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Acceptance of the
World Ecology Medal

President José María Figueres
Republic of Costa Rica

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ACCEPTANCE OF THE
WORLD ECOLOGY MEDAL AT THE
INTERNATIONAL CENTER FOR TROPICAL ECOLOGY
UNIVERSITY OF MISSOURI-ST. LOUIS
Saturday, June 15, 1996

HON. JOSÉ MARÍA FIGUERES,
PRESIDENT OF THE REPUBLIC OF COSTA RICA

As you may guess, when the political flames burn brightly in a country one-third the size of Missouri, one must extinguish them quickly, because there is usually no place to hide. In this case, I refer to a sudden and momentous vote in our Congress, and a change in my Cabinet that have forced me to stay home and fight fires. Please accept my profound thanks to Dr. Sork, Chancellor Touhill, Mr. Hermann and Dr. Raven, and of course, my sincere apology for my absence.¹

However, on the more positive side, you all have the opportunity to meet two women with very strong influences on the sustainable development policies of this Government and on me, personally: Ambassador Sonia Picado, and of course my mother and former First Lady Karen Olsen.

Friends, it is a deeply felt honor to receive this medal. It is especially meaningful to receive it from an institution made up of people who have carried out such authoritative and influential work in the field of tropical conservation science, long before the popularization of the term, "sustainable development." In fact, my Chief of Staff commented to me last week that Peter's [Dr. Peter H. Raven] pioneering research throughout the region should establish him as the official, one-man precursor to the Central American Alliance for Sustainable Development.

1. Dr. Victoria Sork, Director, International Center for Tropical Ecology, (ICTE), and Professor of Biology, University of Missouri-St. Louis. Chancellor Blanche M. Touhill, University of Missouri-St. Louis. Mr. Robert R. Hermann, Member, Advisory Board, ICTE, and Chairman, President and CEO, Hermann Companies, Inc. Dr. Peter H. Raven, Director, Missouri Botanical Garden, Member, Scientific Board, ICTE, and Adjunct Professor of Biology, University of Missouri-St. Louis.

In Costa Rica, the Center's successful emergence from the combined resources of the University of Missouri-Saint Louis and the Missouri Botanical Garden is well known. Through this institutional synergy, the Center has deepened the world's understanding of the value of tropical conservation, the sustainable use of tropical ecosystems and the need to assure long-term harmony between humans and nature.

Thank you also to each and every one of the members of the Advisory Board for the honor you bestow upon me, particularly given the list of extraordinary individuals who have received this award in the past. This medal represents both the values and the concerns we share with respect to the environment and to our future.

The prize you have given me is for outstanding work in the area of ecology. Ecological awareness and conservation is a global responsibility we fully want to live up to in Costa Rica. While we are one of the smallest countries in the Western Hemisphere, we are the home to 10,000 species of flowering plants, 200 species of mammals, 10 percent of the world's birds and butterflies, and even 20,000 species of insects. Furthermore, we have all tropical habitats except for deserts and snow-capped peaks. We are endowed with a phenomenal natural resource wealth.

During the last three decades our predecessors were concerned with safekeeping this wealth. They had the foresight to gradually put 24% of Costa Rican territory under protection in natural parks, biological reserves and private forest reserves. They saw the importance of a strong national park system based on progressive legislation. What our predecessors did not foresee, however, is the growing pressure put on these lands. During the same period of time in which the parks were being created, increasing population and rising costs of living also caused one of the highest deforestation rates in Latin America. That tendency has now been reversed: in this year of 1996 we will plant more trees than we harvest. However, disappeared forests, contaminated rivers and eroded soils in Costa Rica and around the globe are showing

us that much of the social and economic progress achieved during this century was made at the expense of the environment. With every passing day, there is a growing awareness that the path we chose to follow in the past was not sustainable. The need to build new visions for a common future has become of the utmost importance.

Forty eight years ago, Costa Rica took a giant step forward. We abolished our army, and thus created a peace dividend which for decades we have invested in health, education, housing and infrastructure. That gave us the Costa Rica we have today: peace-loving, 94% literacy rate, 2000 dollars of income per capita, a life expectancy of 76 years. As we look into the future, we are concerned about growing tensions between our continued social progress and the environment that supports it. And therefore today we are taking another bold step forward as we tackle the challenge of creating a new vision, the vision of sustainability.

