

Desertification a Growing Concern

By Zulima Palacio
August 1, 2006

Washington, DC – *Desertification is the gradual and dangerous degradation of productive land into useless desert. Land experts have been concerned about the process for two decades. The United Nations declared 2006 the International Year of Deserts and Desertification.*

Forty percent of our planet's land is considered dry land, vulnerable to become arid, infertile and desert-like. The United Nations has called desertification "a major threat to humanity" and "one of the world's most alarming processes of environmental degradation."

Moctar Toure works with the Global Environment Facility, an organization of the United Nations and the World Bank. The African native says desertification today affects 100 countries.

"It is widespread. Dry lands cover about 40 percent of the lands of the globe and affect one third of the total population of the globe, so we're talking about two billion people affected by dry lands, by degradation," he says.

Some of the most affected regions are sub-Saharan Africa, Central Asia and northeastern Brazil. Toure says the loss of productivity there has deep implications for the wellbeing and livelihood of the people, as well as the integrity of the ecosystems. He says desertification triggered by climate change could trigger a mass exodus of people looking for more productive land.

"The impact of climate change is going to be a major factor in the expansion of the desertification phenomena."

Experts agree that the desertification has multiple causes, all of them related to human activity. Population growth, poor land management, and the pressure on natural resources in already fragile areas have led to the loss of biological diversity.



Robert Winterbottom,
IRG Senior Manager

Robert Winterbottom is a senior manager at the International Resources Group in Washington. The group provides professional services in natural resources, sustainable land use and desertification, mostly in Africa. He says, "Typically when you get the wet periods restored then the vegetation comes back, there is a tremendous capacity in nature left to its own devices to regenerate, to protect itself. So [it is] in these areas that are heavily impacted by men, by people, that you have desertification."

Winterbottom says desertification can be reversed through the planting of trees and better land management. His group and USAID have worked to stop the desertification of Africa for the last 30 years.

"We just completed a study in Niger which shows that there are two, three million hectares of land that now has more tree cover on it and has become more productive, work crop is increasing, people are getting higher income and that is despite regular variations in rain fall and despite other problems that could have gone the other way," says Winterbottom.

Experts say prevention is the real solution. They say once desertification has started, it is very expensive to restore the land.

At the Global Environment Facility, Moctar Toure says some people are doing their best to fight desertification, with limited results. "I think we're not doing enough. The extent of the problem is so huge that it would require a major global commitment to bring it back to manageable proportions."



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