

Message of Monique Barbut
Executive Secretary of the UN Convention to Combat Desertification
on
World Migratory Bird Day
10-11 May 2014

Can you imagine a world without migratory birds? If not, think again.

In 2012, one billion people crossed international borders for tourism. Such is our fascination with nature. But each year, billions of migratory birds undertake a hazardous migratory journey across countries and continents just to survive.

About a quarter of the 500 bird species that breed in Europe migrate to sub-Saharan Africa, where they spend a greater part of their lives, before flying back to breed in Europe. In the United States, millions of birds migrate north and south of the Great Lakes Region. In the animal kingdom, birds hold the record in long-distance migration. For some of the Eurasian birds, for instance, two thirds of the year is spent migrating. The Barn Swallow can travel up to 10,000 km in a year, crossing deserts in Africa and Asia. The pollination of plants is one of the major benefits we reap from this migration.

But scientists warn that the feeding grounds for some of the migratory birds are declining, making it harder for birds to survive. Many are arriving in their breeding grounds earlier or much later than normal, which is upsetting their breeding schedules and patterns. And it is not just birds.

Globally, the population of many migrating mammals is declining. Elephants, wildebeest, guanaco and antelope migration has fallen by 35-90% in the last decades. The change is mostly due to ecosystem degradation from land use change for agriculture, degradation of wetlands through land degradation and growing drought effects as well as the expansion of dry areas due to climate change.

We are extracting value – soils, water, biodiversity – from ecosystems, but hardly re-investing in them. Animal migration plays a big part in the structure and functioning of our ecosystems. And migratory species support livelihoods and service a multi-billion-dollar tourism industry. By investing some of the revenue from tourism to build sustainable tourism along important locations along the migratory bird routes, The Destination Flyways Project is a valuable example of what it means, practically, to secure healthy ecosystems. We all extract value from the ecosystems, but most of us are underpaying or not paying for it at all.

Imagine what the world would look like without birds. Now imagine what we could achieve, if each of the three million international tourist birdwatchers who travelled in 2012 invested something small in The Destination Flyways project. Imagine further what the world would look like, if each of us re-invested back into the ecosystems that support our livelihoods – soils, water or biological diversity.

To invest in the ecosystems that sustain our livelihoods is to take responsibility for our ecological footprint. Each of us must find practical ways to reinvest in the ecosystems that make our lives on Earth possible and meaningful.