In Costa Rica, our definition of sustainable development is anchored on four pillars, all equally important and interdependent:

1. Macroeconomic balances
2. Strategic social investment
3. Construction of an "alliance with nature"
4. Participation of civil society in decision-making

We are effectively incorporating all four components in our decision making process. But it is the construction of an alliance with nature to which I would like to bring your attention this afternoon.

Conservation for the sake of conservation only, I am afraid, is not sustainable. If conservation is to be sustainable, it must create good business opportunities. Therefore, we must develop intelligent environmental management which complements and is in itself a form of economic growth. We must devise a type of development that sees nature as an ally, not a victim. Such development is based on a deep understanding of our natural resource base, not

just for preservation, but for its non-destructive use. Our long term management of natural resources must follow the financial principle of living off the interest, and reinvesting the capital. In short, my friends, we have heard nature's voice crying "Don't tread on me". We should all raise that flag as we embark upon the task of building a strong "alliance with nature". Now is the time to translate theory into action. Allow me to share with you three ways in which we are doing this.

Climate Change

In the field of climate change, we take the warnings of the international scientific community very seriously. Costa Rica's ability to undertake adaptive measures to compensate for the potentially dramatic effects of global warming are limited by our resources and access to capital. Under this administration we have ratified the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (FCCC), have become the first Central American country to complete an inventory of our sources and sinks for greenhouse gases, and have set an ambitious goal of moving away from fossil fuels and toward almost complete dependence on renewable energy sources for electricity generation by the end of the century. Simultaneously, we have implemented a new carbon tax whose revenues will be used for reforestation, conservation and sustainable forest management.

We are working with industrialized countries to help them offset their greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions through the innovative mechanism of "joint implementation" (JI). Joint Implementation refers to international arrangements where entities in one country jointly undertake greenhouse gas mitigation or sequestration activities in another country. Costa Rica offers itself as a test for the success of JI by being the first developing country to establish a national program. We have signed a bilateral agreement with the United States and we are host to eight of the fifteen projects approved by the United States Initiative on Joint Implementation. Our Forestry Law, signed just three months ago is the first of its kind to

specifically promote Joint Implementation investment in projects of national scope that preserve biodiversity.

Biodiversity

Costa Rican wildlands conservation is an issue of crucial local and global importance because our country contains five percent of the world's biodiversity. In recognition of the significance of this to our society and our economy, we are actively engaged in protecting, learning about, and utilizing our biodiversity.

Under this administration we have ratified the United Nations Framework Convention on Biodiversity. Last year, our National Biodiversity Institute, known as "INBio", received the Prince of Asturias Prize, second in prestige only to the Nobel Prize. INBio is engaged in an All Taxa Biodiversity Inventory (ATBI) of the Guanacaste Conservation Area in Northwest Costa Rica, the first attempt in the world to identify a region's biodiversity in a comprehensive manner that will facilitate its access to society in general.

We also want to explore and develop non-destructive commercial uses of our biodiversity. In this pursuit Costa Rica is actively promoting "Biodiversity Prospecting" through collaborative research agreements with pharmaceutical firms, to screen samples of organisms for use in new medicines, cosmetics, agricultural and other industrial products, in search of developing economically viable and environmentally responsible uses for our protected areas.

Education

Finally, Conservation Areas are also important to our education system. We desire the education of a population that is "bio-literate", rather than merely literate. Thanks to the peace dividend, Costa Rica has the highest literacy rate in the region at 94 percent. Our new form of literacy, "Bio-literacy" places an emphasis on understanding natural resources and the importance of sensible management in the educational process. Curricula are being revised to

include sustainable development concepts, particularly environmental issues. Our parents taught us the importance of protecting lands. We want our children to fully understand the importance of the environment with respect to life in the future.

The measures I have enumerated are some of the building blocks of Costa Rica's alliance with nature. These policies, together with many other measures we are undertaking in the fields of macroeconomic balances, social infrastructure development and popular participation in the decision making process, constitute our vision of sustainable development.

Conclusion

In closing I would like to reaffirm Costa Rica's support and admiration for the Center's mission, and to thank the Center once again for the distinction conferred upon me and my country today.

