Convention on Biological Diversity

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on the occasion of

THE FIRST AFRICAN FUNGUS DAY

25 May 2022

Distinguished participants,
Ladies and gentlemen,

It is my great pleasure to help launch the celebration of African Fungus Day. I would like to thank the Arab Society for Fungal Conservation and the other organizers of this event, the very first of its kind.

I must admit that I am very new to the world of fungus and probably I am not alone. As such, I will share with you that the very word has mixed connotations for me. While the culinary delights might be the first thing that spring to mind, the term also has less pleasant connotations. As mycologists, you are undoubtedly aware that fungus doesn't always get the respect it deserves. It's time this changed, and this celebrative launch is such that opportunity.

Biodiversity is made up of all life on Earth: animals, plants, microorganisms and fungi. Without biodiversity we would have no food to eat, no water to drink, or air to breathe. Without biodiversity there would be no life. Understanding the importance of biodiversity and the intricate relationships within the natural world, including the role of fungi, will encourage us all to take the necessary actions to protect biodiversity. This first African Fungus Day aims to advance and share knowledge and raise awareness for the often underappreciated but highly critical fungal networks, on which the survival and health of our planet and people depend. As our understanding of the vital roles that fungi play in the overall health of our planet increases, let us work to conserve and utilize these climate warriors in our fight against biodiversity loss, desertification, and climate change.

Fungi remain an untapped resource with enormous potential in fields such as biotechnology, restoration, and carbon sequestration. If it were not for fungi, life on Earth would look very different than it does today. Around 1.3 billion years ago, fungi began creating an environment in which other life forms could survive. This was done through the acids and enzymes produced by fungi extracting minerals from rocks and forming calcium oxalates, which caused rocks to crumble and the generation of soil to begin. Fungi not only help to produce soil, but also help to

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fuse and absorb water into the soil, which is essential in the prevention of erosion. Within soil, large fungal networks work to break down waste and redistribute nutrients between plants, cycling energy within and between ecosystem, a process without which life on earth would not be possible. And while fungi work to create and maintain healthy soils and ecosystems, some fungi have also been found to use enzymes to break down oil and turn hydrocarbons into carbohydrates, where mushrooms can grow and attract other forms of biodiversity and eventually create a thriving ecosystem. These findings can be game-changing for restoration, as fungi may restore degraded or contaminated lands back into healthy ecosystems, as well as carbon sequestration, as fungi extract carbon from plants and use it in their growth, storing it in the soil and reducing the amount of greenhouse gases released into the atmosphere. Along with all these benefits we receive from healthy fungal networks, fungi are also essential in fermentation processes, and provide the world with globally significant medicines, such as penicillin and lovastatin.

The effective conservation and management of biodiversity is largely dependent on the thorough understanding of the many species that make up each ecosystem and the contributions that each one brings to maintaining the health of those ecosystems. And while we know that fungi are essential for a sustainable and healthy planet, it is estimated that over 90 per cent of fungal species are currently unknown to science. Reinvigorating the field of fungal research is essential to ensure that fungi are understood, valued, conserved, and sustainably used, with the benefits arising from their use fairly and equitably shared for the well-being of society and the sustainability of the planet.

The draft post-2020 global biodiversity framework, currently being developed under the Convention on Biological Diversity, aims to halt biodiversity loss by 2030 and will thus contribute to the achievement of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. It also strives to achieve recovery and restoration by 2050 to reverse the current crisis caused by the combined effects of climate change, biodiversity loss, desertification, and pollution and achieve the 2050 vision of Living in Harmony with Nature. But this can only happen through a transformative change that ensures sustainable development. If biodiversity loss is not halted, countless opportunities for new solutions to pressing socio-economic and environmental problems will forever be lost.

Mycology is a highly specialized field of science. And yet, mycologists have much in common with other environmental scientists whose aim is to better understand the world around us, to combat biodiversity loss, climate change, pollution, and environmental degradation. We all share a vision of a sustainable future where human activities support biological and cultural diversity to improve our livelihoods and well-being. We are united by our collective intention to improve the status of species, genetic and ecosystem diversity.

May this first African Fungus Day increase our knowledge on the immense importance that fungi play in the health and prosperity of, not only the African continent, but all life on Earth. May we all take the knowledge and passion from today's presentations and apply them to our respective areas of work, to further advance the research and conservation of the fungal world.

I wish you fruitful discussions.

Thank you for your kind attention.