

Jón Gunnar Ottósson: “Chairman’s report”

At the opening of the 29th meeting of the Standing Committee of the Bern Convention on the Conservation of European Wildlife and Natural Habitats, held in Bern, Switzerland, 23. – 26. November 2009

Conseiller fédéral, other Swiss representatives, Director of Culture, Cultural and Natural Heritage of the Council of Europe, other staff from the Council of Europe, Dear delegates!

Welcome you all to this 29th meeting of the Bern Convention on the Conservation of European Wildlife and Natural Habitats. This important regional treaty on nature conservation was negotiated at the Council of Europe in the late 1970’s and was opened for signature on 19th September 1979 here in Bern, on the occasion of the Third European Ministerial Conference on the Environment. This means that that the Bern Convention is celebrating its 30th anniversary this year.

The Standing Committee of the Convention, the governing body of the Convention, including all Contracting Parties as well as observer states and organizations, both governmental and non-governmental, meets annually at the Council of Europe premises in Strasbourg. This year we make an exception and meet for the first time outside Strasbourg.

I wish to thank the Swiss authorities for their kind invitation to host this 29th meeting of the Standing Committee here in Bern, marking the 30th anniversary of the Convention. We thank the Swiss authorities sincerely for giving us the pleasure to celebrate the anniversary here in the locations where the Convention was adopted three decades ago.

Having said that I declare this 29th meeting of the Standing Committee open.

First, our sincere thanks to **Mr. Moritz Leuenberger, minister (Conseiller fédéral), Head of the Federal Department of Environment, Transport, Energy and Communications**, for honouring us with his presence in the opening session of our meeting, as well as **Mr. Andreas Richenbacher, the representative of the Cantonal Government** and **Ms. Regula Rytz, Municipal Councillor of the City of Bern.**

- Our sincere thanks also to **the Swiss staff** for all the administrative and logistical support provided during the preparation of the meeting.
- And a special and warm thanks to our good colleague, the Swiss delegate in the Standing Committee, **Mr. Olivier Biber**, who has worked hard behind the scenes to make this meeting come true here in Bern.

- This year is not only the 30th anniversary of the signature of the Convention, but it also marks the “maturity” of the membership of the Bern Convention, having reached 50 Contracting Parties.

The Convention has now 50 Contracting Parties, with Bosnia and Herzegovina participating as full Party at this meeting, while Montenegro has completed its ratification procedure and the Convention will enter into force in that country in February 2010. Georgia deposited its instrument of ratification 19th of November, bring the number of Parties to 50 in this anniversary year!

- The Bureau has been busy this year reviewing the programme of activities, as well as dealing with the complaints received and the treatment of the various case files. This year, it has also looked into possible options for changes in the membership of the Bureau and elections of its members. We will discuss these options later today as well as related proposals for amendments of the Rules of Procedure .
- Regarding the Programme of Activities for 2009, all planned activities have been successfully carried out, except for the preparation of a draft Charter on Angling and Biodiversity, which has been postponed to 2010 due to unavailability of the consultant in this year. All the planned meetings of the expert groups were held according to schedule. Later on we will have reports from these groups, The Invasive Species group, the one on Biodiversity and Climate Change, the new group on Island Biodiversity and the Emerald group - and deal with their proposed recommendations.
- The running of the programme of activities scheduled for 2009 in a satisfactory and efficient way is primarily the work of our good and very competent Secretariat which has managed the task along with several other duties. We thank all the members of the Secretariat and not the least the head of the Secretariat, Carolina Lasen-Diaz, for their work as well as their important part in preparing this meeting of the Standing Committee.
- The main task of the Bureau is to take administrative and organizational decisions in between meetings of the Standing Committee. The atmosphere at the Bureau meetings has been very friendly and relaxed and all pending issues solved without difficulties. For this I thank not only my Bureau colleagues, the former Chair, Veronique Herrenschmidt and the Vice-chair Jan Plesnic, but also our good staff at the Council of Europe.
- In 2009, our activities have continued to be carried out in co-operation with the Convention on Biological Diversity and other international biodiversity conventions. A good example is the finalisation of a Memorandum of Co-operation with the Secretariat of the Convention on the Conservation of Migratory Species of Wild Animals (CMS), which will be formally signed at the end of our meeting this afternoon.

