

Three International Days in a Week, But Is Anybody Listening?

Posted by Joan Russow
Wednesday, 23 March 2016 06:57 -

By [Monique Barbut](#)



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BONN, Germany, Mar 22 2016 (IPS) - For three consecutive days this week, we gave thought to our future. On International Forests Day, Monday, 21 March, we were reminded that forests are vital for our future water needs. On Tuesday, 22 March, [World Water Day](#), we learned that half the world's workers are involved in the water sector and some 2 billion people, especially women and girls, still need access to improved sanitation. World Meteorological Day, on Wednesday, 23 March, concluded with the warning of [a hotter, drier and wetter future](#). A reality that is already evident and frightening, as productive land turns to sand or dust.

Is anybody listening?

The overall message of this week is: we have developed a reckless appetite for resources and we are not doing enough to meet future demand. But nature is neither kind nor forgiving. When the resources are exhausted or destroyed humans will lose, and lose big.

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Few of us can visualize a future without trees, fresh water or productive land while the resources are still flowing and politicians muddle the science. Denial and inaction have prevailed – except in countries like Rwanda and Ethiopia where land degradation has already led to economic ruin, poverty and political conflict.

Ethiopia's history offers us a glimpse into what our own future might look like if we fail to act now. Its story of recovery should inspire us to act – while we still can.

In just one century, [Ethiopia reduced its forest cover from 40% to below 3%](#) . It is easy to see why. In a country where agriculture is the main source of livelihoods for 85 percent of the country's 90 million people, and also makes up 90% of the exports, it seemed like there was little choice.

Following decades of deforesting and converting forests into farmland, the land's vulnerability to recurrent and longer droughts grew. By the 1980s, food and water shortages were severe. The political situation worsened in tandem. But Ethiopia is rising, and her people are doing the unimaginable.

For the 2007 World Environment Day, Ethiopia signed up for a 60 million tree-planting campaign. Success led to a bolder target. In late 2014, [Ethiopia announced to the world that it will recover 22 million hectares of degraded lands and forests](#)

. That is an area

[more than one-sixth of the entire country](#)

. Recently, Ethiopia took the bolder step of becoming land degradation neutral by 2036. Under [this scheme](#)

, it plans to recover and rehabilitate, voluntarily, up to 33 million hectares of degraded land to ensure the country's productive areas remain stable thereafter.

Ethiopia is re-covering the power to feed itself and replenishing its ground water sources, but has gained much more than it anticipated. It is creating new jobs every day, by paying its population to restore degraded lands. It is re-building the means to shield itself or recover from the future drought risks. And there is a global bonus. Ethiopia's highlands are nourishing River Nile, a lifeline for the drier countries downstream. Ethiopia's experience is rich, with lessons for everyone.

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Restoring degraded land, is a revolutionary, yet counter-intuitive, way to create formal jobs, eradicate poverty, replenish ground water sources, revive dying lands, manage disaster and climate change risks, and channel resources to the neediest.

The [Bonn Challenge](#) , which aims to restore 350 million hectares of degraded forests, is also built on inspiring stories of land restoration. Costa Rica doubled its forest cover in 25 years, and boosted its tourism industry. In just 15 years, land users in the Shinyanga area of northern Tanzania restored 2 million hectares of land, and household incomes doubled. The Republic of Korea restored more than half its forest cover and now earns up to US\$50 billion in ecosystem services every year.

We are treading a dangerous path with a bleak future, but that path is not fated. We can change the trajectory of our history by our choices as individuals, organizations and countries.

At the UNCCD, we have chosen to follow the example of countries like Ethiopia. We are working with countries, UN partners, civil society organizations and women and youth groups to recover 500 million of the [2 billion hectares of land](#) we have degraded in the course of our development.

Since the adoption of the global Goals for sustainable development last September, 65 countries have expressed interest in our programme to set out voluntary targets to become land degradation neutral by 2030. This is a sea-change that few people could have visualized five years ago.

We may never know the true value of the International Days. But they offer unique moments to share inspiring stories that are too often lost in the clutter of political negotiations. If we listen to the stories and act on them, we can influence hearts and minds, and inspire action.

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