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inside:

A legal case for loss and damage liability

Island nations endangered by
climate change

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development

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photo: AAA/Florian Kopp

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About Stakeholder Forum

Stakeholder Forum is an international organisation working to advance sustainable development and promote democracy at a global level. Our work aims to enhance open, accountable and participatory international decision-making on sustainable development through enhancing the involvement of stakeholders in intergovernmental processes. For more information, visit: www.stakeholderforum.org

Outreach is a multi-stakeholder publication on climate change and sustainable development. It is the longest continually produced stakeholder magazine in the sustainable development arena, published at various international meetings on the environment; including the UNCSO meetings (since 1997), UNEP Governing Council, UNFCCC Conference of the Parties (COP) and World Water Week. Published as a daily edition, in both print and web form, Outreach provides a vehicle for critical analysis on key thematic topics in the sustainability arena, as well as a voice of regional and local governments, women, indigenous peoples, trade unions, industry, youth and NGOs. To fully ensure a multi-stakeholder perspective, we aim to engage a wide range of stakeholders for article contributions and project funding.

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Vegetation fires increasingly dangerous in an insecure climate

Johann G. Goldammer

The Global Fire Monitoring Center (GFMC)



photo: forest fire in the Yuganskiy nature reserve, West Siberia, by Tatiana Bulyonkova

In many ecosystems across the world, fire is a natural and essential force in maintaining the structure and health of ecosystems that are susceptible to, tolerant of, adapted to, or dependent on either natural or human-caused fires. In many rural regions, fire is an important land management tool embedded in the culture of many societies in the developing world.

However, fire – or wildfire/vegetation fire, as it is often referred to – is uncommon and unnatural in many ecosystems, such as fire-sensitive tropical rainforests and peat lands, where its current application is causing widespread vegetation damage and site degradation.

According to some satellite remote sensing studies, wildland fires affect between 3 and 4 million square kilometres (300-400 million hectares) globally every year. Other studies push this figure further, estimating the total annual global area burned at more than 600 million hectares.

Vegetation fires are a significant source of atmospheric pollutants, affecting air quality and human health on a local and regional scale. Smoke aerosols perturb regional and global radiation budgets through their light-scattering effects and influence cloud microphysical processes.

For some atmospheric pollutants, vegetation fires rival fossil fuel burning as a source of atmospheric pollution. On a global scale, fire frequency, fire intensity and emissions from burning biomass change according to

climate variation and land use. Several climate model-based studies indicate that future fire activity is likely to increase markedly across most tropical biomes, Mediterranean climate areas, temperate biomes and the boreal zone. The principal driver of this increase will be a combination of reduced rainfall, extended droughts and higher temperatures.

At the 72nd session of the United Nations Economic Commission for Europe (UNECE) Committee on Forest and the Forest Industry, held in November 2014, the Global Fire Monitoring Center (GFMC) presented the conclusions of the work of the UNECE/FAO Team of Specialists on Forest Fire. This team of experts, representing about half of the 56 UNECE Member States, had been led by the GFMC between 1993 and 2014.

During the 1990s the team began its work focusing on identifying policy and management options of fires affecting forests and other vegetation types. The work addressed explicitly the transboundary and global nature of fire and fire effects—for example, border-crossing fires, smoke transport, impacts of fire on human health, biodiversity and landscape stability. With the increasing insight into the global interconnectedness of fire and fire effects, the need to address this problem collectively at global level has emerged. As a result, the Global Wildland Fire Network (GWFN), a Thematic Platform under the UN International Strategy for Disaster Reduction (UNISDR), was established in 2001 to address these issues.

Its representative body, the UNISDR Wildland Fire Advisory Group, in conjunction with the United Nations University, took the initiative of developing a White Paper on Vegetation Fires and Global Change. This paper is aimed at the United Nations and International Organisations, and has been introduced as background and rationale for the “UNECE/FAO Regional Forum on Cross-boundary Fire Management”.

In the concluding report of the Forum and its follow up, the GFMC stressed again the increasing threats posed by destructive wildfires at a global level. Governments within and outside the UNECE region have been alerted by the scientific and professional fire management communities that the threat from wildfires will become increasingly dangerous in the coming years, due to climate change and socio-economic changes.

Wildfires may become the most important driver of global degradation and destruction of vegetation. To counter this risk, voluntary rules and cooperation mechanisms have been created, such as the “International Wildfire Preparedness Mechanism” (IWPM) and the “International Fire Aviation Guidelines”. However, given the seriousness and cross-country nature of wildfires, voluntary agreements should transition to more formal rules under UN conventions and perhaps towards legally binding instrument on forests ■