- In addition, we have continued our partnership with relevant international organisations, governmental and non-governmental. In this case, I'd like to highlight the ongoing co-operation with the European Environment Agency, and a new agreement under discussions to continue the development of the Emerald Network. The Secretariat has also agreed on a Memorandum of Co-operation with IUCN, to replace the Agreement signed back in 1962 (long before Bern Convention!) between the Council of Europe and IUCN. This time, the agreement focuses on improving synergies and co-operation on matters dealt with by the Bern Convention.
- I would like to stress as well the important coordination and exchange of information carried out on a regular basis with the European Commission. I welcome the new focal point for the Convention in DG Environment, Ms Marta KACZYNSKA, and offer her my full co-operation and assistance. The Bern Convention Secretariat participates actively in the meetings of the EU Coordination Group for Biodiversity and Nature, and this year it was also invited to the EU Nature Directors meeting hosted by the Czech Republic in May 2009. In addition, we participate in the European Commission ad hoc expert group on biodiversity and climate change.
- This year, the Bern Convention has followed the ongoing debates on the post-2010 targets, both at the EU- and international level. We intend to make practical contributions next year at the Conference in Madrid on "Post-2010 Biodiversity Vision and Target - The role of Protected Areas and Ecological Networks in Europe", to be held at the beginning of the International Year of Biodiversity. We have participated actively in the preparation of the conference in close cooperation with the Spanish hosts and the European Commission.
- Finally, as regards co-operation with the EU, I would like to thank the European Commission for their financial support of the project "Support for the implementation of the CBD's Programme of Work on Protected Areas in the EU Neighbourhood Policy East Area and Russia". This 3-year project aims to identify part of the potential Emerald sites in seven countries of Central and Eastern Europe and the South Caucasus. The first meeting of the Steering Committee of the project was held in Strasbourg in September 2009.
- Next year will be critical for biodiversity conservation and sustainable use, as we take stock of the 2010 target and decide on a future vision and targets. By the time of our next meeting, at the end of next year, the United Nations General Assembly high-level event on biodiversity, and CBD COP-10 will have taken place. We will therefore have an opportunity at our next Standing Committee meeting to discuss the outcomes of decisions taken at the global level.
- In the meantime, the Bern Convention will participate actively in the CBD SBSTTA-14 meeting to be held in Nairobi in May 2010, as well as in CBD COP-10 in Japan next October. At these meetings there will be three priority issues for the Bern Convention on the agenda for in-depth consideration by the CBD: Biodiversity and Climate Change, Protected areas, and Sustainable use. For the first one, we plan to

organise a joint side-event with the European Commission at SBSTTA-14 to showcase Europe's work on biodiversity and climate change, including the guidance developed by the Bern Convention.

- Dear colleagues. The Bern Convention came into force in 1982. In its 27 years of existence it has proven to be a very important and effective tool to achieve our common aims to conserve the wild nature of Europe. It is in fact the common foundation of the nature conservation legislation in Europe and possibly the main reason for our success in harmonising national legislations. It has not only been the platform for close co-operation between countries on nature conservation issues but also an important forum for a necessary dialogue between governments and NGO's, something that has proven to be invaluable throughout the years.
- We must recognise that the Bern Convention has turned out to be a more solid and flexible instrument than anticipated by many some years ago. Being 30 years old it is one of the oldest environmental treaties which have nevertheless kept in line with changing times. The Convention has adjusted to new thinking, to new challenges and evolved to keep its position as the main legal instrument for nature conservation in Europe and neighbouring countries. Also it has established itself by its various programmes, strategies and other activities as an important regional implementation tool for the global UN Convention on biodiversity, the CBD.
- This 29th meeting of the Standing Committee marks the 30th anniversary of the Bern Convention at a critical time for biodiversity in Europe and beyond. I therefore call on all of you to join efforts to agree on a meaningful vision for the future of biological diversity in Europe. We all recognise that the 2010 target to halt the loss of biodiversity will not be reached. But it has generated important actions for sustainable use and conservation of biodiversity at national, regional and global level. The target to halt the loss of biodiversity is still valid and even more urgent than before. There is a need for a similar, ambitious overall target beyond 2010, emphasizing the intrinsic value of biodiversity and the need for healthy ecosystems for human well being.
- Later on we will be discussing a draft Bern Declaration addressing the issue and hopefully adopting a meaningful and ambitious Declaration to take away from this anniversary meeting here in Bern. A Declaration that helps us create a clear vision for the future.
- In this context, I would like to remind us all of the progress made since the Rio Summit in 1992 and the need to concentrate our energies to improve the state of Europe's natural heritage. I believe that the Bern Convention is a unique instrument to help European countries achieve this goal in the years to come.
