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THE SECRETARY-GENERAL

**“TOWARDS A SUSTAINABLE FUTURE”
(THE AMERICAN MUSEUM OF NATURAL HISTORY’S
ANNUAL “ENVIRONMENTAL LECTURE”)
Delivered by Mrs. Nane Annan
New York, 14 May 2002**

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Thirty years ago, the world community gathered in Stockholm for the first United Nations Conference on the Human Environment. That event was a watershed. It inspired legions of green activists at the grass-roots level. It led to the establishment of environment ministries and agencies in countries that did not already have them. It put the environment on the international agenda.

Ten years ago, the international community gathered again for the Earth Summit in Rio de Janeiro. With the conceptual breakthrough of sustainable development, the Summit generated both heat and light. No longer, it was hoped, would environmental protection be regarded as a luxury or afterthought. Rather, environmental factors would be integrated with economic and social issues and become a central part of the policy-making process. Developed countries, which had benefited immensely from a wasteful and hazardous path of modernization, would help developing countries combat poverty and avoid that same polluting path. In adopting Agenda 21, a blueprint for sustainable development, rich and poor seemed to have agreed on common vision for growth, equity and conservation over the long-term.

But progress since then has been slower than anticipated. The state of the world’s environment is still fragile. Conservation measures are far from satisfactory. At discussions on global finance and the economy, the environment is still treated as an unwelcome guest. High-consumption life-styles continue to tax the earth’s natural life-support systems. Research and development remains woefully under-funded, and neglects the problems of the poor. Developed countries in particular have not gone far enough in fulfilling the promises they made in Rio – either to protect their own environments or to help the developing world defeat poverty.

Less than four months from now, at the World Summit on Sustainable Development in Johannesburg, we have a chance to restore the momentum that had been felt so palpably after the Earth Summit. Already, the process leading up to that event has brought renewed attention to issues that have been largely overshadowed by conflicts, globalization and, most recently, terrorism. Still, I sense a need for greater clarity on what Johannesburg is about and what it can achieve. Negotiators who meet later this

month in Bali need clarity if they are to draft a strong programme of action. The public at large needs clarity if they are to support the changes that must occur.

At its core, Johannesburg is about the relationship between human society and the natural environment. We here in this room are among the 20 percent of humanity that enjoys privilege and prosperity undreamt of by former generations. Yet the model of development that has brought us so much has also exacted a heavy toll on the planet and its resources. It may not be sustainable even for those who have already benefited, let alone for the vast majority of our fellow human beings, many of whom live in conditions of unbearable deprivation and squalor and naturally aspire to share the benefits that we enjoy.

This fact was recognized by the world leaders who gathered at the United Nations almost two years ago for the Millennium Summit. They decided that the first 15 years of this century should be used for a major onslaught on global poverty, and set a number of targets – the Millennium Development Goals – for doing so. But they also resolved to free future generations “from the threat of living on a planet irredeemably spoiled by human activities”. The Johannesburg Summit aims to find practical ways for humanity to respond to both these challenges – to better the lives of all human beings, while protecting the environment. The Summit also aims to move from commitments – of which we have had plenty, 30 years ago and 10 years ago – to action. I see five specific areas where concrete results are both essential and achievable.

First is water and sanitation. More than 1 billion people are without safe drinking water. Twice that number lack adequate sanitation. And more than 3 million people die every year from diseases caused by unsafe water. Unless we take swift and decisive action, by 2025 as much as two thirds of the world’s population may be living in countries that face serious water shortage. We need to improve access. We need to improve the efficiency of water use, for example by getting more “crop per drop” in agriculture, which is the largest consumer of water. And we need better watershed management, and to reduce leakage, especially in the many cities where water losses are an astonishing 40 percent or more of total water supply.

The second area is energy. Energy is essential for development. Yet two billion people currently go without, condemning them to remain in the poverty trap. We need to make clean energy supplies accessible and affordable. We need to increase the use of renewable energy sources and improve energy efficiency. And we must not flinch from addressing the issue of overconsumption – the fact that people in the developed countries use far more energy per capita than those in the developing world. States must ratify the Kyoto Protocol, which addresses not only climate change but also a host of unsustainable practices. States must also do away with the perverse energy subsidies and tax incentives that perpetuate the status quo and stifle the development of new and promising alternatives.

Third is agricultural productivity. Land degradation affects perhaps as much as two thirds of the world’s agricultural land. As a result, agricultural productivity is

declining sharply, while the number of mouths to feed continues to grow. In Africa, especially, millions of people are threatened with starvation. We must increase agricultural productivity, and reverse human encroachment on forests, grasslands and wetlands. Research and development will be crucial, as will implementation of the UN Convention to Combat Desertification.

The fourth area is biodiversity and ecosystem management. Biodiversity is declining at an unprecedented rate – as much as a thousand times what it would be without the impact of human activity. Half of the tropical rainforests and mangroves have already been lost. About 75 percent of marine fisheries have been fished to capacity. 70 percent of coral reefs are endangered. We must reverse this process -- preserving as many species as possible, and clamping down on illegal and unsustainable fishing and logging practices -- while helping people who currently depend on such activities to make a transition to more sustainable ways of earning their living.

Finally, the area of health. The links between the environment and human health are powerful. Toxic chemicals and other hazardous materials are basic elements of development. Yet more than one billion people breathe unhealthy air, and three million people die each year from air pollution – two thirds of them poor people, mostly women and children, who die from indoor pollution caused by burning wood and dung. Tropical diseases such as malaria and African guinea worm are closely linked with polluted water sources and poor sanitation. Conventions and other steps aimed at reducing waste and eliminating the use of certain chemicals and substances can go a long way to creating a healthier environment. But we also need to know better how and where to act – meaning that research and development are especially important, particularly studies that focus more on the diseases of the poor than has historically been the case.

Water. Energy. Health. Agriculture. And biodiversity.

Five areas that makeup an ambitious but achievable agenda.

Five areas in which progress is possible with the resources and technologies at our disposal today.

Five areas in which progress would offer all human beings a chance of achieving prosperity that will not only last their own lifetime, but can be enjoyed by their children and grandchildren too.

Five areas that can be remembered by a simply acronym: WEHAB. You might think of it like this: we inhabit the earth. And we must rehabilitate our one and only planet. I'm sure you can come up with your own interpretations. I hope this will become something of a mantra between now and the opening of the Summit in Johannesburg.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Archaeological discoveries of recent decades suggest that even great civilizations, such as the Sumerians and the Mayans, met devastation at least in part by failing to live in harmony with the natural environment. We, too, have tempted fate for most of the past two hundred years, fuelled by breakthroughs in science and technology and the belief that natural limits to human well being had been conquered. Climate change is a prime example of this.

Today we know better, and have begun to transform our societies, albeit haltingly. So far, our scientific understanding continues to run ahead of our social and political response. With some honourable exceptions, our efforts to change course are too few and too little. The question now is whether they are also too late. In Johannesburg, we have a chance to catch up. The issue is not environment versus development, or ecology versus economy. Contrary to popular belief, we can integrate the two. Nor is the issue one of rich versus poor. Both have a clear interest in protecting the environment and promoting sustainable development.

At Johannesburg, Governments will agree on a common plan of action. But the most creative agents of change may well be partnerships -- among Governments, private businesses, non-profit organizations, scholars and concerned citizens such as you.

Together, we will need to find our way towards to a greater sense of mutual responsibility. Together, we will need to build a new ethic of global stewardship. Together, we can and must write a new and more hopeful chapter in natural – and human – history. Thank you very much.