

Protecting mangroves cheaper than building coastal protection - official

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JEJU, South Korea (Alertnet) – Keeping coastal mangrove forests intact or replanting them is cheaper than building man-made structures to protect coastlines threatened by climate change, according to the head of the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN).

“Our message is, ‘Don’t assume that man-made or engineered solutions are the only ones to protect our coasts and rivers and to provide drinking water. We are not against engineering in the absence of natural solutions, but look at what nature has to offer,’” urged Julia Marton-Lefevre at the recent **World Conservation Congress** in South Korea.

Preserving mangrove forests can help regulate rainfall patterns, reduce the risk of disasters from extreme weather and sea level rise, provide breeding grounds for fish and capture carbon dioxide in the atmosphere to slow climate change, she said. That suggests preserving them will be essential to fighting climate change and protecting lives and livelihoods in the face of climate shifts already underway.

“Standing trees help us with inevitable climate change,” she said. “Keeping mangroves intact on the coast is not only good for capturing and storing carbon but also very useful for protecting the coast in times of extreme weather conditions and acting like nurseries for fish to ensure people have protein to eat,” she said.

Marton-Lefevre said the financial benefits of maintaining mangrove forests outweigh those of, for instance, cutting mangroves to build coastal hotels, particularly when their effect on disaster risk is taken into account.

And “it is the same for trees standing rather than being cut down (in terms of) protecting against landslides,” she said.

“Ecosystems, including mangroves, play a role in mitigation and adaptation. You have to respect the forests, wetlands, peatlands and oceans in capturing and storing carbon. Once you respect that, then maybe there would be an impetus to take care of (them) better,” she said, during an interview with AlertNet.

“Standing forests also provide livelihoods for people,” she added. “You don’t have to cut the trees down to raise cattle. You could also grow food inside the forest canopy,” she said.

FUELWOOD ALTERNATIVES

Part of what is driving cutting of mangroves and other forests, experts at the conference said, is a lack of alternatives to fuelwood.

In Pakistan's Balochistan province, for instance, the juniper forests of Ziarat are being cut because residents have no other way of getting fuel. But pilot projects to provide alternative energy sources, including solar lighting, are helping make a difference, experts said.

Pakistan's mangrove forests, similarly, have been reduced from 600,000 hectares (1.3 million acres) to 86,000 hectares (190,000 acres) over the last 50 years, according to a documentary film shown at the conference.

But an IUCN-backed effort to ensure "mangroves for the future" has so far overseen replanting of 30,000 hectares (66,000 acres) of mangroves, said Mahmood Akhtar Cheema, manager of IUCN's Islamabad programme office.

Overall forest cover in Pakistan now stands at just four percent of the total land area and "every sapling is needed," added Javed Jabbar, an IUCN representative for West Asia and the Middle East.

Johann Earle is a Guyana-based freelance writer with an interest in climate change issues.

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