



Washington, DC, Launch of *Africa: Atlas of Our Changing Environment*

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Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars

Edited Transcript – Daniel Reifsnyder

Yes. Excuse me.

Thank you, Geoff, and it's great to be here with Achim and Hennie and Ashbindu, and it's great to look out in this audience and see so many people that I know from many different incarnations. So welcome to everyone.

Achim Steiner may not be the busiest person on the planet, but he certainly -- he's right up there with the busiest people, and so it's especially pleasing to us that he could take time to come to Washington and to be here to take part in this launch of the atlas for Africa. And it's a very great honor to be up here with him. Unfortunately Claudia McMurray, our Assistant Secretary for Oceans, Environment, and Science, who is passionate about Africa, is, herself, in China today, or she would be here herself, so I'll just make that comment.

We are very pleased that the United States can be here and can congratulate Achim Steiner and UNEP, Ashbindu Singh, publicly, and all of the partners involved in the product of the *Africa: The Atlas of our Changing Environment*. In our view, the atlas is a unique product that combines the best of scientific assessment and analysis with really striking graphic imagery that highlights the environmental changes taking place in Africa, as Achim pointed out. As they say, a picture is worth a thousand words, and the impact of the scientific and visual evidence presented in the atlas is compelling.

I would say that this is an area -- there's been a lot of discussion in the world recently about international environmental governance and about the comparative advantages of institutions and so forth. We think that the kind of work done here, the kind of work that UNEP is doing with Google Earth, for example, is a place where UNEP has a comparative advantage, a real unique comparative advantage within the UN system, and we encourage this kind of



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scientific assessment of environmental issues, environmental problems. I think that's a very important contribution that UNEP makes.

We hope the atlas will be successful in drawing the attention of African government officials, policy makers, and the international community to the many serious environmental problems facing the continent today, including the disappearance of glaciers, deforestation, as was mentioned, drying up of lakes, we saw the picture, and the many challenges posed by rapid urbanization. These environmental issues are closely linked to sustainable development and must be addressed as part of the overall development agenda for Africa.

In addition to the evidence of environmental changes and degradation over the past 30 years, we're pleased that the atlas also highlights some areas of environmental improvements that are the result of successful interventions by national governments and local communities. These improvements demonstrate that local actions taken to manage resources and protect the environment can have dramatic, positive effects. I think this is especially important because so often the news on the environmental front is negative, and it's important not to lose sight of the actions we can take that make a difference.

I'm also pleased to note that the United States government was a major contributor to the development of the atlas through its ongoing support for space science and earth observation technologies, including the 36-year legacy of the US Geological Survey's Landsat satellite program. The atlas serves to demonstrate the power of satellite imagery data in monitoring ecosystems and natural resources and providing science-based evidence to support political decisions.

I'd like to specifically acknowledge the contributions of USGS and USAID as contributing agencies along with the other public, private, and civil society partners. I think I should mention University of Maryland in this regard and, in particular, not just because they're very close by, but because they contribute so much.

Beyond drawing attention to environmental problems, we hope that UNEP and its partners will build on the momentum generated by the atlas to further strengthen scientific capacities in Africa. Specifically, there is an urgent need to develop capacities within African governments and institutions to use science-based tools for environmental monitoring and assessment to support decision making. We would welcome the opportunity to, with UNEP,



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to explore how the data sets generated from the atlas could be packaged and used to further develop expertise in geospatial analysis and environmental assessment.

Once again, just like to congratulate Executive Director Steiner, UNEP, and all of the contributing partners in making the atlas a great success. The United States looks forward to continuing our productive partnership in this important area.

Thank you very much.



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