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New peatland coalition targets cutting climate change, saving thousands of lives

- Drained and burned peatlands are responsible for up to 5 per cent of anthropogenic carbon emissions
- Peat carbon stocks hold the equivalent of at least 60 per cent of all atmospheric carbon
- 2015 Indonesian peat fires contributed to 100,000 premature deaths and cost US\$ 16.1 billion

Marrakech, 17 November 2016 – A new global initiative, launched today at the climate meeting in Marrakech, aims to reduce global greenhouse gas emissions and save thousands of lives by protecting peatlands – the world’s largest terrestrial organic soil carbon stock.

The Global Peatlands Initiative will mobilize governments, international organizations and academia in a targeted effort to protect peatlands, which contain almost 100 times more carbon than tropical forests.

Greenhouse gas emissions from drained and burning peatlands account for up to 5 per cent of anthropogenic carbon emissions. These emissions are rising due to increasing peat degradation and loss from agriculture and fires, and driving the world closer to a dangerous tipping point.

Rising temperatures can cause a chain reaction in which thawing permafrost switches boreal and Arctic peatlands from carbon sinks to sources, emitting huge amounts of greenhouse gas. Peat carbon stocks are equivalent to at least 60 per cent of all atmospheric carbon, meaning they hold the potential to send climate change spiraling out of control.

“Even with current pledges under the Paris Agreement, we are heading for a global temperature rise of over three degrees Celsius this century,” said Erik Solheim, head of UN Environment. “This will cause misery and chaos for millions of vulnerable people, so we cannot afford to let any opportunity to reduce emissions slip by.

“Taking urgent action through the Global Peatlands Initiative can help us limit climate change. It is critical we do not reach the tipping point that will see peatlands stop sinking carbon and start spewing it into the atmosphere, destroying any hope we have of controlling climate change.”

Despite their importance, peatlands are coming under increased threat, mainly from conversion for palm oil and pulp wood production. Drainage of peatlands can result in environmental problems, most visible being the enormous fires in Indonesia and Russia in recent years.

In Indonesia, the worst days of the peat forest fires resulted in emissions greater than the daily emissions from the entire United States economy. In the Nordic and Baltic states, drained peatlands are responsible for 25 per cent of all emissions.

The impacts of peatland degradation go beyond emissions. Recent studies have suggested that the 2015 Indonesian peat fires affected 43 million people, indirectly killed up to 100,000 people through the toxic haze, and led to US\$ 16.1 billion in overall economic damage (twice the value of the Aceh Tsunami Reconstruction).

The Global Peatlands Initiative, led by UN Environment with support from over a dozen partners, is the largest collaborative effort on peat so far. It aims to increase the conservation, restoration and sustainable management of peatlands in countries with significant peat deposits, delivering benefits for agriculture, biodiversity and the climate.

The founding members of the Global Peatlands Initiative are the governments of Indonesia, Peru, the Republic of Congo, UN Environment, FAO, Joint Research Centre of the EC, CIFOR, Wetlands International, UNEP-WCMC, GRID-Arendal, Ramsar Convention on Wetlands, European Space Agency, WRI, Greifswald Mire Centre and SarVision/Sateligence.

The initiative was launched at the Global Landscapes Forum, the leading side event of the UN's COP22 climate change talks in Marrakech, Morocco.

NOTES TO EDITORS

What is peat?

Peat consists of partially decayed plant material, which has accumulated under water-logged conditions over long periods of time. Peatlands can be found on every continent and are regionally known as peat swamp forests, fens, bogs or mires and are found on every continent on Earth.

Tropical peatlands are home to a number of endangered species including Sumatran tigers, gorillas and orangutans. Boreal, sub-Arctic and Arctic peatlands provide habitat to species with unique adaptations such as caribou and muskox. Peatlands also support important traditional knowledge, local economies and practices.

Peat is burned as fuel, sold in gardening centres as potting soil, is highly prized as agricultural land (when drained) and is used in the production of whisky. Because of its importance and multitude of uses, the European Union regulates the use of peat, ASEAN has adopted a regional peat management strategy and Ireland and Scotland are among a number of countries that have developed national peat strategies.

www.globalpeatlands.org

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