
Convention on Biological Diversity: Will it translate hopes into action?

Biodiversity loss is rapid and ongoing. Over the last 50 years, humans have changed ecosystems faster and more extensively than in any comparable period of time in human history. Tropical forests, many wetlands and other natural habitats are shrinking in size. Species are going extinct at rates 1,000 times the background rates typical of Earth's past. The direct causes of biodiversity loss --habitat change, overexploitation, the introduction of invasive alien species, nutrient loading and climate change-- show no sign of abating. ... It is time to translate our hopes and energies into action, for the sake of all life on Earth.

The above is not ours. It is a quote from the Executive Secretary of the Convention on Biological Diversity --Ahmed Djoghla-- in his foreword to the Convention's "Global Biodiversity Outlook", launched on March 20 to coincide with the opening session of the Conference of the Parties of this Convention in Curitiba, Brazil.

We totally agree with those words and the present bulletin provides further evidence on the problem.

Nonetheless, we feel the need to emphasize on two issues that --from our perspective-- have not received sufficient attention in the abovementioned report: monoculture tree plantations and transgenic trees.

Regarding the former, the Global Biodiversity Outlook does mention that tree plantations have a "low biodiversity value", but still considers them to be forests when stating that "tree planting, landscape restoration and natural expansion of forests have significantly off set the loss of primary forest area." This position is even more obvious when looking at Figure 2.1 ("Annual net change in forest area by region") which explains that "Forest area includes primary forests, modified natural forests, semi-natural forests, productive forest plantations and protective forest plantations" and that "Net change in forest area takes into account afforestation efforts and natural expansion of forests." Translated into common language, this means that the CBD still believes --against all evidence-- that plantations are forests.

The above is contradictory with Mr Djoghla's diagnosis of the situation, when he rightly includes habitat change among the "direct causes of biodiversity loss." Large scale tree plantations imply major changes in and destruction of natural habitats that result in impacts on biodiversity. As a starting point, the CBD should therefore clearly differentiate forests from plantations. Within plantations, it should make clear that large scale industrial tree monocultures should not be promoted or supported by the parties of this Convention, precisely because they are a direct cause of biodiversity loss.

Regarding transgenic trees, there is no mention at all on this crucial issue in the Global Biodiversity Outlook, in spite of the fact that this is one of the most dangerous threats to forests, which host most of the Earth's terrestrial biodiversity. The release of genetically engineered trees will inevitably and irreversibly contaminate forest ecosystems and destroy biodiversity.

As a result, non-governmental organizations, social movements, scientists, indigenous groups, farmers, foresters and others are calling for a global ban on the commercial release of transgenic trees into the environment. We believe that the CBD is the UN body responsible for putting this ban in place.

Large scale monoculture tree plantations are destroying biodiversity and local peoples' livelihoods; the release of transgenic trees would exacerbate those impacts while adding further ones. Following Mr Ahmed Djoghla's words, we truly believe that "it is time to translate our hopes and energies into action, for the sake of all life on Earth", and that neither tree monocultures nor transgenic trees have any role to play in this. We therefore hope that the CBD will take action.