



Message by the Commonwealth Secretary-General Rt Hon Don McKinnon

Welcome address by Mr. P.M. Leelaratne, Secretary, Ministry of
Environment and Natural Resources

This conference is taking place only a few months after the Tsunami that claimed so many lives and caused so much destruction in Sri Lanka. I would like, once again, to express the sympathy of the entire Commonwealth family to all those who have suffered – and continue to suffer – from this tragedy. The Commonwealth stands ready to assist in the process of reconstruction in all Commonwealth countries affected.

I regret that I am not able to join you for this conference. I would like to take the opportunity of this message to thank the organisers of the conference, as well as our Sri Lankan hosts, who have all put so much effort in making this event happen.

Forests are a huge resource in many Commonwealth countries – including Sri Lanka – and can play an important part in reducing poverty. The forestry and forest products industry in member countries provides employment in substantial numbers and there are hundreds of communities across the Commonwealth that rely on the forest product industry for their prosperity. For many countries, the forest export industry constitutes an important source of growth and is a major contributor to rural economic development.

Of course, forests are a precious resource which needs to be carefully managed. This is a challenge many countries face in the Commonwealth and we can tackle it more effectively by learning from each other. We must recognise that successful conservation and replanting of forests requires the full involvement of local communities. In order to achieve progress in this area, we must raise awareness of conservation issues and develop knowledge of planting and management techniques. One way in which we contribute to this effort is by producing and disseminating tree planting manuals.

Forests are integral to the future of the 1.8 billion Commonwealth citizens, as well as the wider international community. Thanks to its global reach, the Commonwealth is in a strategic position to help address forest issues on the basis of consensus and dialogue. I am confident that we will continue to play an important role in this area, particularly as we help our members balance the use of forests to create growth and the need to adopt effective sustainable management strategies.