



Think like an astronaut !

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Ladies and gentlemen,

I fully agree with Minister Schouten, when she says, for example, that “producing and consuming countries have to work together to fight deforestation”.

After all, our common future is at stake.

Or, as one expert commented so aptly in *The Guardian* recently:

‘The world’s forests are now in the “emergency room”. And it is death by a thousand cuts.’ ...

‘Band-Aid responses are not enough...

For every hectare lost, we are one step closer to the scary scenario of runaway climate change.¹

It’s because of this scenario that I sometimes feel we should all think more like astronauts.

Astronauts, after all, have the chance to get this breath-taking view of our planet. No matter where they come from, their experience is the same.

They see this little blue ball with patches of green land, floating in endless space.

They see the mighty Amazon, and forests in Africa and Asia...

They see a planet of amazing biodiversity that we cannot live without. An earth that has no spare.

¹Frances Seymour from the World Resources Institute, part of the Global Forest Watch (GFW) network said this in the Guardian. Link: <https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2019/apr/25/death-by-a-thousand-cuts-vast-expanse-rainforest-lost-in-2018>

I'll never forget the words of the Syrian astronaut Muhammed Faris, once called the 'Neil Armstrong of the Arab World', now a refugee.

In 1987 he said:

'Those seven days, 23 hours, and five minutes *changed* my life.' ...

'Because when you have seen the whole world through a little window from space...

... there is no us and them – no politics.'²

And in 2015 – when the devastating effects of deforestation, for instance, was much more visible...

... astronauts around the world joined forces to record a video, entitled 'A call to Earth'.

In it, they urged world leaders to take action ahead of the Paris Agreement.³

And their overall message was clear:

'If we don't clean up our act now, and fast, we could irreversibly destroy the only home we've got'.

Now I've never had the chance, of course, to view our planet from outer space...

But I do feel the urgency of the need for action.

This was brought home to me in Ghana, in 2016, one year after the astronauts recorded their video.

I was there to attend a conference on large-scale reforestation in Africa, an initiative of a Dutch forestry consultation company.

But before the conference, I visited *Kakum National Park*. A park surrounded by 33 villages growing cocoa, and threatened by illegal logging and gold mining.

That day, I saw with my own eyes how little is left of the ancient forests we call the 'lungs of the earth'.

In fact, in Ghana, this park was the only primary forest left.

Shortly afterwards, I met with Kofi Annan. He told me that when he got married in 1984, he promised his fiancée to someday take her to see the wonderful forests of his home country.

² Farris was the first and only Syrian to travel to space. Many roads, a school, and even an airport are named after him.

³ Dan Barry, an American astronaut for instance said: "Our atmosphere connects us all", he said. "What happens in Africa affects North America. What happens in North America affects Asia". And the German astronaut, Ernst Messersmidt, said in his message to world leaders: "We astronauts have been witnessing the continued shrinking of the Aral Sea, the burning rain forest along the Amazon and in Indonesia, the polluted air over industrial zones, and the dirty water at the River delta's".

But when he eventually returned to Ghana with his wife, she asked him:

'Where are all those forests you promised to show me?'

Mr Annan said he was left speechless by the extent of the deforestation.

At the same time, he knew we can't just blame people who burn down forests and who cut down trees. Because we're all to blame.

Governments, the private sector, consumers worldwide.

After all, it's *us* who buy and sell products. Like chocolate, margarine, yoghurt, baby food, crackers, instant noodles, crisps, soups, sauces or cookies.

It's *us* who like to use soap, shampoo and cosmetics.

And it's *us* who keep cattle because we want to eat beef and drink milk.

So who are *we* to question forests being cut down to create space for plantations?

And who are *we* to question why an acre of agricultural crops is seen as much more valuable than an acre of forest?

That's why we need to combine forces.

Governments, NGOs, industries and consumers.

We need to collectively engage in bold, sustainable and progressive forest-friendly investments...

In order to change the way people live, and protect the environment on which we all depend.

Fortunately, a lot is happening already.

Just look at the fact that we're all here, at the *Amsterdam Declarations Partnership* stakeholder meeting. For the fourth time already.

And consider all the other actions we've taken:

- Like all the *national forest action plans*.
- Or all the *programmes* to get financing to protect forests, to combat child labour and help farmers to improve their economic position.
- Or all the *policy research* for forest-related decision-making.
- Or all the *monitoring* and *analysis* of sustainable supply chains and forest management.

And, when I look at my own country, I see how the *Dutch supply chains for cocoa, oils and fats* took the initiative.

By 2016 for instance, around 66 per cent of the chocolate sold by Dutch supermarkets was made using sustainably certified cocoa. And labelled as such.

And 88 per cent of the palm oil used in food products in the Netherlands today is produced sustainably.

Yet at the same time, global deforestation, driven by our demand for commodities and meat, is on the rise.

So there's still much that needs to be done.

If we want to achieve the ultimate goal of deforestation-free and sustainable commodities...

... by promoting sustainable production and trade on the one hand, and sustainable forest management and conservation on the other...

... we need to look at the bigger picture.

We have to search for ways to meet the many different, and sometimes conflicting, interests and needs at play.

So we need to find answers to questions like:

- How can we find a *balance* between economic needs and products for which no forests were cut down and no child labour used?
- How do we find ways to produce more food, *without* further forest encroachment?
- And how we can *educate* the next generation to understand that sustainable development *is* possible – provided our patterns of consumption are sustainable as well?

And, just as important:

- How can we avoid human rights violations against communities, including indigenous communities, that resist land grabbing and forest clearing?
- Or what can we do when families don't earn enough money, and need to put their children to work?

These are all equally important questions that we must find answers to - if we want to contribute to the global effort to limit climate change...

... and if we want to accelerate progress towards achieving the Sustainable Development Goals.

Goals we are all committed to.

That's why I'm so glad all of you are gathered here today. To share your expertise and experience.

I hope this meeting will contribute to concrete outcomes, and to improved conditions for human rights and forests.

And to help us accomplish that, I'd like to remind everyone of those brave men and women who have seen our fragile planet from outer space. A planet that we cannot live without...

They see us all as 'astronauts of a spaceship called Earth', and urge us to take 'incredible care of our planet'.⁴

Or, as Wubbo Ockels, the first Dutch astronaut, said in a video - just one day before he died of cancer:

'When you have the spirit, the insight and the attitude of an astronaut, you start to love the earth in a way other people do not.'

'And if you really love something, you don't want to lose it'.

He also believed there is a good future ahead of us. Or, as he said:

'We have proven we can change before. And we really have to change now! ...

(...) 'Even a small thing does something.'

And I believe that's what we should keep in mind for today, ladies and gentlemen;

'Even a small thing does something.'

Thank you.

⁴ Quote van Andre Kuipers