

Missing the 2010 Target?

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[In 2002, governments of the world agreed to achieve a significant reduction of the current rate of biodiversity loss at the global, regional and national level as a contribution to poverty alleviation and for the benefit of all life on earth. A recent review by a UN body meeting in Bonn has revealed that this target is unlikely to be achieved.]

Will the world meet the 2010 target? This was the question upper-most in the minds of delegates from nearly 200 countries and members of several hundred civil society organizations gathered in Bonn, Germany, in the second half of May. The occasion was the 9th Conference of the Parties (COP9) to the Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD), an international treaty that had back in 1993 laid the ground for comprehensive and effective action to protect the earth's living beings. Fifteen years later, it was time to take stock of what the convention had achieved. It was also the right time to ask about '2010', an iconic figure that has been occupying the thoughts of those who care about life on this planet.

What's with this figure? In 2002, governments of the world decided to achieve, by 2010, a significant reduction of the current rate of biodiversity loss at the global, regional and national level as a contribution to poverty alleviation and to the benefit of all life on Earth.

Biodiversity—or the range of plant, animal, and micro-organism life around inhabitation—is the basis of everything people care about. It is what makes the planet livable. Without biodiversity, people would all be dead in a matter of minutes.

And yet people everywhere have treated this crucial resource as if it was expendable. Human beings have plundered forests at rates that are mind-boggling: in the last 300 years the earth has lost 40% of its forest cover, and is currently losing 13 million hectares each year, including 6 million hectares of relatively intact 'primary' forests. Farmers have mistreated soils so badly that over half the world's arable land is degraded. They have abused and overgrazed vast tracts of grasslands, converting them into dead deserts. They have polluted or drained out wetlands beyond the point of recovery, with over 50% having been lost in just the last 100 years. Even the oceans—once considered infinite in their ability to provide fish and absorb pollutants—are facing collapse.

So What? Won't the billions of dollars that people are making, and the incredible technologies scientists are developing, help people to pay or find their way out of any environmental crisis? Not this one. A series of recent reports put together by hundreds of the world's scientists, under the Millennium Ecosystem Assessment point to the fact that biodiversity loss is already causing food-producing and water-recharging systems to collapse, and recovery is going to be exceedingly difficult. Two thirds of fish stock is already gone extinct. A preliminary report by a global team of economists titled 'The Economics of Ecosystems and Biodiversity', revealed that biodiversity damage is leading directly to staggering economic losses. Currently, says the report, 'each year we are losing ecosystem functions with a value equivalent to around EUR 50 billion from land-based ecosystems alone'.

Several billion people in the world have depended directly (i.e. in their day-to-day existence) on biodiversity for their food, medicine, livelihoods, and so on. Whenever there is irreversible damage to biodiversity, the immediate impacts are on such people, though eventually even those who buy food from supermarkets and medicines from pharmacies will be affected. But it is the 'ecosystem people' who suffer the most, and indeed their poverty is enhanced. If current trends continue, over two billion people along the coasts and in forests will face serious loss of not only livelihoods but also essential nutrition and well-being.

Has the world done enough to check the loss of biodiversity, since it decided 15 years ago to take action? To answer this, one must first look at the main causes of destruction and damage.

Fisheries are a good example to learn from. For thousands of years traditional fisherfolk have lived along the seas or inland waterways, catching fish or other aquatic resources. There is little evidence of their having caused irreversible damage, though undoubtedly there may have been a few sites where overfishing would have resulted. It is, however, when industrial-scale fishing started a few decades ago that the depletion began. Massive ships with sophisticated navigation and fish school detecting systems, deep-sea trawling equipment that would scrape up every bit of marine resource began to operate both near the coast and deeper into the oceans. Soaring consumer demand from not only industrial countries but also the increasingly wealthy affluent class in 'developing' countries, has fuelled these fishing monsters. In the space for a few decades, virtually every ocean and sea in the world (except perhaps the Indian Ocean) is overfished.

As in aquatic resources, industrial technologies and uncontrolled consumption have led to massive deforestation. In Brazil alone, since 1970, over 600,000 square kilometers of rainforest have been destroyed - an area almost double the size of India!

And now the latest threat: climate change. And so the question again: have people done enough to stem the rot?

At COP9 in Bonn, delegates reviewed the implementation of several conservation-related work programmes. Many of these are very impressive in concept. Overall, though, it was clear that the world was nowhere near reaching the 2010 target and the picture is quite bleak. Deforestation rates may have gone down very marginally, but the world's most biologically diverse forests in the tropics continue to be degraded at alarming rates. There is little let-up in the over-exploitation of marine fisheries.

One interesting discussion at COP9 concerned protected areas (PAs). Many countries have made impressive progress in expanding the area under PAs. It is, however, not clear if this has helped secure some more ecosystems and species from threats, for thousands of PAs across the world remain without adequate on-ground protection. Secondly, many new PAs continue to be set up in conventional top-down manner, adversely affecting the livelihoods of communities living inside or adjacent to them by stopping or restricting access to resources. In other words, attempts to meet the first part of the 2010 target (reduced rate of biodiversity loss) may actually be taking the world further away from meeting the second part (alleviating poverty)!

Most government delegations at COP9 did not seem to be in the mood to take the drastic actions needed to even begin moving towards a significant

reduction in the rate of biodiversity loss. At the start of the conference, non-governmental organizations, indigenous peoples and local communities had presented to the delegates what they considered to be some essential steps. These included :

- Halting all illegal logging and phasing out commercial operations in the most valuable forests;
- A moratorium on industrial fishing till the seas recover;
- Recognition of the rights of indigenous peoples and local communities to their territories and lands, and to their own conservation practices;
- Securing Protected Areas with full respect to the rights of communities in them;
- Substantial increase in funding for biodiversity conservation, while phasing out all kinds of 'perverse' incentives such as agricultural subsidies that encourage unsustainable practices;
- Support to farmers and pastoralists to conserve agricultural biodiversity;
- Prohibitions or moratoria on genetic engineering, and expensive technologies for climate change problems.

Governments politely heard these out, some agreed in public, many agreed in private -but when it came to the negotiations, there were always a few countries to block major progressive moves.

There are only two years left to 2010. it seems next to impossible to achieve the target set in 2002. □□□

—TWNF