

**Acceptance Speech, IUCN 14 October 2008
by Ashok Khosla**

Thank you Valli. And thank you, Fellow Members, Colleagues and Friends:

I am deeply grateful to all the members of the Union for electing me to this high position. The awesome responsibility you have placed on me makes me feel very honored and also quite humbled at the same time. All I can promise is that I will do what I can to fulfill your trust and confidence.

I know that it will not be easy to fill the space and expectations created by my predecessors, who included such eminences as Donald Kuenen and Mohamad Kassas, MS Swaminathan and Sridath Ramphal, Jay Hair and Yolanda Kakabadse and most recently my good friend Valli Moosa. However, with the excellent members you have also elected for the Council, I feel we have a team that can deliver the kind of results you would like to have from us.

The Union is celebrating here, in Barcelona, its 60th Anniversary. It is today the largest conservation organisation, working at the leading edge of biodiversity issues. It has hundreds of ongoing programmes and commitments – and most of them are highly appropriate and relevant. These activities will continue to receive the full support of the Council and they will be strengthened where they need to be.

But the times are changing, and the issues, problems, contexts we must deal with are changing even more rapidly. So, the new Council will have to do what all effective Councils should do, which is continually to guide and steer the Union's programme sometimes gradually, sometimes urgently, into ever newer directions and territories.

My starting point for working with my fellow Council members to define the immediate and strategic priorities of the Union will be the commitments I made in my brief presentation to you last Saturday. With further inputs from members, commissions and other partners and constituencies, we will, of course adjust these priorities and our workplans to meet changing requirements as appropriate and as we go along.

Let me first reiterate the priorities I set forth the other day, for which I take your very positive and unequivocal vote to be a strong endorsement from the membership at large and a clear mandate for the Council to deliver on.

First, we will assume responsibility for the mission to protect the biosphere with particular focus on the conservation of biodiversity in all its manifestations. This

means that we must do what is necessary to bring the issues of biodiversity right into the centre stage of public awareness, media concern and decision making at the local, national and global levels.

To mobilise the world to help preserve our biodiversity, we must establish the strongest, most incontrovertible evidence for the value of doing so and the costs of losing it. For this, we will have to promote and if necessary carry out deep scientific investigations for which our Commissions, strengthened where necessary, will take primary responsibility.

On the basis of these findings, the Union will mobilize the resources needed to send out to the world clear and unambiguous messages that cannot be ignored by decision makers in government, private sector or civil society. It will be the responsibility of the Union to design an aggressive and effective outreach strategy. In this effort, our Members are uniquely positioned to take front line responsibility to activate communities, media, companies and public authorities. Clearly, IUCN is the body that can and must do this.

The second commitment I made, and one which has since received very positive response from various members, is that IUCN will have to build on its excellent initiative to analyse the economics and distributive issues of conserving or not conserving biodiversity (TEEB) and I will also propose the establishment, in collaboration with partners such as WWF and UNEP of a World Commission to investigate the deeper implications of "Green Carbon" options such as sequestration, REDD and biofuels.

The third commitment was on bringing some clarity into the basis for establishing appropriate relationships between IUCN and business. Judging from the debates on several motions on this subject and from the feedback from our constituencies, I believe that we have considerable consensus that the Union must engage with corporations, large, medium and small. However, the terms of such engagement must be such as to lead to positive conservation outcomes, and ensure that at no time is IUCN's integrity or capacity to fulfill its mission compromised in any way. Moreover, the national and regional committees of the Union and its national members will have to be mandated to perform both expert and watchdog roles at the grass root levels. For this purpose, I will request the Council to help accelerate the process for defining the terms of such engagement and the changes in function required.

The fourth commitment I made was on the need to bring a better balance between the the three legs of the biodiversity stool. To raise our attention and work on ecosystem processes to the level we have achieved on species and habitats, I plan to work closely with the CEM to help deepen its focus on natural biogeochemical cycles and broaden its scope to other life support systems. In addition, given the trans-disciplinary implications of these processes, the Council will have to facilitate active collaboration between CEM and the other

commissions to ensure that the impacts, particularly social and economic, of these processes is well understood. I hope I can count on the support of all members and Commissions on this.

The rich and the affluent are not the only ones who have a destructive impact on the environment and biodiversity. The poor, out of the exigencies of survival, often also destroy the local resources – the soils, waters, forests, biomass – making what were renewable resources into essentially non-renewable ones. In many ways, poverty is a major threat to nature and biodiversity, no less than the consumption and production patterns of today's industrialised economy. The work started by the Union on sustainable livelihoods and the relationship between biodiversity and jobs is of critical importance and must be nurtured by all parts of IUCN.

It is the value of ecosystem services that will provide the strongest rationale for investing in conservation in the future. One of the most valuable ecosystem services is the knowledge accumulated over billions of years by nature – the basis of technologies that serve human needs without destroying the environment: Biomimicry. I firmly believe that IUCN must urgently build its capacity in this science.

