



Comment

Earth calling ...

Environmentalists must make up for the failure of politicians to safeguard the planet's biodiversity, says Cherry Farrow

Cherry Farrow
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There cannot be anyone left in Britain who has not heard about Kyoto and George Bush's refusal to sign up to the global warming treaty. But spare a thought for the world's other major environmental treaty, the Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD). Signed at the earth summit in Rio de Janeiro in 1992 by virtually all attending heads of state - except George Bush Sr - it has now been ratified by 188 countries.

In its way, the CBD is as important as Kyoto. In short, it commits countries to protect plant and animal species and conserve the world's rich diversity of life. But despite the UK government's best efforts, it has consistently failed to make any global political headway. The world appears to be unconcerned about its commitments.

So far, despite the promises made by the industrialised world, there has been no money or political will for financing biodiversity conservation. Developing countries, which contain most of the world's richest natural diversity, are, however, expected to meet protection targets, but without the promised funds.

Meanwhile, the most comprehensive UN survey of the biological state of the planet reported earlier this year that the human pressure for resources had resulted in "largely irreversible loss in the Earth's diversity" with at least two-thirds of its life support systems irretrievably damaged.

Washington-based lawyer John Fitzgerald, who helped draw up the CBD, says that 13 years after the CBD came into force, countries should now not be using, exporting or importing any products derived from eco-systems that have not been protected - as required by the convention. He wants to see countries pointing the finger at others who are exporting (or importing) things in violation of conventions. "They could issue a warning. And if that didn't work, then in a very short time they could begin to cut off trade in the items that directly affect biological diversity," he says.

This is what the Convention on the International Trade in Endangered Species (Cites) did when it set up a team of visiting experts to help Taiwan find out if it was an entry port for tiger bone and ivory.


Eric Chivian, Nobel prizewinner and founder of the Harvard Centre for Health and the Global Environment, believes the loss of the world's biodiversity deprives it of invaluable tools for biomedical research, new insights into how human cells and organ systems function. "The public is still not grasping the magnitude of the biodiversity crisis," he says. "Although ministers, scientists and ecologists point to the world's natural eco-systems as irreplaceable assets, we do not know enough about them to be able to recreate them once they have gone. There is no sense of urgency to address the problem."

Chivian says the loss of global biodiversity is not given much attention by clinical physicians, yet its

importance to human health is well illustrated by diseases such as malaria. He suggests that one way through this inertia may be through developing a "green list" - a list of species essential to human life, whether they are threatened or not. And putting additional levels of protection in place before they become threatened.

Scientists, environmentalists and development agencies have mostly kept silent about the loss of biodiversity. It is time they started shouting from the rooftops.

- Cherry Farrow has worked as a media adviser for WWF and RSPB, and is a freelance journalist.

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