

PRESS RELEASE

New Atlas of Africa's Changing Environment demonstrates the power of Earth observations for managing the planet

Geneva, 10 June 2008 – The launch today of the United Nations Environment Programme's African edition of the "Atlas of our Changing Environment" highlights how modern Earth observation systems can support action to address humanity's growing impact on the natural environment.

By comparing satellite images and ground photos of specific locations taken 30 years ago and then again today, the Atlas makes it possible to truly comprehend the decade-scale changes occurring in the African environment. It will offer decision-makers new insights into how to craft policies for climate change adaptation, land remediation and sustainable development. Researchers will also benefit.

UNEP has presented the Atlas, which was produced in cooperation with organizations in Africa and the United States, as a contribution to the Global Earth Observation System of Systems. GEOSS is linking together the world's diverse environmental monitoring networks, instruments, data bases and models to help policymakers make evidence-based decisions about global environmental challenges.

"The coordinated, comprehensive and sustained Earth observations generated through GEOSS need to be presented in user-friendly formats for decision-makers and other users. The UNEP Atlas is an excellent example of how to do this," said José Achache, Director of the Group on Earth Observations, which is leading the construction of GEOSS.

"By complementing the Atlas's image pairs with ground-based observation data on rainfall patterns, land use, and other variables available through GEOSS, analysts can more rigorously interpret the human impacts and environmental trends in Africa," he added.

GEOSS supports users of Earth observations in Africa in many other ways as well. For example, the China Brazil Earth Resources Satellite Programme (CBERS) has launched a new Earth observation service that provides state-of-the-art images of the planet to end-users throughout the continent free of charge via four receiving stations in Africa. This and other information can also be accessed by users lacking high-speed internet connections via GEONETCast, a system of four communications satellites that transmit data to low-cost receiving stations maintained by the users. Many other GEOSS components, such as ChloroGIN Africa (a coastal water-quality monitoring system) and the South African Fire Information System also support the gathering, dissemination and use of Earth observations in Africa.

The Group on Earth Observations was established in 2005 after the World Summit on Sustainable Development (WSSD), the Group of Eight leading industrialized countries (G8) and three ministerial Earth Observation Summits all called for improving existing observation systems. Its membership now includes 73 countries and the European Commission; 52 "participating organizations" also contribute to its work.

GEO is coordinating the construction of the Global Earth Observation System of Systems. GEOSS addresses nine priorities of critical importance to the future of the human race. It aims to help countries to protect themselves against natural and human-induced disasters, understand the environmental sources of health hazards, manage energy resources, respond to climate change and its impacts, safeguard freshwater resources, improve weather forecasts, manage ecosystems, promote sustainable agriculture, and conserve biodiversity.

Note to journalists: The Atlas can be viewed on-line at www.na.unep.net/AfricaAtlas/ or purchased at www.earthprint.com. For more information, please see www.earthobservations.org or contact Michael Williams at +41-22-730-8293 or mwilliams@geosec.org.