

Perverse priorities

Globalization leads to at least US\$ 200 billion being spent on 'perverse' subsidies that harm biodiversity habitats as well as economies. This subsidies funding is ten times more than conservation spending worldwide. Norman Myers describes the paradox.

It is several decades since it was realized that the planet is entering the opening phase of a mass extinction of species. Since then, thousands of scientists have written tens of thousands of books and articles on the issue, and activists—whether governments, international agencies or NGOs—have mobilized unprecedented efforts to stem the crisis. But while conservation resources—scientific skills, funding and the like, as well as measures such as protected areas—have increased greatly, the problems have increased even more greatly as leading habitats such as tropical forests have declined at ever-faster rates. The best efforts have hardly done more than slow the pace at which extinction is gathering momentum. This assessment is not defeatist. Rather, it is realistic, and it is necessary to keep a keen eye on the deteriorating situation. It is one thing to ask “How much better are we doing than before?” It is another thing to ask the ultimate question, “Are we doing enough?”

How much progress has been made, how far are conservation efforts falling short, and how much time is left before the extinction problem exceeds human reach and further efforts become no more than salvage affairs? How far is it true to say that conservationists have effectively been tackling symptoms of environmental problems, rather than getting to the sources of the problems—which include, for notable instance, those subsidies that are bad news both environmentally and economically, hence they are 'perverse'. Conservationists spend around US\$ 20 billion a year, whereas perverse subsidies that serve, albeit inadvertently, to deplete biodiversity habitats total at least ten times as much. So long as we fail to tackle the mega- and meta-problem of perverse subsidies, conservationists will find themselves pushing an ever-bigger rock up an ever-steeper hill.

This implies the need for an expanded approach to the conservation challenge. Certainly, conservationists have worked long and hard to preserve biodiversity and have become exceedingly skilled at many of their tasks. But in addition to tackling problems, they might do more to tackle sources of problems: how to stifle problems before they ever develop? This means, for example, addressing those perverse subsidies which are destroying forests, expanding deserts, reducing water supplies, fostering grand-scale pollution, stimulating soil erosion, and even causing climate dislocation, among many other

forms of biodepletion. If other developed countries were to follow the example of New Zealand and greatly reduce their agricultural subsidies, that would release several hundred billion dollars of unnecessary subsidies per year. Phasing out these subsidies would also go far in preventing further ecological injury to biodiversity habitats across millions of square kilometres.

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What might it all cost? There is a variety of answers. Safeguarding 35 terrestrial biodiversity hotspots could be achieved for roughly US\$ 3.5 billion over five years, an outlay that could possibly reduce the species extinction spasm by a whopping two fifths. Some 35–45% of the Earth's estimated 10 million species are confined to these hotspots, where they are severely threatened.

In terms of financial costs, the job could certainly be accomplished; nor would other factors be insurmountable. To stem global warming for instance (this ranking among the biggest sources of habitat loss in the eventual future), the technologies to replace fossil fuels are largely available (and with massive financial benefits in the long run). The main obstacles are political, such as the special interest groups that maintain perverse subsidies despite their many environmental (and economic) costs. What is needed is a political commitment to an effort on a scale of the Manhattan Project to produce the first atom bomb. One such effort was the Marshall Plan, with a bill of US\$ 90 billion (in 2001 dollars), though it is questionable if Harry Truman and George Marshall could get their inspiring initiative accepted today in light of the many lobbyists who would militate in favour of their special interests to the detriment of the Plan. Note too a couple of other grand-scale projects in recent decades, with costs (in 2001 dollars) in the



same order of magnitude: putting a man on the Moon, US\$ 100 billion; and the Missile Defense System, US\$ 150–240 billion. A third, though much smaller outlay was the Pathfinder probe to seek life forms (a few primitive slime moulds?) on Mars, at a cost of a mere US\$ 240 million.

So the problem seems to devolve into a case of societal vision and the political will to translate the vision into action. Various communities in the past have mobilized the



institutional chemistry to achieve successes of a size proportionately far more costly than what is required to counter the biotic crisis. Notable examples are the building of the Pyramids in Egypt and the Gothic cathedrals in Europe, both of which demanded the assignment of exceptionally large sections of contemporary economies and social capacities. Both were achieved through society-wide endeavour. Such an attempt could be made today, especially insofar as

the long-term payoff would be far more enduring than the Pyramids and cathedrals have proved thus far. After all, if humankind fails to protect biodiversity at a time of unprecedented peril, the length of time it will take for evolution to come up with replacement species will be at least 1,000 times longer than the Pyramids have been in existence. Should this not inspire humankind to expand its sense of what is at stake, and do it at least as effectively as the

religious rationales for the Pyramids and the Gothic cathedrals? ■

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