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Views & Commentary

RIO+20 outcomes recognize the value of biodiversity and ecosystems: Implications for global, regional and national policy

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More than 190 countries gathered in Rio de Janeiro during 20–22 June 2012 for the United Nations Conference on Sustainable Development and charted a pathway of expectant hope for the future of people and our planet. During the meetings, representatives from around the world agreed that the recent global crisis shows old-fashioned views about development which are misleading and it is now time to rethink the very foundations of how we consider development, wellbeing and wealth. Over the past four decades, the world has increasingly realized that our ecosystems and biodiversity are under serious pressure.

These concerns are reflected particularly in points 39 and 40 of the outcome document of the Rio deliberations 'The Future We Want': "*We recognize that planet Earth and its ecosystems are our home and that "Mother Earth" is a common expression in a number of countries and regions, and we note that some countries recognize the rights of nature in the context of the promotion of sustainable development. We are convinced that in order to achieve a just balance among the economic, social and environmental needs of present and future generations, it is necessary to promote harmony with nature. We call for holistic and integrated approaches to sustainable development that will guide humanity to live in harmony with nature and lead to efforts to restore the health and integrity of the Earth's ecosystem.*"

This shows that world leaders believe that the rights of nature must be preserved while balancing the economic, social and environmental needs of present and future generations for sustainable development and opens a window of opportunity to transition towards a sustainable development pathway by incorporating the multiple values of biodiversity and ecosystem services into policy and management decisions.

RIO+20 outcomes: Implications for global, regional and national policy for biodiversity and ecosystems

Ecosystems and biodiversity underpin human survival and livelihoods. As a result they must be protected, restored where damaged, and managed sustainably within a socio-ecological context to ensure continued provision of their services for human wellbeing. The human population is expanding, rising to over nine billion by 2050 and an increasing number of people expect living standard improvement and material gain, placing additional demands on resource use. Current consumption rates of natural resources are a trade-off between human demands and maintaining the long-term capacity of ecosystems to supply goods and services. A sustainable use of biodiversity and ecosystems requires a shift in human expectations and aspirations, behavior and immediate resource use. At the same time it must be recognized that poverty alleviation is a primary objective. The aspirations of the poor need to be respected and supported, especially in cases where impoverished people cause biodiversity loss and ecosystem degradation in their struggle for survival using scarce resources. This is often due to a lack of solid, up-to-date science to inform policy processes that would enable countries and regions to reverse the decline through ecosystem restoration and also lack of effective governance of natural capital through the collaboration of the public and private sectors, civil society and local communities. Central to many of the solutions in terms of practical application is the need to achieve behavioral change through supportive and enabling policies that redress the current imbalance in trade-offs. Building on the RIO+20 outcomes recognizing the value of natural capital can help in input to policy development that leads to the realization of these possibilities.

This could be done through

- Strengthening ecosystems and biodiversity governance and institutions at local and national levels, as a basis for supporting effective policy development. Recognizing that the effective

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governance of biodiversity and ecosystems through the collaboration of the public and private sectors, civil society and local communities is vital to achieving sustainable development.

- Recognizing that one of the main drivers for biodiversity loss and ecosystem degradation is economic, and that the past lack of biodiversity and ecosystem valuation has been a market failure. The continuing degradation of natural capital is the result of a variety of drivers that impact terrestrial, freshwater and marine biodiversity as well as the underlying failure of our social and economic systems to ascribe values to ecosystem services that accurately reflect their contribution to human well-being.
- Incorporating environmental values into economic models in order to move towards sustainable development: the value of ecosystem services and biodiversity must be considered in planning processes and decision making at all scales, including in the development of strategies for poverty reduction and human development. The Economics of Ecosystems and Biodiversity (TEEB) TEEB, 2010 effort points to the general agreement among scientists that the inclusion of the value of biodiversity and ecosystems in stock of wealth calculations is a "more meaningful and correct approach" than traditional GDP or income calculations which treat most ecosystem impacts as "externalities."

Conclusion

The "RIO+20" summit will be regarded as a moment when the global community recognized that prior agreements on climate, biodiversity and poverty alleviation must simply be implemented with greater urgency. The recognition in the RIO+20 outcomes of the value of natural capital provides a new affirmation that nature is an essential ingredient if development is to be truly sustainable over the long term. The synergies between objectives need to be better recognized by governments, who must facilitate change by supporting both top–down and bottom–up initiatives. Similarly, businesses and communities need to take advantage of the economic benefits that biodiversity and ecosystems service will bring. Integrating biodiversity in daily decision-making at all levels would benefit from the support and participation of civil society, including media, NGOs and the general public. World leaders have set the table for the kind of development redesign we now need to follow. Addressing the multiple issues of biodiversity loss and ecosystem degradation in an integrative way could just provide the sustainable solutions that will deliver the Future We All Need.

Reference

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