A very good afternoon to all of you.

I am honoured and humbled to be here with you this morning to share some thoughts with you on a theme which I hold very close to my heart. Many of you may not be aware, I spent much free time during my young adult life in the fresh air and sunshine helping my close ones with agricultural activities. This is why I feel a deep connection with nature and the environment.

So, today bears special significance for me.

As already indicated to you, we are assembled here today to celebrate World Forest Day. It is a special day where we are meant to think of the importance of the forest and all that it gives us, like air to breathe, water to drink, food to eat, and timber for homes.
So, ladies and gentlemen, young friends, let us start by reminding ourselves of some basics. Why are forests so important?

I would say that the significance of trees in our lives is too often overlooked. We take for granted all these free services that the forest so willingly and graciously offers us.

First and foremost, Trees are our closest relatives. Trees exhale Oxygen which is life for us. We exhale Carbon Dioxide which Trees inhale to filter the atmosphere for us. If we just try holding our breath, after a few seconds we will choke if we don’t resume breathing. The intake of Oxygen, which we called breath, is an involuntary reflex which we perform over 17,000 times a day. Can we imagine what would happen if Trees were not there to filter the air for us! So, essentially, Trees keep our lives going.

Forests and trees perform many other functions which sadly, we don’t value and recognize often enough:

(i) Medication are often derived from plant based products.
(ii) Trees provide shade which cools the environment in the summer.
(iii) Trees clean the air by trapping dust, pollen and other pollutants.
(iv) Trees provide habitat, shelter and food for wildlife such as birds.
(v) Timber makes homes, furniture and paper.
(vi) Roots help to hold the soil together and prevent erosion.
(vii) When leaves fall off, they decompose to make new soil.
The list of benefits is endless.

Ladies and gentlemen, I am at the right place this morning to speak about the importance of extracurricular activities.

Today’s education model is sadly focused too much on textbook learning assisted by ultramodern technology. We place too much reliance on grades, marks and examinations rather than practical application of learning in our day-to-day life. I believe that not enough focus is given to more balanced learning environments where for example environmental education is delivered as an experience, rather than something read from textbooks.

Teachers and parents alike should encourage more value-based learning around the normal education curriculum. Values and ethics refine our character.

Thoedore Roosevelt, one of America’s former Presidents, said (and I quote): “To educate a man in mind and not in morals is to educate a menace to society.” (Unquote)

We find that young HSC and degree graduates these days are finding it increasingly difficult to find a job because employers are placing more importance on well-rounded personalities, on soft skills rather than mere certificates. So, special days such as today are important to enable us to reflect on the appropriateness of being curriculum-centric as we prepare our youth for adulthood. I believe that Teachers have a duty to sensitise students on the importance of making responsible choices and being responsible citizens.
Teachers and the PTA should accordingly encourage students as early as Form 1 to join projects and Ecology Clubs. I am sure students would be interested to embark on projects aimed at protecting our planet. Tree planting is the most visible form of action. This is a project which can be initiated in little time and results are wide-ranging.

You have all heard of Global Warming. I am sure you must be asked as part of the school curriculum to write essays on Global Warming. In simple terms, Global Warming is caused by too much carbon dioxide in the atmosphere. Trees capture this carbon dioxide. The answer is to plant more trees and lots of them.

Young friends, I would wish you to go home today with certain key messages. It is important for you to know that great things come from small beginnings. If you plant one seed or sapling today, this small seed will become a big tree and will bring innumerable benefits to the community. As the tree you have planted will grow, you will feel good about the transformation you are bringing about you, you will feel confident about yourself. Such good initiatives will help develop your personality and skills. As I said earlier, your participation in environmental projects will help develop an all-round personality which will help you all your life.

Let me tell you a short story. It is called The Starfish Story. It is about “One Step Towards Changing the World”.

Once upon a time, a Father and Son were walking on the beach in the morning. As the tides rise during the night, thousands of starfish are thrown on the beach. While walking, the young boy would occasionally
pick up a starfish and throw it back into the sea. So, his Father asked him: “Son, what are you doing?”

The Son replied: “Throwing starfish into the ocean. The tide has washed them up onto the beach and they can’t return to the sea by themselves. When the sun gets high, they will die, unless I throw them back into the water.”

The Father replied with a surprise: “But there must be tens of thousands of starfish on this beach. I’m afraid you won’t really be able to make much of a difference.”

The Son bent down, picked up yet another starfish and threw it as far as he could into the ocean. Then he turned, smiled to his dad and said, “It made a difference to that one!”

So, every little act of kindness, of generosity, of conscious action to preserve nature and its bounty will help.

Young friends, planting trees is not other people’s jobs. It is not just the job of the gardener or horticulturist. It is everybody’s responsibility to protect the environment. On this World Forest Day, let us resolve to plant more trees, keep rivers and sea clean and pure, and refrain from polluting air. If we take care of the environment, it will take care of us. So, as from today let us start planting seeds of conscious action in our minds. With this deed, we send a message of hope for a more sustainable world.

Let us take a pledge this morning for Bel Air SSS Students to be the region’s ecological-superheroes. I assure you that I shall support you in your green initiatives in whatever capacity I am whether as Minister, as Parliamentarian
or in my own personal name. I am sure my colleague Honourable Minister Seeruttun will be pleased to lend us help as well. So let us pledge this morning to be seeds of hope for a Better Mauritius. Let us lead by example and become environmental role models for the region and the country.

Ladies and gentlemen
Young friends,

Mother Earth is bountiful and gives us a lot of wonderful gifts that help maintain life on the planet. We have to learn to honour the Planet, honour the soil, honour trees, honour the environment. World Forest Day is a special time for us to think about how we can give back to the Earth that sustains us all. Once you start being conscious of your responsibility as human beings, you will talk about it at home and raise the awareness of those around you. Together we shall create a more eco-friendly Mauritius.

We shall be planting a tree today. Let us sow the seed for a better future, for a greener, healthier, cleaner Mauritius.

Ladies and gentlemen, I thank you all for your attention.