
Biodiversity is much more than carbon

As well as celebrating the International Day for Biological Diversity this month, on May 22, we are also on the eve of another international climate change conference: the 34th session of the Subsidiary Body for Implementation (SBI) and the Subsidiary Body for Scientific and Technological Advice (SBSTA), which are responsible for providing advice and guidance for the implementation of the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change. The two bodies will be meeting in Bonn, Germany from June 6 to 16.

The issues of climate and biodiversity are, in fact, very closely linked. Climate conditions enabled the development of the rich biodiversity of life on earth, which took two million years to reach its current state. The climate crisis and its devastating impacts are threatening biodiversity and drastically impoverishing the world's ecosystems today.

The importance for the world of the conservation of biodiversity continues to be underestimated and undervalued by the parties to the climate change convention. While there is renewed emphasis on tropical forests at the international level, this is not due to their biodiversity, but rather their capacity to store carbon and to serve the interests of the countries that have historically contributed the most to global warming and yet refuse to take responsibility by adopting measures to reduce their greenhouse gas emissions. This extremely limited and deceptive view of forests has given rise to a mechanism known as REDD: Reducing Emissions from Deforestation and Forest Degradation. Promoters of this mechanism claim that it will also contribute to preserving the world's biodiversity. But is this really true?

In the first place, it should be stressed that very often, biodiversity is associated only with tropical forests. Nevertheless, while legal protection of most of the world's forests is already rather precarious and inefficient, the situation is even worse for other ecosystems that are also hugely important in terms of their wealth of biodiversity, such as mangroves, savannahs, grasslands, and others. Because they are less protected, these ecosystems are more rapidly destroyed to make way for shrimp farms or monoculture plantations of sugarcane, soy beans, oil palms and eucalyptus trees. As a result, while short-term profits are the only consideration, biodiversity continues to be destroyed – in tropical forest areas and elsewhere – without full awareness and recognition of its importance for the future of the planet.

Another basic problem is that the populations who have traditionally lived in ecosystems such as forests, mangroves, savannahs and grasslands are commonly excluded from them, as if they did not form an integral part of biodiversity. As a consequence, there is no consideration of the coexistence and knowledge of local populations on every continent, or of their relationships with the ecosystems that they depend upon for their survival and quality of life. For these populations, the ecosystems in which they live are essential as a means of providing everything they need for their nutrition and health, as well as for maintaining their ways of life.

In order for the upcoming negotiations in Bonn to give rise to sound advice and guidance for the implementation of the climate change convention, there must be recognition not only of the

importance of biodiversity for humanity, but also acknowledgement of the fundamental presence of human beings as an integral part of biodiversity in every ecosystem. This means that initiatives to prevent deforestation must include such measures as recognition of the rights of local populations over their lands, where they have traditionally coexisted with the forest and with other ecosystems. However, in many of the plans drawn up by the governments of countries with tropical forests to obtain financing through REDD, the rights of the people who live in the forests are not recognized. On the contrary, these people are often accused of being mainly responsible for the destruction of forests.

Yet what we see in practice is that the governments discussing and implementing REDD continue to insist, at the same time, on maintaining a model of development that continues to destroy the planet's biodiversity, and on the discourse of the need for "sustainability" and actions to combat climate change. And so in areas of high biodiversity, they continue building and implementing new mega-dams and industrial monoculture tree plantations, new mining operations and logging concessions, new highways and oil wells. Those who are mainly responsible for this ongoing destruction are in fact big corporations, and transnational corporations.

In order to effectively confront these destructive activities, we once again urge the SBI and SBSTA to consider what forest peoples on every continent have demanded time and time again: the recognition of their rights over their lands and over the forests where they live, and full involvement in the design and implementation of biodiversity conservation policies in their regions, as well as the strengthening and expansion of local economies based on multiple use of forests – something that these peoples have practiced for centuries, without causing destruction. Without a doubt, this is the route to follow.