

'Conserve mangroves as carbon sinks'

MANGROVES and coastal ecosystems are such large stores of carbon dioxide that they should be included in countries' carbon counts and protected, conservation groups have said.

The International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN) and Conservation International on Tuesday called for negotiators at the United Nations climate change conference in Durban to include coastal conservation in policies and financing processes.

Mangrove plants and their rich mud can sequester up to five times as much carbon dioxide as tropical forests, and destroying them can release substantial amounts of the greenhouse gas.

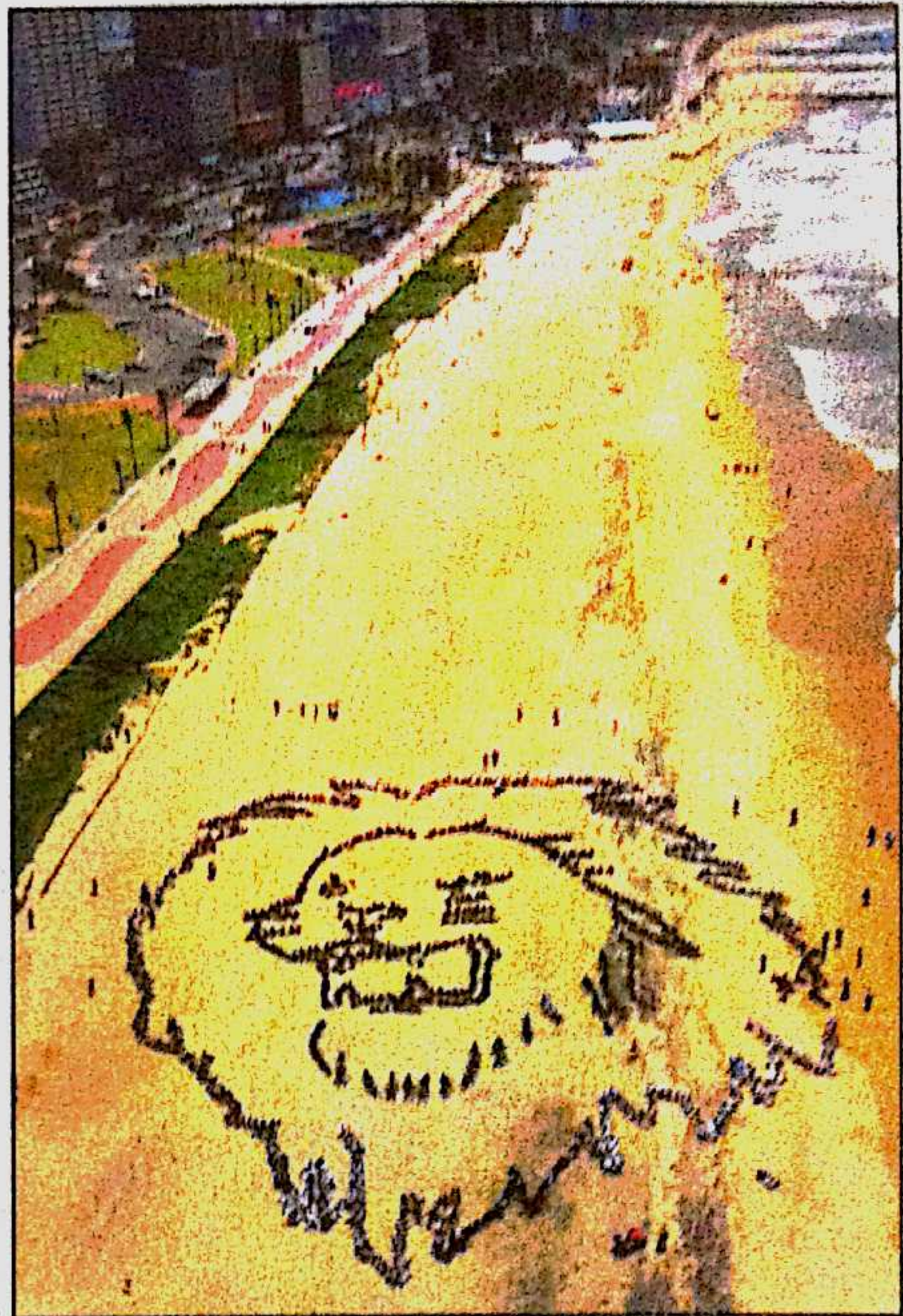
The IUCN said mangrove forests could be specifically included in the Redd+ (reducing emissions from deforestation and forest degradation) framework, meaning other governments and private investors can fund mangrove conservation projects in needy communities. The Redd+ scheme aims to boost the carbon stored in forests by keeping them intact and preventing forest degradation. It also aims to protect local communities and indigenous peoples.

A few countries, like Indonesia, already include their mangroves in national climate change plans, but these are not detailed.

Many countries already recognise the value of mangroves as fish nurseries and in preventing erosion. But scientific and policy work on mangroves as carbon sinks gives an extra reason to protect them, said IUCN marine programme officer Dorothee Herr.

To date, human activity has destroyed more than 35 per cent of mangroves, 30 per cent of seagrass meadows and 20 per cent of salt marshes worldwide.

Singapore has some seagrass meadows, including some globally vulnerable species. In 1950, mangroves covered some 13 per cent of the land area. By 2002, that had dwindled to 0.5 per cent.



South Africans forming a lion's head on a beach in Durban yesterday to call for urgent action on climate change. PHOTO: AGENCE FRANCE-PRESSE

But in recent years, Singapore has undertaken mangrove reforestation, especially to prevent coastal erosion and to protect against a rise in sea level. By 2008, mangroves covered 6.6 sq km or less than 1 per cent of the land area now.

Singapore-Delft Water Alliance researcher Daniel Friess said: "Carbon (storage) is one of a multitude of ecosystem services that coastal wetlands provide, and another good reason to focus attention - and funding - on them."

GRACE CHUA