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Climate Change and Biodiversity in Australia

**Statement by Ms Shirley McPherson
Chair
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(Check against delivery)

I would like to thank you for the opportunity to speak on the critical issues of climate change and biodiversity.

Over many years, scientists have gathered a body of evidence which makes the case that climate change is real and is being caused by human activity. People around the world are calling for action.

Indigenous peoples are among the first to face the consequences of climate change. Today, I would like to highlight how Australia's efforts will help Indigenous people, in both Australia and our neighbouring countries, to deal with the challenge, and also the ways Indigenous communities are contributing to the solution.

Australia's climate change policy is built on three pillars: reducing our greenhouse gas emissions; adapting to climate change that we can't avoid; and helping to shape a global solution.

The first pillar – reducing Australia's greenhouse gas emissions – is marked by our existing commitment to a target of reducing emissions by 60 per cent of 2000 levels by 2050 and to introduce a greenhouse gas emissions trading scheme by 2010.

The second pillar is adapting to the unavoidable and far reaching impacts on our environment, human amenity and our economy that will accompany climate change.

The third pillar is helping to shape a global solution to this global problem. This is why Australia has recently ratified the Kyoto Protocol. It is also why we are committed to working towards a post-2012 agreement including a long-term global goal for emissions reductions.

Members of the Forum,

Australia's economy and environment are highly susceptible to climate impacts. The UNESCO World Heritage listed Great Barrier Reef is sensitive to sea temperature rise. Our ecosystems and wildlife rely on very particular conditions. Our population is largely coastal and is confronted by rising sea levels, extreme storm events, coastal erosion and the potential for increased exposure to water- and food-borne diseases.

Australia is accelerating efforts to adapt to climate change. Our 'Caring for our Coasts' program's focus is on adaptation in the coastal zone, and there is a rescue plan for the Great Barrier Reef – which builds on partnerships with Indigenous communities.

Australia, as a developed country, recognises that it is in a position to assist other countries to adapt to climate change, particularly those Pacific countries highly vulnerable to rising sea levels.

Climate change will be a key consideration in the design of Australia's aid program.

Members of the Forum,

Reducing emissions from deforestation is another critical issue – around 20 per cent of global greenhouse gas emissions come from deforestation and forest degradation.

Deforestation is also a key sustainable development issue for many Indigenous peoples.

Australia is keen to build on the momentum from the UN Climate Change negotiations in Bali by taking practical action on deforestation, through collaborative efforts with other countries in our region - particularly Papua New Guinea and Indonesia - which will also improve the livelihoods of forest-dependent communities.

While broad-scale efforts to adapt to climate change and reduce emissions from deforestation have tangible benefits for Indigenous peoples, it is also important to talk about the active role that Indigenous people can and are playing.

As an example, the application of traditional savanna burning practices in northern Australia to reduce the extent of unmanaged wildfires can contribute to reducing greenhouse gas emissions and benefit existing voluntary and emerging emissions markets.

There are other obvious environmental benefits, such as helping to protect native flora species that are vulnerable to intense fires, as well as social and economic benefits for remote Indigenous communities.

Indigenous people are also actively engaged in a range of other activities to preserve Australia's wealth of biodiversity. This acknowledges their strong historical, cultural and spiritual links to land and sea and their traditional knowledge of conservation and sustainability.

The Australian Government's *Working on Country* program will create real jobs and train Indigenous rangers to work on Indigenous owned and managed lands and waters. By its third year it will see at least 400 Indigenous rangers working on country, providing

environmental services such as noxious weed and feral animal management, fire management, fencing, vegetation restoration and the protection of endangered species.

Working on Country links in with the establishment and management of declared Indigenous Protected Areas which already cover 89 million hectares – over 11 per cent of Australia. These areas protect natural and cultural heritage as well as providing important opportunities for carbon abatement and biodiversity protection.

Programs that draw on Indigenous peoples' special knowledge of the sea include marine turtle and dugong conservation and management activities.

Indigenous people in the north of Australia have also been involved in developing solutions to the problems posed by discarded fishing nets and other marine debris. The Ghost Nets project has evolved to become one of the highest profile Indigenous natural resource management projects in Australia and has won several environmental awards.

An important element of the programs I have outlined includes the recording and passing on of traditional knowledge to a new generation of Indigenous land managers. The Australian Government actively supports Indigenous communities in recording their traditional knowledge and, with their consent, applying it to contemporary resource management settings.

Australia is committed to the United Nations Convention on Biological Diversity and has convened Indigenous workshops to contribute to the National Biodiversity Strategy.

We have national legislation that ensures the role of Indigenous people in environment and biodiversity protection. An Indigenous Advisory Committee provides advice on the operation of the *Environment Protection and Biodiversity Conservation Act 1999*. I am pleased that the Chair of the Committee – Ms Melissa George – is in attendance here at this Forum.

Members of the Forum,

This Forum can be assured that the Australian Government will continue to look to Indigenous people for their invaluable knowledge and perspective on the environment.

We will also continue to build on our collective efforts to support, complement and build the capacity of Indigenous peoples to meet the challenge of climate change.

Thank you.