



## Biodiversity: the key to prosperity

### The loss of biodiversity: a real threat

Since the Rio Earth Summit ten years ago, biodiversity has continued declining faster than ever and drastic measures are now needed to save thousands of species from extinction.

An important part of the problem is that natural resources, especially biological resources and fish stocks, have continued to be exploited at a worrying rate. They need managing in a more sensible way.

Whole industries are founded on nature's products: agriculture, cosmetics, pharmaceuticals, pulp and paper, horticulture, construction and waste treatment, to name but a few. The loss of biodiversity threatens our food supplies, opportunities for recreation and tourism, and sources of wood, medicines and energy.

Global atmospheric changes, such as ozone depletion and climate change, only add to the stress. Scientists warn that even a one-degree increase in the average global temperature, if it comes rapidly, will push many species over the brink.

But while the loss of individual species catches our attention, it is the fragmentation, degradation and outright loss of forests, wetlands, coral reefs and other ecosystems that poses the most serious threat to biological diversity.

Forests contain much of the Earth's biodiversity, but about 45 per cent of the planet's original tree cover has gone, most of it cleared over the last century. Despite major replanting efforts, the world's forests are still shrinking rapidly, particularly in the tropics. Environmental quality of forests as *reservoirs of biodiversity* is also depreciating.

### A planet running out of time

Species are disappearing at 50 times the natural rate.

Some 34,000 plant and 5,200 animal species face extinction.

Thirty per cent of farm animal species are at great risk.

Ten per cent of coral reefs have been destroyed and, if nothing is done, a third of the remainder will collapse before 2020.

Source: United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP)

Biodiversity loss also renders whole ecosystems less productive, thereby shrinking the natural 'goods and services' from which we constantly draw.

A planet rich in biodiversity is a prosperous planet, so the conservation of biological diversity is a key element in the fight against poverty. Local communities, particularly those in developing countries, can only benefit from the sustainable management of natural resources.

The European Union is, therefore, determined to halt and reverse this current loss of natural resources and biodiversity by 2015 and to manage natural resources in a sustainable and integrated manner

### Biodiversity action plans to reverse the trend

The situation in Europe itself is cause for concern. In some European countries, up to 24% of species of certain groups such as butterflies, birds and mammals are now nationally extinct.

The scale of the problem has accelerated in the past few decades, leading the European Commission to introduce a strategy and action plans to halt the loss of biodiversity in Europe and where possible to reverse the trend.

The aim of this strategy is to integrate biodiversity concerns into all relevant EU policy areas, such as the conservation of natural resources, agriculture, fisheries, regional policy and spatial planning, forests, energy and transport, tourism, and economic and development cooperation.

The strategy is regarded as a model for the integration of environmental policies in key areas of European Union activity, and is being implemented throughout the EU's legal instruments and financing mechanisms.

In this way, biodiversity conservation is now an essential concern when regional Structural Funds, Common Agriculture Policy payments, fisheries grants and development aid are allocated. And to give the strategy more weight, the EU last year introduced biodiversity action plans in these key sectors.

## Linking biodiversity and poverty

The Biodiversity Action Plan on Economic and Development Cooperation is part of the worldwide initiative to reduce poverty, as set out in the UN-agreed Millennium Development Goals. The plan states the need for improved links between EU member states and international development cooperation agencies, the World Bank and the Global Environmental Facility.

It lists 'guiding principles' to be followed, such as the need to take a whole ecosystem approach, involve stakeholders and integrate biodiversity conservation and the sustainable management of natural resources into wider policy frameworks.

There are three areas for action:

- intensive production systems – such as agriculture, livestock, aquaculture and tree plantations – where priority is given to their life-support functions, the maintenance of genetic biodiversity and where caution is exercised in admitting alien invasive species;
- production systems involving wild species – such as forestry, wildlife and fisheries – where the focus should be on maintaining an array of productive ecosystems and habitats
- protected areas, where stronger links are needed between conservation action and sustainable development strategies.

The plan also emphasises the importance of improving the use of strategic environmental and environmental impact assessments, and focuses on the need to support capacity-building in this field.

## Tackling overfishing

Global fish stocks are being seriously depleted. Almost one third have been overexploited in recent years and will need time to recover. Another half are already fully fished and can stand no more catch increases or they will go into serious decline. In other words, just a quarter of the world fish stocks are, what the UN terms, 'moderately exploited'.

The EU is in the process of reforming its fisheries policy, with the aim of reducing fleets and total catch, and calls on other countries to do the same in order to restore stocks to sustainable levels by 2015 at the latest. This is in line with the Biodiversity Action Plan on Fisheries, which also provides other measures to preserve or rehabilitate biodiversity.

Indeed, by improving the integrated management of oceans, establishing marine and coastal protected areas and supporting the sustainable management of fish stocks, the overfishing crisis can become a thing of the past.

An EU fishing inspectorate is also planned, as well as regional advisory councils to bring the EU's Common Fisheries Policy closer to fishermen, the fish industry, NGOs, local authorities and other stakeholders.

To achieve sustainable fisheries beyond EU waters, on the basis of stronger international co-operation, the reform package includes an action plan against illegal fishing and a strategy for EU fisheries development partnerships with third countries.

## Changing farming practices

The agriculture action plan is aimed at encouraging farming practices that contribute to the conservation of biodiversity. It encourages the farming of crops and livestock that are naturally adapted to local and regional conditions and argues against the introduction of non-native species that may harm the balance of the ecosystem.

Farmers are warned that their production methods may affect local biodiversity. The EU recommends a decentralised approach, where intervention methods are tailored to local conditions and the member states are responsible for choosing appropriate measures based on complementary national and EU policy instruments.

A set of agri-environmental indicators, to monitor progress in conserving biodiversity on agricultural land, is being developed and will lead to a better understanding of the complex relationship between agriculture and environment.

## Full implementation of legislation

Finally, the Biodiversity Action Plan on Conservation of Natural Resources aims to ensure that existing and planned EU environmental laws and rules are used to their full potential.

Conservation of habitats and species will be assured by properly implementing legislation such as the birds and habitats, and water framework directives, as well as strategies for integrated coastal zone management and instruments for environmental impact assessment, environmental liability, eco-labelling and eco-audit.

International agreements, such as those on illegal trafficking of species, climate change, desertification and forests, are also seen as crucial in preventing further loss of biodiversity. ■

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