

Biological Diversity: Reconciling Global and Local Priorities

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While conservation clearly has huge potential to contribute to achieving the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), major challenges need to be tackled if this potential is to be realised. A fundamental question to address is what we actually mean when we talk about conservation. To many in the North, conservations mean preserving rare or endangered species and habitats so that we, and our children, may continue to enjoy them for generations to come. For those that actually live near, and depend upon, biodiversity in the South, the priority is to conserve those species that provide direct benefits such as food, medicines, fuel or that have cultural or spiritual significance. Distinctions between domesticated and wild species are also less meaningful to many Southern rural communities, who farm forest gardens or gather food widely, than to the Northern architects of international conservation policy. These different perspectives can result in major tensions between North and South, between policy-makers and 'policy-takers' and their reconciliation requires a range of tools and strategies to negotiate tradeoffs and to identify and build on synergies.

Tools, however, are not enough. Many conservation initiatives engage locally on the assumption that they are dealing with local people with legitimate right to the ownership and control of their natural resources – while in fact the broader frameworks that might legitimise those right are entirely lacking. Tactical tools are of little value without higher-level strategies to strengthen governance, particularly at national levels. These are long-term goals: many who rally for equity in conservation decision-making would argue that solution lie outside the 'sector' in much bigger issues of how society can shape governments and markets.

People-centred conservation dose not mean that the agendas of poor people must override the role of conservation in other key social aspirations such as environmental sustainability. But it dose mean that the trade-offs and commonalities between local goals and global goals, between goals of conservation and goals of development, need to be given greater – and more incisive-attention than has been the case in the post so that differences in perceptions and priorities can be turned from a problem into an asset.

Taking a Strategic Approach

One way forward is to adopt an 'ecosystem approach' to conservation planning – as advocated by the Convention of Biological Diversity (CBD). This recognises that ecosystems must be managed as a whole, with protected areas serving as reservoirs of wild biodiversity in a 'matrix' of land that is managed to enhance its habitat value, while also providing a range of benefits to people such as food supply and income for ecosystem services. Within this integrated strategy, agricultural lands need to be managed as part of the matrix surrounding protected areas, while the protected areas are managed as part of the matrix surrounding agricultural lands. The approach draws on multiple interest groups within society and relies on local management institutions as far as possible.

'Ecoagriculture' builds on this concept and refers to land-use systems that are managed to simultaneously achieve improved livelihoods, conserve biodiversity, and enhance sustainable production at a landscape scale. For ecoagriculture, enhancing rural livelihoods through more productive and profitable farming systems becomes a core strategy for both agricultural development and conservation of biodiversity.

A programme for sustainable landscape management that includes biodiversity conservation needs to include both firm governmental action and alliances with the other stakeholders. National governments cannot delegate their role of guarantors of the conservation of a country's natural heritage, so the appropriate authorities need to build the capacity to fulfil their regulatory and management duties and responsibilities regarding the management of living natural resources after careful preparation and an adequate definition of roles and responsibilities. Given the interests of NGOs, business, indigenous people, and local communities who live within or close to protected areas, alliances should be created among stakeholders that enable each to play an appropriate role according to clear government policies and laws.

The private sector is only one of this set of key stakeholders. However many businesses operate in ways that have fundamental negative impact on biodiversity – through sourcing of raw materials for production and consumption management of company landholdings and through release of environmental pollution such as green house gas emissions. Food processors, forestry and paper, mining, oil and gas, utilities, electricity, pharmaceuticals and biotechnology and tobacco companies are the sectors with the greatest impacts on biodiversity, but all businesses have some form of impact – whether directly through their operations or indirectly along the supply chain through pollution or resource use. The lack of a clearly understood link between corporate and natural value has meant that business has been slow to understand that there are both threats and opportunities posed by mismanagement of biodiversity and have often seen the issue of biodiversity management as a governmental or societal responsibility.

Nevertheless, there are now a number of initiatives amongst large and small companies that are beginning to address the issue of biodiversity loss. Much of the focus of NGOs and investors to date has been on the biodiversity impacts and management practices of big business. However, small- and medium- sized enterprises (SMEs) are major contributors to both income generation and resource use in much of the world and thus have the potential to significantly impact on, and influence, biodiversity. Indeed many consider that the path to biodiversity- aware development lies with removing the barriers faced by SMEs rather than focusing on big business.

Overall such initiatives and processes remain obscure to business and, as a significant global force for development and potentially for conservation, excluding business is a major omission. There is an urgent need, therefore, for the governors of those processes to consider how business large and small – can be drawn into these discussions and appropriate safeguards set up to ensure that their level of influence is appropriate. In sum, what we need is to raise a new consciousness among policy makers and civil society that our “natural capital” is a key to sustain our human and social capital.