

An Address by the Acting Managing Director/Chief Executive Officer, Niger Delta Development Commission, NDDC, Mrs. Ibim Semenitari, to mark the flag-off of the World Environment Week on Tuesday, May 31, 2016.

Towards Preserving a Biodiverse Environment for Future Generations

It is my pleasure and pride to make comments at this year's World Environment Day (WED) celebrations. This is so because of the significance of this year's celebrations to us in the Niger Delta region and especially at the NDDC as it marks the beginning of the fulfilment of the Federal Government's promise to clean up the region, starting with the strategic Ogoni clean-up exercise.

When we visited Governor Seriake Dickson on April 12, at Government House, Yenagoa, during our regional tour, he said, "For us in Bayelsa, our wealth is in the sea." That profound statement underscores the immense endowment of the Niger Delta's ecosystem. What is unfortunate however is how this same resource is constantly abused and denigrated by repeated violations brought about by decades of bad behaviour. From government, with its weak regulatory frameworks, to oil companies and multinationals who do business in the region, to communities and individuals, who for different reasons wreak havoc, the environment in our region has taken a hard beating.

Covering about 70,000 square kilometres, the Niger Delta region is home to one of the largest wetlands in the world and Africa's largest delta. It has at least five distinct ecological zones. These range from the montane and savannah belts in Northern Cross River to the mangrove swamp forests, near the Atlantic coast,

which embody some of the last remaining untouched forest resources and centres of endemism in Africa.

These biogeographical attributes are known to have created the complex and rich environment of habitats that supported the evolution of its fantastically wide range of plant and animal lives. Some say the Niger Delta is home to all of Nigeria's endemic or near-endemic mammal species. Others say Niger Delta harbours many locally and globally endangered species, and approximately 60-80 percent of all plant and animal species found in Nigeria.

However, the globally significant environment and biodiversity of the Niger Delta are in grave danger. Some endemic fish species of the region are in grave danger of extinction due to many reasons, including environmental degradation and over-exploitation among others. Likewise, some animal species such as the endemic African Monkey (Guenon species), one of the world's most beautiful monkeys found mostly in the West African rain forest region (the Niger Delta Region inclusive), are at the risk of extinction.

This is why we must all rise to the daunting and pressing challenge of preserving our biodiverse environment for future generations. We all owe future generations a responsibility to preserve the biodiverse environment of the Niger Delta. As the countdown begins for us to join people from across the globe to celebrate WED on 5 June 2016, we all need to take part in environmental action and become agents of change for positive impacts on the planet. Today's tree-planting exercise typifies such action.

This year's theme is on the illegal trade in wildlife, which is eroding Earth's precious biodiversity, robbing us of our natural heritage and driving species to the brink of extinction. The NDDC is statutorily mandated to tackle ecological

and environmental problems in the Niger Delta region. Evidently, the killing and smuggling of wildlife constitute ecological and environmental problems. They also undermine economies and ecosystems, fuel organized crime, and feed corruption and insecurity across the globe.

Tackling the scourge of illegal trade in wildlife requires concerted action. We need to understand the damage this illicit business is doing to our environment, livelihoods, communities and security. We must change our habits and behaviour so that demand for illegal wildlife products falls. But it is not just the demand for illegal wildlife that must fall. It is also the demand for illegal crude, the destruction and vandalism of pipelines in the region. Our ecosystem is our wealth, and the protection of our region is, first and foremost, the responsibility of all who live and do business in the region. Saying no to everyone who dares to destroy our environment, whether they be government, corporations or individuals, is our collective responsibility.

This year's theme for WED – Go Wild for Life – encourages each one of us to celebrate all those species under threat and take action of our own to help safeguard them for future generations. This can be about animals or plants that are threatened within your local area as well as at the national or global level - many local extinctions will eventually add up to a global extinction! Whoever you are, and wherever you live, show zero-tolerance for the illegal trade in wildlife and the destruction of our environment, in word and deed, and make a difference.

According to Roxanne Paul, “Every little bit helps. It's amazing how much you can do when you choose to give a little bit of that natural habitat back.”

Thank you for your attention and God bless you.