



### 3. NATIONS: Afghanistan's "first lady of the environment" calls for awareness

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**Darius Dixon, E&E reporter**

A few years ago, Habiba Sarabi found herself out with a young nephew enjoying one of Afghanistan's natural beauties. She recalled the deep blue of the region's lakes, a striking contrast against bone-white rocks and tall ridges.

But all Sarabi could see was the trash. She bent down with her nephew and began picking up the scattered litter.

"Please, you are young, you have to learn how to clean your environment," she recalled telling two onlookers on the lake's edge.



Habiba Sarabi, governor of Afghanistan's Bamyan province.

Sarabi, 53, is governor of Bamyan province, in central Afghanistan, west of Kabul, the nation's capital. She is Afghanistan's first and only female governor, and has become a motivating force for environmental conservation in a country wracked by war and chaos.

Bamyan is one of the poorest among Afghanistan's 34 provinces. More than a third of the population lives below the poverty line, according to the CIA's World Factbook. But in a report issued in spring of this year, the United Nations' office on human rights said "poverty is neither accidental, nor inevitable in Afghanistan."

Sarabi, in an interview with *ClimateWire*, said she is determined to prove that preserving the environment has a major role to play in the economic development of her struggling province. She has successfully convinced village elders and district committees -- dominated overwhelmingly by men -- that Bamyan can prosper through eco-tourism. Meanwhile, the committee that oversees the national park, which ranges from 30 to 50 people, will soon welcome its second woman.

And after considerable effort, she managed to turn the area where she and her nephew picked up trash into Afghanistan's first national park.

Band-e-Amir national park is a tourist destination for many Afghans, Sarabi said. She is hoping to preserve the area as Afghanistan's economy and political issues develop and attract an international community.

The governor visited Washington, D.C., last week to participate in a series of discussions with women conservationists from around the world. Along with House Speaker Nancy Pelosi (D-Calif.) and members of the Congressional Caucus for Women's Issues, the Alliance for Global Conservation, the U.N. Foundation and the Green Belt Movement hosted activists for an exchange of recommendations to the international community.

Sarabi said she recommended that development aid to struggling countries include significant measures and goals to promote conservation and ecologically sustainable practices.

#### Environmental awareness is a major hurdle

Between decades of war, crushing poverty and trying to hold ground against the Taliban, Afghanistan has a lot more to worry about than climate change. But experts say it's a serious threat to the country. According to the climate change action plan the country submitted to the United Nations last year, 80 percent of the country's population depend on natural resources for their livelihood. Droughts and desertification brought about by rising temperatures could disrupt agricultural production.

Sarabi said she is concerned about the effects of climate change but has focused her environmental work on efforts closer to the ground.

Awareness, she said, is the environmental challenge of Afghanistan. Sarabi is trying to convince communities that even though the country has lost so much, its future will depend on how much can be preserved.

A 2008 story in *TIME* magazine illustrated Sarabi's environmental resolve. In June 2007, she scolded a platoon of Afghan National Army soldiers for littering at the visitors center of the province's national park. She told them that part of their national duty was "keeping their country clean."

In her discussions with the other women invited for the discussions last week, she said she plans to redouble her efforts to fostering environmental awareness among everyday people.

Sarabi said she has started several youth "cleanness" groups throughout her province. She often joins them in the cleanup effort herself. But, she said, given the struggles of everyday life in Afghanistan, environmental activism is a struggling concept.

Once, Sarabi recalled, she was leading a youth cleanness group in a village, picking up litter in the streets. People passing by in cars or buses would say, "Oh, poor governor. No one listens to her," Sarabi said. "They didn't know that I am doing something that could be a kind of model for the others to follow."

It is as if, when first lady Michelle Obama got her hands dirty planting an organic vegetable garden on the White House grounds with fifth-graders last year, Americans believed she was doing it because she could not get someone to do it for her.

Many people in Sarabi's province cut down trees to maintain and heat their homes, leading to severe deforestation, erosion and, eventually, deadly floods. She conducted a three-year awareness project on the issue by encouraging each person in her province to plant two trees supplied by nongovernmental organizations. It was difficult but worthwhile, she said. Sarabi is planning another go at the tree-planting campaign at the beginning of Nowruz, the New Year, on March 21.

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