For our conservation efforts to be in the right direction and to be sustained, they must be driven by the highest ethical considerations and a deep respect for all living things. Given its importance to planetary survival, the practice of conservation is today among the highest callings a professional can aspire to. It must therefore set the highest benchmarks for personal, scientific and ethical commitment and integrity, for which I will ask the Council to establish the necessary mechanisms to assist the Director General in ensuring these.

It is the job of the President and Council, first and foremost, to listen carefully to the members, both State and Civil Society, the scientists in the Commissions, and other external partners, and interpret their views as expressed at the General Assembly and other forums into the policies and programmes of the Union. Its perspective must be global and above particular interests, and its efforts must ensure integrity, objectivity, due process, transparency and through these, excellence. As I stated on Saturday, we need to bring the three 'pillars' of IUCN together in these tasks and build stronger partnerships with other organisations.

My fifth commitment was to act as a facilitator for the work and interaction of all parts of the Union, the Council, the Members, the Commissions and the Secretariat so they mutually support each other and have a clear understanding of their roles to enable the entire Union to act in unison, as a result-oriented single organism.

A second part of this task is to maintain the best possible working relationship between the Union and the external partners – conservation organisations, the donors and the agencies to enable us to maximise our results -- in policy influence and in impact on the ground. In particular, given our special position in the UN system, we have a particular opportunity to use it as a means of globalising our agenda, and I expect that the Councilors will join the Director General and me in fully exploiting it.

Analysis of the voting patterns and of the feedback from members, both Governmental and NGO, seems to indicate a degree of unease regarding the relationship of members with the secretariat. Clearly, the Union needs to remove any impediments – real or perceived – to the sense of participation and ownership by the members without which it can never hope to fulfill its mission. One way to achieve this is for it to be more responsive to members' needs. As I mentioned on Saturday, I plan to request Council to establish a one-window mechanism, something like an ombudsman function, to enable members' concerns to be heard, dealt with and responded to expeditiously.

But a more effective and enduring solution is to bring the Union nearer to its members. For this, I will work with the Council and the Director General to strengthen the regional capacities of the Union, a goal to which we are all already committed. The days of centralised management and control are long over and whether in the public or private sectors, distributed structures are recognised as being much more relevant to today's needs. This is even more true for civil society, where goals, motivations, and impacts have to be far more localised. Of course, the HQ still continues to have many important functions, but operational and project matters need to be managed with the knowledge, perceptions and mindsets that are connected to local realities.

Mobilising resources for the work of the Union is a fundamental part of the responsibility of the Director General and the Secretariat, both at the HQ and in the Regions. It is also a responsibility of the President and Council. I plan to work closely with the DG in helping to identify and interest existing and potential funding sources in supporting the work of the Union. Moreover, I will work closely with the Secretariat in developing training modules that help the members and commissions to build their own capacities to mobilise resources.

I have great admiration for the work you, Valli, and your colleagues on the outgoing Council have done. We who come in today to take over your functions can only hope to be worthy successors and it is our hope that we will be able to build further on this structure that you and our earlier predecessors have so painstakingly constructed.

It takes decades of hard and self-less work to build an organisation like our Union. It can take but a few months of careless inattention to destroy it. We will continue to face ignorance, greed-based resistance, vested interests and other

external factors to hinder our work. But these only strengthen our resolve and ability to overcome them. However, internal dissension, professional friction, office politics – not to mention compartmentalisation and fragmentation – can bring the effectiveness of an organisation to a standstill in not time.

I believe that the Union is generally in good health, but I would like to work closely with the Director General in setting up decision and reporting systems that are clear, transparent, accountable and result-enhancing. For this, as I said on an earlier occasion, the Council must set clear policies, the Director General must implement them and be held accountable by the Council.

Many of you may have noticed the elegant Indian sari in which our Director General has graced the proceedings today. I suspect that this is not so much a fashion statement as a symbol of her desire to maintain a close and constructive working relationship with the Council and its President, a desire that is fully reciprocated. You may also have noticed that now, when I no longer have to impress you for votes, I have switched my clothes in the opposite direction, from my normal rustic into what is called “global attire”. Perhaps this is a subconscious symbol that, where needed, this relationship will also maintain an arm’s length. In any case, we will all endeavour to do what is best for the Union.

Colleagues, Friends, the world is today at a crossroads. And so is IUCN. The dire state of our natural world demands an increasing involvement of all sectors of human activity. We either continue to talk to ourselves, or we reach out to the wider world. The second option is risky, but I believe we have no choice but to engage new partners in this struggle to keep nature alive. We can dwell on our internal problems or waste precious time fiddling with our governance structures, or we can roll up our sleeves and work together. Yes, we need to work in a more collaborative and transparent way. And I am committed to doing that. But let's not waste this unique opportunity, now that the world is finally listening to our conservation message, to go out there and convince people, institutions, private companies and governments about the need to conserve nature and eradicate poverty.

Finally, I wish to thank the government and people of Barcelona, Catalonia and Spain for the warmth of their hospitality and the excellent arrangements for the Congress, which has certainly the most vibrant and well attended so far.

Thank you.