Biodiversity: Boom or Bust?

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Source: BioScience, 59(2) : 192

Published By: American Institute of Biological Sciences

URL: https://doi.org/10.1525/bio.2009.59.2.17

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Like a bear rousing itself in spring, conservation scientists and advocates gauged their strength last December as they contemplated a transformed political landscape. A national conference on biodiversity in a rapidly changing world, held by the National Council on Science and the Environment (NCSE) in Washington, DC, was suffused with optimism about the new administration. But there was also anxiety that biodiversity loss has failed to make as vivid an impact on the public imagination as global warming. Despite at least 15 years of effort, "we have not got the traction yet on the linkages of biodiversity to other issues," warned Peter Crane, of the University of Chicago. Politicians at the event agreed about the need for more persuasive communication. Representative Rush Holt (D–NJ), a PhD physicist, said that the problems of loss of biodiversity "are not that well defined." Speakers argued that conservation scientists need allies if their concerns are to ride to wider popularity on the coattails of climate change and energy, key policy thrusts of the Obama administration.

One reason for the optimism was that within days of the presidential election, representatives of major conservation organizations secured a meeting with the Obama transition team, including cochair John Podesta, although the conservationists felt that the Obama side did not understand the biodiversity crisis. "Until we can prove humanity needs nature, we're not going to get the votes of history," declared Peter Seligman, chief executive officer of Conservation International, in a roundtable discussion.

"How does biodiversity conservation get translated to an administration that's very open to it?" asked Dan Martin, an environmental adviser to the transition team. Martin, a former volunteer for Obama's campaign, told how in conversations with thousands of potential voters when he was knocking on doors, concerns about biodiversity "didn't come up." Politicians will need the help of conservation scientists to incorporate biodiversity perspectives into policy, Martin said. He also offered a challenge, or maybe a rebuke: "This is political ecology. It's all about relationships and symbiosis. Is conservation science symbiotic with other areas? I don't think so."

Martin said advocates might advance if they presented well-supported arguments about the economic necessity of intact ecosystems, the health consequences of the loss of biodiversity, the possibility of violent conflict over natural resources, and the likelihood of unexpected pathogens and pandemics arising "as we destroy intact ecosystems." Moreover, conservationists should be willing to address the religious and spiritual dimensions of their concerns. To engage the public, "we must find ways to speak their languages," he said. "The language of science is arcane to most people."

Jane Elder, of Jane Elder Strategies, recommended dropping the term "biodiversity" because of its limited appeal. She recommended that advocates argue for "life on Earth." Elder said solutions to biodiversity loss are not adequately defined, and recommended what she termed a "whole-life approach" that incorporates social changes.

John Wiens, former chief scientist of the Nature Conservancy, was one of those stressing the window of opportunity as public recognition grows that environmental problems are coming home to roost. But Wiens warned that the global economic crisis could cause a "circling of the wagons" of policy players and so might demand new approaches. He urged conservationists to join the debate over the administration's infrastructure rebuilding initiative, which could have a major impact on ecosystems.

William Sutherland, of Cambridge University, likened current conservation practice to medicine before the 1970s. The field is not looking forward enough and is not learning adequately from past experience, he said. Moreover, he added, "We won't be funded until people know about ecosystem services." Seligman similarly argued that the most urgent need is for more knowledge and monetization of biodiversity.

Several speakers urged more international collaboration. "Our stock could be higher if we participated more fully in the Global Crop Diversity Trust, the United Nations Environment Programme, and the Global Environment Facility," Crane said. Many at the conference expressed the hope that the United States will finally ratify the Convention on Biological Diversity. Ahmed Djoghlaf, executive secretary of the convention, made a plea for full US participation and said the convention will finalize, no later than 2010—the "Year of Biodiversity"—an international framework for access to genetic resources and benefit sharing.

The NCSE meeting produced some 200 recommendations, which were later transmitted to the Obama energy and environment transition team. They emphasized the interconnections of climate disruption and biodiversity loss, the potential for US leadership on the issue, and the importance of biodiversity as "a fundamental basis" for wealth. The recommendations also stressed biodiversity's importance for national security and the need for proper information to realize its benefits.

Representative Jay Inslee (D–WA) declared that all federal agencies must be engaged to persuade people that "biodiversity and economic growth are symbiotic"—a view rejected by some at the event. Inslee promised that within a year Congress will deliver legislation on a cap-and-trade system for limiting carbon emissions, as well as on expanding the renewable energy portfolio, a high-capacity electrical grid, the decoupling of utility company revenues from electricity sales, an expanded research and development budget, and improved building codes. Whether biodiversity researchers will have a meaningful influence on the initiatives remains to be seen.

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doi:10.1525/bio.2009.59.2.17