

Dear Minister for the Environment - dear ladies and gentlemen

First of all, I would like to express my gratitude for this invitation. As president for the Danish Society for Nature Conservation I am honored to be here today.

A wide range of delegates from grassroots to civil servants and politicians are represented here today and that is the exact forum necessary when it comes to protecting and developing the nature and natural resources, which are under tremendous pressure worldwide.

Each and every citizen in my view is a stakeholder in this challenge and it is a sizeable challenge that takes all of us to solve – the NGO's, the civil servants as well as the political system.

That notion was also the start of Danish Society for Nature Conservation, which was established in 1911 as a result of diverse scientific, social, and political interests.

The driving force behind the new green movement was not so much the idea of sustainable development addressing environmental issues as the belief that every citizen should be given access to the nature and beaches north of Copenhagen and the idea was born out of the new tendency of excluding public access to those recreational areas.

At the same time farming methods drained lakes, bogs and changed the landscapes to a degree that called for political intervention. It turned out that the leading politicians were concerned about these various threats as well. As a result, Denmark had her first law on nature conservation in 1917. The law was created in order to protect different landscapes of special characters and beauty and to ensure the public access to these places.

In 1937 the Danish Society for Nature Conservation obtained a new and probably the most important victory. By law we gained the right formally to put forward proposals for new areas under conservation and moreover – we were given the right to complain against decisions made on nature conservation issues.

As the only organization worldwide we have obtained the right to propose conservation for an area of particular importance for nature. This particular right of which we take much pride we use very carefully only after deep consideration and pre-examination. We always include the local society, the municipality and other potential stakeholders in this often very sensitive work. Nature conservation can over night double the prize of your house or it can limit your ability to expand your business.

But let me emphasize – the majority of stakeholders are happy when a nature conservation project has been finalized.

Another important tool is our right to filing complaints. Even though this right has got a somewhat negative feel to it - it is actually one of the most positive and important tools in our work even today because it means a right to raise our voice and be heard in the official system.

In short – we can oppose to all threats to environment when government or municipalities plans for building a new highway, a new industrial complex or for example a new extension to a farm and be heard by the environmental legal system.

Today the Danish Society for Nature Conservation is being heard at all levels regarding environmental issues thanks to our more than 130.000 members which are more than all members of political parties of Parliament combined.

It is also of significance that we are financially independent and base our work on member contributions only.

Out of this large group of members more than 2000 offer their time as caretakers. We take great pride in these men and women all over the country who voluntarily dedicate a lot of time and effort in order to secure a richer nature and a healthier environment. The volunteers are not only nature's eyes and ears in every part of the country – they are the backbone of our organization.

Our members are also those setting our overall political agenda.

Through electing a board of representatives who again choose the political board of our organization, they also get their voice heard within the organization.

In order to assist our volunteers we have established a secretariat in Copenhagen – all in all we have approximately 65 specialists in action on a daily basis.

And we are all busy – locally as well as nationally. The Danish nature is under an extreme pressure due to national as well as global threats.

Seeking influence, we consider it one of our main strengths to uphold a close and respectful cooperation with the civil servants system both in regard of the local system as well as on a national level. We are very aware, that our main strength, when voicing problems and solutions, is a thorough research and reasonable answers to various problems.

Locally we have hundreds of hearings every year regarding new projects. The last couple of years we have had to put a lot of time into filing complaints regarding farming practices and it is noticeable, that we win hundred complaints out of every hundred we file. In other words – we do make a substantial difference in order to make sure, that the environmental laws are being upheld.

On the national level we are obtaining daily contact with the Parliament and the Government through civil servants or at the political level.

When Parliament is hesitant to develop a national plan for biodiversity, we use all available resources in order to push forward this agenda.

We do put a considerable effort into communication in national and local papers and television in order to create all round awareness of the problem at hand. And try at least to secure official commitments from the politicians.

Our strategy is based on a set of overall political guidelines. In order to ensure the same messages from every part of Denmark and every part of our organization we are in a constant process of developing policies in every area of our work. We have a complete policy for the forests, for the energy supply, for farming, for nature, for climate and so on.

Don't be mistaken! As much as we are a peaceful part of the civil society we are taking our role as nature's watchdog to the next level if necessary. We do not hesitate to bring various cases before the European Courts and for the time being we have ten cases pending.

A hundred years ago we were formed as an NGO in order to ensure the public their right to enjoy nature. Today that's still a main goal – but we also transformed over the years into a strong protector of nature for nature's own sake as well as ours.

Today we consider our task to be a battle of values. Who has the right to exploit our common nature and common natural resources? And who has the right to our areas and how to use them?

Those questions are very important in Denmark, being the world's most intensively farmed country, with 62 percent of its land in use.

In Denmark the nature are also one of the most fragmented on Earth and as a result of those facts every third species is endangered, our clean drinking water are under pressure due to chemicals - especially pesticides and our aquatic environment is still polluted. Just to mention a few of the current challenges.

Our battle of values is supported by the new and greener world order set by both UN as well as the EU. The need for strong unbroken ecosystems is climbing up the agenda and biodiversity is no longer just an issue for the worlds green movements. It is now appreciated and recognized as the foundation of welfare as we know it.

The study of Economics of Ecosystems and Biodiversity is a comprehensive way to value the biodiversity and it shows the growing costs of biodiversity loss and ecosystem degradation. The total loss costs 50 billion euro every year. Alone in Denmark we lose groundwater resources worth 67 million euro every year.

In other words – we are risking not only our own welfare but the very platform on which we are standing for what appears to be a shortsighted gain.

Fortunately the awareness surrounding environmental issues is present in the EU system of which Denmark is a long time member and Iceland maybe a newcomer soon. We receive more than 80 percent of our environmental laws and guidelines from the EU system and frankly - when it comes to environmental issues and politics we now consider the European Union as a powerful friend.

Because of reluctant politicians the activities from local and national NGO's are very important. In order to strengthen that role the Danish Society for Nature Conservation played an active role in ensuring the Aarhus convention.

The convention secures environmental organizations and citizens the right to access information, to participate and to get access to the judicial system in questions regarding environmental issues.

I believe Iceland signed the convention in 1998 but not ratified it - yet.

I'm sure that is only a question of time before that happens.

It is important because all experience clearly shows that the true caretakers of nature are the citizens and the civil society. Openness is the base for a strong public interest, which moves the politicians to make the right decisions towards protecting our nature.

Denmark has long ago lost it's originally nature. Iceland still has got hers. I have had the great pleasure to see the fabulous Harlequin Duck in Laksau and had the thrill of watching the tiny chicks of Dunlin and the puppies of Arctic Fox in the spectacular nature that makes me and my family return to your wonderful country again and again. Please take good care of her.

Thank you very much.