In my case, I consider the World Ecology Medal an award for **Effort**. Costa Rica has taken great strides in moving toward sustainable development. But it is a challenge we are still tackling. It is only through careful planning, persistence and the active involvement of local and international organizations like the Center that we will continue to make progress. I invite you to maintain and strengthen your partnerships with Costa Rica to make sustainable development, both globally and locally, a replicable reality.

After all, it is not by our industriousness that we will be judged, but rather by the stewardship of our heritage. Public life has taught me that it is not only today which must be conquered, but also and most importantly, it is the vision of tomorrow which must be sown. Policies and decisions promoting sustainable development are not necessarily easy to make, nor are they often popular, for the seeds we plant today may not bear fruit for me, nor for you. However, the future must be fruitful for the society of forthcoming generations. Let us continue to work together today to make the harvest of tomorrow plentiful and enduring.

Remarks of Karen Olsen de Figueres, representing President José María Figueres at the University of Missouri-St. Louis, June 15, 1996.

Good Afternoon. Friends:

I stand here **deeply moved** and **deeply grateful** for the **recognition**, of the University of Missouri-St. Louis, the International Center for Tropical Ecology, and the Missouri Botanical Garden, in granting the World Ecology Medal to President José María Figueres.

In reading the thought provoking words of Dr. Peter Raven I was taken by his reference to one of our mutual mentors, Abraham Lincoln, when he said "Things may come to those who wait, but only the things left by those who hustle." Today, you here and we there are not waiting, we both are hustling!

Today, your University, your Center and your Garden are recognized internationally for their leadership on environmental issues, and Costa Rica is recognized for its "sustained development in harmony with nature". **Indeed**, we do **share the same dream**: the dream to introduce what I call the spiritual ingredient into making sense of this tired world and promoting a new focus and a new change of mentality that will lead to permanent, not transitory, transformations, in order "to **lift** the human spirit to recognize the total beauty and purpose of the natural world".

These are not new concepts to Costa Rica. You may say that it is part of our human nature. Five generations of Costaricans, since 1948, when our army was abolished, have been formed by what is now accepted as natural: a high sense of civil and pacific consciousness and conscience.

Costa Rica is one of the very few, if not the only Latin American country which has had 100 years of continuous democracy which has given us thereby the stage for "equal opportunities".

God has blessed our country in giving us bountiful rain and sun which allows us to be a green country, and this by osmosis has molded our character and taught us to live at peace with nature. We are bound to Mother Earth by an unbroken umbilical cord of respect and

gratitude because, as descendents of agriculturists and farmers, we are daily conscious that Mother Earth gives us the food to live. **But we must do things to keep and to further strengthen this "Green Consciousness"**. This is the **firm** and unswerving commitment of President Figueres.

In his stimulating video that we are about to see, President Figueres indicates that 25% of Costa Rica's 55,000 square kilometers of land is protected national parks, rain forest and wildy reserves. There is no horizon where the green frontier ends. **And we are determined to keep it that way!** In the 21st century we will serve as a green lung for the world. Allow me to close with an appropriate reflection of President Figueres's father, don Pepe as we affectionately call him:

"Twenty years ago" (he said in 1973) "I only worried about poverty. Today I worry about poverty **and** riches. What kind of society and what type of human beings will we become once we reach abundance?... We risk the danger of becoming a rich and vulgar people. It is necessary to make a cultural effort superior to the economic possibilities of today. It is necessary and paramount to think not only in the standard of living but in the **quality of life**".

President José María Figueres, whom I knew 9 months before he knew himself, **began** at an early age, to cultivate a **passion for nature** and a **passion for excellence**. And, he sees them, today, as the two sides of the same coin, as he leads his people forward to understand and to emphasize the **sustainable character** of the (human) development process.

The World Ecology Medal is so important for Costa Rica and for the President because it is an acknowledgment of what the Costa Rican human being is and how we are working to create a facilitating environment so that people may enjoy a long, healthy and creative life, a life that places human beings as the **object** and **subject** of development, for this simple but powerful truth is generally set side in order to pursue material and financial wealth.

For each and every one of you here today, please accept President Figueres' **deep gratitude**. Also his warm **invitation** that there is a special place in our hearts and that Costa Rica, Garden of the Americas, awaits you with a flower, a bird, a tree, which is your beckoning destination for unforgettable encounters.

Thank you. Thank you.