



**Hereby the speech given by Angelo Caserta, Regional Director at BirdLife European Division, at the opening of the photo exhibition "Biodiversity on the Brink", held on 26 January 2010 in the European Parliament.**

### **The five elements**

Ladies and Gentlemen, dear Chris, dear colleagues, dear friends, my dearest family:

I had the privilege of spending my childhood holidays in wild protected areas, enjoying the beauty of nature and the richness of biodiversity and I was the same age as my son Raffael, when I saw for the first time a **Golden Eagle** in the National Park of Gran Paradiso, in the north of Italy.

39 years later I still remember the emotions and the sense of beauty and peace. These emotions help me to carry out my role of Regional Director of BirdLife International, a major conservation global partnership, with 42 members in Europe.

I am very pleased to welcome all of you tonight, with 5 words: **Earth, Water, Air, Fire, Aether.**

These are the five elements, which in several philosophies are though to be essential materials of all existent aggregates and phenomena. They are essential to life and they are intrinsically linked to healthy ecosystems and biodiversity.

#### **Earth**

Earth is the planet we live in. Earth is also the soil and soil biodiversity is fundamental to provide nutrients for plants and natural and inexpensive pest control.

We depend on agriculture and agriculture depends on soil fertility.

But the current intensive agriculture practices and the EU Common Agriculture Policy are responsible for the degradation of ecosystems and the loss of biodiversity.

Indeed, common farmland birds, like the **Corn Bunting** shown in a wheatfield in Spain on one of the posters, are disappearing across Europe.

#### **Water**

Wetland ecosystems absorb and recycle essential nutrients, treat sewage, and cleanse wastes. Trees and forest soils purify water as it flows through forest ecosystems.

Forests and grasslands protect landscapes against erosion, nutrient loss, and landslides. We now realise, for example, that healthy ecosystems help to reduce the damage caused by floods.

Water reminds us again our planet. 71% of it is covered by oceans. They represent a reservoir of biodiversity and wildlife.

Yet, several species, like the **Bluefin Tuna** and the **Albatross**, are today endangered because of unsustainable fishing practices and an obsolete Common Fisheries Policy.

#### **Air**

Air recalls us a vital service provided by healthy eco-systems. Plants help regulate the composition of the atmosphere, trapping carbon and thus contributing to climate stabilization.

As Commissioner Dimas says: **"We will not succeed in mitigating or adapting to climate change if we do not protect valuable ecosystems."**

Maintaining and restoring natural carbon sinks, for example the massive **peat bogs** found in Estonia, the **old growth forests** of Eastern Europe, and the important **wetlands of the Danube delta** that can be seen in the photos, will be crucial to the success of our efforts to combat climate change.

Air is also home to flying species – bees, butterflies, bats and birds.

We now know that more than one-third of food crops depend on the process of natural pollination. And I would like to thank the members of the European Parliament for their efforts to bring the catastrophic decline of bees across the world to the attention of policy makers.

## **Fire**

Fire is energy. Biomass has been used for millennia to produce energy.

Prehistoric biodiversity is responsible for the fantastic source of energy, oil, that underpins our unprecedented technological development of the last 50 years. But we have been exploiting this marvellous gift of nature to a level that we are jeopardising our own lives and our own planet.

Our primary source of energy is not oil but food. Biodiversity provides the vast majority of our foodstuffs like fruits, nuts, mushrooms, honey, spices and aromatic herbs.

The annual world fish catch, for example represents humanity's most important source of wild animal protein.

"Fire" also recalls us another fantastic gift of nature: the so-called "fire of plants", the essence of plants. Plants and essential oils have been used for millennia to heal human beings.

The World Health Organization estimates that 80 per cent of people in the developing world rely on traditional medicines derived mainly from plants.

But biodiversity is also critical to the 'formal' health sector of the developed world. In the United States, 118 out of the top 150 prescription drugs are based on natural sources.

As you can see, "Earth", "Water", "Air", "Fire", remind us an impressive list of services provided by biodiversity and ecosystems. Losing biodiversity means losing these services, and that means economic loss.

A study into The Economics of Ecosystems and Biodiversity (TEEB), supported by the European Commission and German Government, has shown that by 2050, if biodiversity loss continues unchecked, the costs would amount to about 7% of global GDP.

Without healthy ecosystems and without biodiversity, our economy would collapse on the long term.

Just think at what happened to Rapa Nui ... covered by forests, its inhabitants overexploited its natural resources to a point that the island ecosystem collapsed, meaning death for many. The earth is a small island in the vast universe... Haven't we learned the lesson?

The fifth element is **"Aether"**.

Aether reminds us our spiritual dimension. We are intelligent creature, meant to elevate ourselves not only by satisfying our primary needs, but also by fulfilling our spiritual needs.

**We need beauty around us to be happy. Biodiversity is a source of beauty and happiness.**

The images we have chosen for you are just a small sample of the natural beauty we can find around us, but they should also remind us that this beauty is fragile.

The bond between humanity and biodiversity, which is reflected in the art, religions and traditions of Europe, will be lost if we continue to destroy its basis – nature itself.

And this is exactly what we are doing, unfortunately. **Biodiversity IS on the brink.** We are destroying nature and following the Rapa Nui path to oblivion.

We are destroying forests, even though we know their importance for mitigating climate change by trapping carbon.

We pollute water through the use of chemical pesticides and fertilisers, even though we know that there is not enough clean water to continue doing this unchecked.

We observe species disappearing, and yet we know that each and every single species within an ecosystem is fundamental for the stability and resilience of the whole ecosystem.

We are losing ecosystem services, and being forced to invest in expensive man made solutions to provide services such as flood control, pollination and carbon capture, even though we know that natural solutions are far more efficient.

Would it not be better to leave biodiversity and healthy ecosystems do the job?

Biodiversity IS on the brink...

What is encouraging, to me, is that I see a shift from a reductionist paradigm, to a holistic approach to nature. **Yann-Arthus Bertrand**, in his movie "Home" and **Jaques Perrin and Jacques Cluzaud** in their recent marvellous movie "Oceans", say it loudly: it is not too late to do something.

At BirdLife, with our millions of members and supporters worldwide, and working with civil society, decision makers and businesses, we have been engaging on protecting biodiversity, ecosystems and birds for years. We are committed to continue while there is a need.

We want to do this together with the **Members of the European Parliament**, who have an important role to play in deciding the future of Europe's environment, and in holding the Commission and Member States to account for their actions, or inaction.

We want to do it together with the **European Commission**, and we welcome the recent letter of President Barroso to Prime Minister Balkenende, defending the importance of biodiversity to ensure a sustainable and wealthy Europe.

We want to do it with the **Member States**, who have the ultimate responsibility for protecting their own citizens' future by protecting and restoring biodiversity.

We want to do it with other civil society organisation, with businesses, with farmers, with hunters, developing together sustainable practices.

And we want to do this with all of you, who have joined us for this reception. It is not too late... **2010 is the International Year of Biodiversity.** It is a great opportunity to double our individual and collective efforts and to save together our planet and our happiness.

Thank you.

Angelo Caserta, Regional Director, BirdLife International European Division