the common objective should be therefore to preserve this unique part of Sierra Leone for present and future generations. The creation of the Gola Forest Park is financed by a number of donors, including the EU, the French Government, the UK Government, Conservation International and the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds (RSPB).

US:

– Senate: No Derailment of Endangered Species Protection

In reaffirmation of his Administration's commitment to the environment, President Obama has restored some of the protections for endangered species that were stripped in the final weeks of the Bush administration. This rule change went to Congress as part of the *Fiscal 2009 Omnibus Spending Bill*, so that it could go immediately into effect, avoiding the lengthy comment period normally required. In effect, this approach closes the brief window of opportunity that would have opened for developers to take action that threatens endangered species. (H.J.RES.18.)

– Control on Pesticide Use

The US's 6th Circuit Court of Appeals (second highest tier of the federal judiciary) issued a decision that would consider any pesticides that enter surface or ground water to be "pollutants", even when those pesticides were being applied according to normal agricultural practices. The case interpreted a regulatory change adopted by the EPA. Formerly, when pesticides were being applied, they were considered to be "products" rather than "chemical wastes" and thus exempt from strict regulation under the US Clean Water Act. The court's decision noted that, to the extent that it is not deposited on the plants or other media that they are designed for, the excess pesticide (overspray, spillage and run-off) should be regulated as a pollutant (*US v. Cundiff*, 555 F.3d 200 (6th Cir. Kentucky)). Two ranking members of the US Congress sent a letter to the EPA urging them to petition the court to rehear the ruling.

(All References written by TRY unless otherwise noted.) 