



June 2, 2011

**MESSAGE**

South Asia has a shared geography with common seascape and a long rich history of social and cultural ties. This region is also home to several diverse natural ecosystems, ranging from the seas and oceans to the mighty Himalayas, harbouring a rich diversity of floral and faunal species including the only existing species of herbivorous marine mammal, the dugong or the 'sea cow'. Dugong lives exclusively in the sea including the Gulf of Mannar, Palk Bay, Gulf of Kutch, and waters of Andaman and Nicobar Islands in India. It is indeed disturbing that the coastal and marine biodiversity including dugong and their habitats in the region are under severe threat due to the anthropogenic pressures. We need to join hands to strengthen regional co-operation among the South Asian countries for conservation of the rich biodiversity including the migratory dugong, as valuable national assets and also as a shared global heritage.

I may mention that the Government of India in the Ministry of Environment and Forests had signed an MoU with CMS-UNEP in April 2008 for conservation and management of Dugongs. The Ministry has also constituted a 'Task Force for Conservation of Dugongs' and included the Dugong under the 'Species Recovery Programme' in its scheme - 'Integrated Development of Wildlife Habitats' for a focused conservation approach.

I am happy to note that the Ministry of Environment and Forests together with the Wildlife Institute of India and UNEP/CMS Office - Abu Dhabi is organizing the First South Asia Sub-regional Workshop on Conservation and Management of Dugongs and their Habitats throughout their Range in the South Asia on 6<sup>th</sup> and 7<sup>th</sup> June 2011 at Tuticorin, Tamil Nadu, India. I was keen to come to Tuticorin and address this important workshop myself. However, at the last moment due to exigency of work, I reluctantly had to miss this opportunity of being with you - the participants from South Asian countries including India. Nevertheless, I hope that the objective of this workshop to support and enhance regional cooperation in preparation and implementation of a Dugong Conservation and Management Plan in the South Asia region under the auspices of the UNEP/CMS Secretariat would be fully met.

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I would like to underline here that proactive cooperation among and commitment of South Asian countries constitute the most essential step forward to institutionalize the collaborative efforts of member nations in conservation of dugong and its habitats in the region. At this occasion, when all dugong range States in the South Asian Sub-region meet for the first time in the Gulf of Mannar Biosphere Reserve, which is the largest habitat of dugong in the region, I would like to thank UNEP/CMS Abu Dhabi Office for sponsoring this workshop, and also the participating countries, *viz*, Pakistan, Bangladesh and Sri Lanka, apart from India for their common vision and commitment to work together to help protect the unique dugong and its habitat across seas in the region. Let me add here a word of caution that such programmes succeed only when these are owned by the local communities. I am hopeful that the current initiative will besides conserving and protecting dugong would simultaneously focus on protecting and enhancing livelihoods of the local communities of South Asia.

I congratulate the participating institutions, agencies, experts, the UNEP/CMS Abu Dhabi Office, Environment Agency – Abu Dhabi, Wildlife Division of the Ministry, Wildlife Institute of India, State Forest Departments of Tamil Nadu and Gujarat, Union Territory of Andaman and Nicobar Islands, District Administration of Tuticorin, GEER Foundation, Reef Watch Marine Conservation and other Civil Society Organizations, Marine Research Foundation, Malaysia and all others who have joined hands in promoting and strengthening regional cooperation to conserve the dugong and its fragile habitats in this region.

I convey my best wishes for a grand success of the workshop.

  
(Jairam Ramesh)

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