Box 4.4 Using Information to Support an Ecosystem Approach

In collaborating on this report and supporting a global assessment of ecosystems, the United Nations Development Programme, the United Nations Environment Programme, the World Bank, and the World Resources Institute confirm their commitment to use information to motivate actions that will maintain and restore ecosystems. Governments, businesses, organizations, and individuals everywhere have many opportunities to match that commitment:

- Governments can use their access to information to drive decisions on ecosystem use, protection, and restoration. Government agencies and officials now have more and better data than ever before, through advancements in science and technology, and they are in the best position to integrate satellite habitat imagery, air and water quality readings, biological data, demographic information, and transportation and land-use maps. For example, government regulators can incorporate scientific findings on ecosystem thresholds, such as the "critical load" of pollutants like SO_x and NO_x, in regulations that govern automobile and powerplant emissions or water quality standards.

- Businesses can improve their environmental performance in relation to ecosystems by collecting and disseminating information about the environmental aspects of their processes, products, and services. Although government regulations are powerful means of requiring businesses to manage and report on their performance, increasing numbers of businesses around the world are voluntarily adopting environmental management systems and publicly disclosing information on their performance. Many businesses do so to save money, to increase shareholder value, to benchmark their performance, and to monitor their compliance with external commitments.

- Industry associations can develop policies and codes that respect the need to keep ecosystems viable. One model for how such ecosystem-friendly business practices can be promulgated is the International Organization for Standardization's ISO 14000 standards, which provide guidance to companies that want to improve their environmental management in a number of areas, including environmental auditing, labeling, and product life-cycle assessment. As of July 2000, 14,106 companies in 84 countries have adopted the ISO 14000 standards. Another model is the Global Reporting Initiative (GRI), which was established in 1997 by the Coalition for Environmentally Responsible Economies and the UN Environment Programme, with the mission of designing globally applicable guidelines for preparing enterprise-level sustainability reports. The GRI guidelines are available online at http://www.globalreporting.org.

- Universities, environmental groups, and civic associations can help interpret the wealth of raw data that is already available—presenting data in user-friendly, indexed, nontechnical formats that allow anyone to navigate lots of information quickly. Such organizations can compile risk-ranked lists of facilities or production methods, integrate data sets, or create rankings of popular consumer products based on the presence of suspected toxins, for example. They can also "watchdog" ecosystem management, ensuring that we truly take an ecosystem approach by promoting open planning processes, organizing and informing constituents, and demanding accountability from governments, multilateral banks, and corporations.

- Consumers can seek product information and use purchasing power to drive businesses to better practices on behalf of ecosystems. Certification of sustainable management practices or "ecolabeling" already enables us to choose the timber, agricultural products, and fish products that are produced and harvested with the fewest ecological impacts. For example, the Forest Stewardship Council assesses forest management practices against a set of 10 environmental, social, and economic principles and has certified more than 15.8 Mha of productive forestland worldwide (Parker et al. 1999:12). Business leaders such as IKEA, the largest furniture manufacturer worldwide, are turning to those forest products both to gain a marketing advantage and to respond to consumer interest in more environmentally sensitive products. Similar certification processes, such as Energy Star ratings, are already in place to help consumers evaluate the energy consumption of appliances, and others could be developed for environmentally sensitive goods and services, such as community-based lodging and guides for ecotourism.

- Citizens everywhere can make a point of learning more about the environmental conditions and issues in their surroundings. Those with access to the Internet can readily get information to help them make decisions about voting, using local land and resources, recycling, and disposing of household wastes, for example. They also gain the means to share the information with friends and colleagues, or voice their opinions—sometimes just by sending a message with another click on the keyboard.