
Biodiversity loss: The issues that need to be addressed before it is too late

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The world is increasingly concerned over the disappearance of life forms on Earth and many organizations --governmental and non governmental-- appear to be trying to find solutions to the problem. However, in most cases they are failing, either because of implementing the wrong solutions --or more simply for not doing anything-- or because the political, economic and social causes which are at the root of the problem are not being adequately addressed.

It is important to stress that, contrary to what many people believe, those most interested in the conservation of biodiversity are not environmental organizations but local communities, whose livelihoods and cultural survival to a large extent depend on the products and services provided by forests and other ecosystems. For them, the issue is not restricted to the conservation of certain species, but to the conservation of the entire ecosystem.

In the specific case of tropical forests, local communities are facing a number of situations which are leading to the disappearance of the resources they depend upon. In most cases, they are struggling to protect their forest against government policies. Some of those policies aim at the large scale extraction of timber, oil or minerals lying within the territories of indigenous peoples and other local communities. This type of "development" results in widespread environmental destruction, while at the same time offering few benefits to local people, who end up in a far worse situation than before. Other policies aim at energy production and large areas are entirely destroyed or degraded by hydroelectric dams, while local people are "relocated" against their wishes, again in the name of "development". But probably one of the most disastrous policies --for local peoples and biodiversity-- is the opening up of the forest through road building, usually coupled with a colonization policy and with the concession of large tracts of forests to corporations.

One of the most catastrophic examples of the above is that of the Brazilian Amazon. In the 1950s, the government opened up the forest under the slogan of "a land without men for men without land". This racist policy totally ignored the existence of indigenous peoples, who had inhabited the territory centuries before the creation of the Brazilian state. Indigenous people were murdered, repressed, died as a result of illnesses brought in by the colonizers and the result was the extermination of entire indigenous communities and the beginning of the widespread destruction of the Amazon forest that continues until today. Unfortunately, Brazil is but an example and similar situations are still occurring in most of the Amazonian countries and throughout the tropical regions of Africa, Asia and Oceania, with support from multilateral and bilateral Northern institutions and to the benefit of local elites and transnational corporations.

If the above were taken into account and if the world's governments were honestly interested in the conservation of forests and their biodiversity, then the first issue they should be addressing is precisely that one: the recognition of the territorial rights of indigenous and other local peoples, whose interests are in line with forest conservation. Biodiversity experts working within the Convention of Biological Diversity are instead focusing on issues such as "invasive alien species" --which undoubtedly is an important problem-- while ignoring that the most dangerous "invasive alien

species" for forests and forest peoples are those who open up the forest for "development" without taking into account that the forest is "a land with people".

Experts should also be addressing the role played in the destruction of forests and biodiversity by institutions such as the International Monetary Fund, the World Bank, Regional Development Banks, Export-Credit and bilateral aid agencies, northern consultancies and corporations and many other actors --examples of whose activities are detailed in the articles below. However, to the view of most experts this would be "political" --not scientific-- and thus outside their mandate. But they are wrong, because unless those issues are addressed, most of their work will be useless in relation with the stated aim of conserving biodiversity.

Biodiversity experts should also be trying to halt the spread of monocultures, which constitute a major threat to biodiversity, particularly in forest ecosystems. More and more tropical forest areas are being substituted by fast growing eucalyptus, pine, gmelina or acacia tree plantations and the disaster is being hidden under the name of "forest cover". Absurd as it may seem, a forest area converted to monoculture plantations is still considered to be a "forest" --according to the FAO definition-- thus hiding the destruction of millions of hectares of some of the most diverse environments on Earth. Unfortunately, biodiversity experts are still not even challenging this absurd definition.

Finally, it is important to stress that governments are not seriously addressing what is probably the worst threat to global biodiversity: climate change. All the efforts aimed at conserving biodiversity at the local level will be almost totally useless if the industrialized North --and particularly the United States-- continue destroying the world's climate through their greenhouse gas emissions. And even worse, some governments --particularly those of the US, Canada, Japan and Australia-- are promoting the use of large scale tree monocultures as carbon sinks --in order to avoid the need to cut emissions-- thus increasing the problem of biodiversity loss.

Biodiversity loss is not simply "happening": it is the necessary effect resulting from a number of causes and the problem will only be solved when those causes are effectively addressed. Which is something that will need to begin to happen very soon, or otherwise it could be too late.