STATEMENT BY

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ON THE OCCASION OF THE MEETING:

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Mr. Peter Harper, chair of the United Nations Committee of Experts on Environmental-Economic Accounting,

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Ladies and gentlemen,

Dear friends,

This is the second time within a couple of months that I have the honor to address a conference on environmental accounting and the application of the SEEA here in New York. It gives me great pleasure to be here again and to recognize many familiar faces.

Let me briefly recall why the Convention of Biological Diversity has such a strong interest in environmental accounting, and in particular in ecosystem accounting. As you know, the Conference of the Parties to the Convention, in 2010, adopted the Strategic Plan for Biodiversity 2010-2020. The Strategic Plan recognizes that, in order to effectively address the unprecedented loss of biological diversity, we need to give more focus and attention to the underlying drivers of biodiversity loss. It is the myriad of policy and economic decisions, made day-in day-out without considering its impacts on nature and its diversity, which in their totality lead to the widespread decline of ecosystems and biodiversity. The Strategic Plan therefore calls for integrating biodiversity issues into broader policies, strategies, programmes, and actions, including decision-making in economic sectors. In one word, we need to achieve what we call the mainstreaming of biodiversity.

However, one important precondition in achieving mainstreaming is to have more reliable and systematic collections of data on the status and trends of biodiversity as it relates to different economic sectors, including statistical information. It is precisely for this reason that Aichi Target 2 of the Strategic Plan, under its mainstreaming objective, calls for the incorporation of biodiversity values into national accounting, as appropriate, and reporting systems more generally.

Incorporating biodiversity into national accounts is also important for another reason. One critical aspect of environmental accounting is to depict the contribution of the environment to economic activities, as well as human well-being more generally. On the biodiversity side, the last decade saw much progress in our

understanding how nature and its variability contribute to human well-being, including economic well-being. As many of you will be well aware, the studies on the Economics of Ecosystem and Biodiversity (TEEB) played an important role in raising awareness of this understanding. The Strategic Plan for Biodiversity captures this understanding very nicely by explaining that biological diversity underpins ecosystem functioning, and thus underpins the provision of ecosystem services that are essential for human well-being. It provides for food security, human health, the provision of clean air and water, and energy; it contributes to local livelihoods, and economic development, and is essential for the achievement of the Millennium Development Goals, including poverty reduction.

Against this background, it is with great pleasure to note that, after volume one of the revised SEEA was elevated to an international statistical standard last year, we now witness the successful completion and publication of SEEA volume two, on experimental ecosystem accounts.

As a community, we now face the challenging task to implement this guidance. And, as a member of the United Nations family, the CBD and its Secretariat, together with its partners, needs to find out how to best support countries that are willing to move ahead with this important issue. I am optimistic that, in the coming three days, we will be able to take important steps to take on this challenge, by generating new ideas, forging new partnerships, and moving ideas to concrete action.

Ladies and gentlemen, dear friends,

Let me spend my remaining time to map out some tentative elements of modalities for an implementation road map.

First, I wish to invite the accounting community to best use the existing and emerging policy inroads in order to push for environmental accounting, and to forge partnerships accordingly. For instance, national governments around the globe are now working intensively towards translating the Strategic Plan and its twenty targets into national policies, in particular by revising and updating their National Biodiversity Strategy and Action Plans, or NBSAPs. A strong emphasis on ecosystem accounting in revised NBSAPs will provide clearly articulated policy demand at national level and will thus contribute to the needed political momentum for enhanced implementation.

In this connection, let me remind you, and re-emphasize, that the CBD interest in accounting is not restricted to implementing the dedicated chapter on biodiversity in volume two, but – through the concepts of ecosystem functioning and ecosystem

services, as explained earlier – also covers the other ecosystem services addressed in volume two, as well as the critical resource accounts covered in the SEEA Central Framework, such as the land use and land cover accounts. Many provisioning services, such as species harvested directly for food, fibre, timber or energy, are captured under the SEEA Central Framework, and information on the status and trends of the underlying ecosystem that delivers these provisioning services would be very important for assessing the long-term sustainability of these harvests.

Beyond NBSAPs and the Strategic Plan, it will also be very important to keep a close eye on the emerging post 2015-development agenda, the development of the Sustainable Development Goals, as well as the post-Rio+20 work, by interested countries, on the green economy. All these processes as they move towards national implementation will eventually provide important additional entry points for synchronizing the required monitoring systems with accounting frameworks.

My second point concerns the role of experimentation and research. The title of volume two – experimental ecosystem accounts – clearly reflects the fact that, at this stage, we have a rich array of different methodologies and approaches, perhaps as yet with a lack of convergence towards a more limited set of agreed tools. Against this background, further conceptual work will be useful, but I strongly believe that most emphasis needs to be given to concrete experiments at country level that seek to already generate and provide more practical information to policy-makers – even while acknowledging that this work is not, or not yet, based on a globally agreed international standard. From the perspective of our Strategic Plan, the clock towards 2020 is ticking and we need all the support we can muster as soon as possible, even if that implies that such support is based on less-than-perfect systems and data available.

My third point is that we need perhaps more practical and realistic step-by-step guidance on how to undertake such concrete work at country level. This is in fact one of the possible supporting activities we identified as the CBD Secretariat, and we are currently in the process of developing such a manual, firmly building on the SEEA, with the help of Jean-Louis Weber.

Among the different methodologies and approaches, some may be better suited for some countries while others may be better suited for others. My fourth point is therefore, perhaps not surprisingly, that such experimentation needs to be country-driven and based on national priorities and circumstances. In practical terms, this may often imply focusing on the most critical ecosystems and their services, instead of seeking comprehensiveness. And, whenever data limitations are a critically

constraining factor (they often are!), this may also imply giving preference to tools that can work with existing data sets, with their possible limitations.

This brings me to my fifth and last point. I strongly believe that environmental and ecosystem accounting can gain a lot from looking closer at, and harnessing, existing data collections in national environmental information systems, and from forging closer and more cooperative ties with the institutions that are responsible for such data collections. At the same time, I also believe that importing such data into the realm of national accounting will oftentimes strengthen their policy relevance – that is, the information resulting from this data may gain strengthened traction in the political discourse.

To be sure, forging such cooperative ties will frequently involve finding solutions to difficult issues of institutional division of responsibilities and burden-sharing. However, and in full recognition of this, I wish to invite both the statistical and the environmental communities to look at both the opportunities and the risks – and I am convinced that the former often outweigh the latter.

In this regard, I am pleased to mention that, within the modest possibilities of my office, we provided support to pair, as far as feasible, the statistical representative of countries present, with a representative from the biodiversity side. I wish to extend a special welcome to those biodiversity representatives who made it to New York. Welcome to you!

I hope that the next three days will provide many opportunities to advance practical ideas for implementation, deepen existing cooperation, and forge new partnerships.

I wish you fruitful discussions and a successful meeting.

Thank you for your attention.