

1 INTRODUCTION

Visions of degraded landscapes, changing climates, chronic pollution and extinction of species have permanently altered our view that the Earth is a limitless resource for exploitation. We now realise that our social and economic goals cannot be pursued regardless of their impact on the environment. Serious challenges lay ahead in translating such awareness into action. In particular, how can we progress towards sustainable development when the gap between current practices and sustainability appears to be so immense?

Many nations are responding to this challenge by committing to the principles of **Agenda 21**, the key output of the Earth Summit in 1992. In particular, they have opted to become Parties to international agreements and protocols relating to biodiversity conservation (e.g. Convention on Biological Diversity, CITES, Convention on Migratory Species, Ramsar Convention, World Heritage Convention) and stabilisation of the global environment (e.g. Framework Convention on Climate Change, Montreal Protocol). Five years later in 1997, at Earth Summit II, there was general agreement that enough discussion, negotiating and treaty-writing had taken place, and that the next major step forward would be **implementation**.

Central to the implementation process is the formulation of **policies, strategies and action plans** to promote the conservation and sustainable use of living resources. The performance of these policies depends on the degree to which they reflect the perspectives of different groups of people and, consequently, on the extent to which government, the private sector and society at large work in partnership. Experience has shown that the best policies result from a process of consultation, consensus-building and, if need be, reconciliation amongst affected stakeholders, leading to solutions which balance economic and social goals with the need to safeguard the environment. When pursued intelligently, a commitment to such policies can improve the economic performance of companies and allow longer-lasting benefits to be delivered by governments.

Good policies have other features in common, including the effective use of information throughout the policy's lifetime. Indeed, the transition from exploitation of living resources to conservation and sustainable use requires a major investment in information and monitoring, otherwise it is not possible to say whether we have truly progressed.