



United Nations
Educational, Scientific and
Cultural Organization

Message from Ms Irina Bokova, Director-General of UNESCO, on the occasion of World Environment Day, 5 June 2017

Connecting People with Nature

It may seem hard to believe now, but, fifty years ago, it was thought the best way to protect nature was to make it off-limits to the human population...

Today, we know better.

We now know that the closer the relationship between people and their natural environment the more likely people are to appreciate the importance of nature and its biodiversity, heritage and water, for their personal well-being and the planet's future.

This spirit guides all UNESCO's action, embodied in a unique global network of UNESCO-designated sites, designed to bring people closer to nature, drawing a new map of the world -- a map of unity and peace, beyond borders, between women and men and the environment around them.

UNESCO Biosphere Reserves, UNESCO Global Geoparks and World Heritage sites -- often overlying key strategic surface or groundwater resources -- bring together more than 2,000 exceptional sites around the world. All of them employ local people and have their doors wide open to the public, because we know now this is the surest path to more inclusive and sustainable development, respectful of the boundaries of the planet.

Geoparks are open-air history books that take us back millions of years in time. Biosphere reserves are places where local communities tackle development challenges by crafting new social and economic pathways to sustainability. Geoparks and Biosphere Reserves combine conservation with education and innovative approaches to sustainable local development, such as ecotourism and organic agriculture.

All this is led forward locally, but these sites fit into a unique global network that allow ideas, experience and best practices to be shared far afield. Respect for nature comes with understanding, which is why UNESCO launched an educational kit on biodiversity for schoolchildren.

Water connects people to nature, and many UNESCO Cultural World Heritage sites are examples of how humanity has managed water to obtain it, store it, harness its power and conserve it. Look no further than the aqueducts, water gardens, and mills that mark our landscapes.

Today, I invite everyone to take time out from busy lives and to visit one of UNESCO's sites. For a moment of contemplation, immerse yourself in a Persian Garden in Iran, where water plays an astonishing symbolic and ornamental role. In Tumbler Ridge Global Geopark in Canada, go for a swim in crystal-clear alpine lakes and sleep under the stars. Or go trekking in Jordan's Mujib Biosphere Reserve, which lies 420 m below sea level in places, thanks to its proximity to the Dead Sea.

On this World Environment Day, I call all countries to make the most of UNESCO designated sites -- most of all, I call on women and men everywhere to connect with the nature around them that gives beauty, meaning and harmony to the lives we lead.