

MaximsNews Alert: Biodiversity and Communication

Biodiversity loss matters, and communication is crucial

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Communicating why biodiversity loss matters for people is essential for reversing it.

The failed UN climate talks in Copenhagen in December could hardly have been a less promising prelude to the International Year of Biodiversity, which opened last month (January).

As with climate change, the threat of large-scale biodiversity loss — and the need for global political action to stop it — is growing every day.

At a meeting about biodiversity organised by the British government in London in January, Robert Watson, former head of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC), warned that damage to the natural environment was approaching "a point of no return", a familiar phrase in the climate change debate.

Both issues face formidable challenges in persuading political leaders and the public of the urgent need to take action. The reasons are complex. But at root is the conflict between the need to radically change our use of natural resources and the desire to maintain current forms of economic growth in both developed and developing countries.

The solutions are equally complicated. Part of the answer, in each case, lies in enhancing the media's ability to communicate messages emerging from the underlying science, so that these accurately reflect both the urgency of the situation, and how ordinary people's lives may be affected.

Re-setting targets

Getting these messages across is no easy task. And so far, in the case of biodiversity, efforts have largely failed.

It is already clear that governments signed up to the Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD) have missed their 2010 target, set in 2002, of achieving "a significant reduction in the rate of biodiversity loss".

As delegates to the London conference and other meetings held to launch the Year of Biodiversity have freely admitted, this failure to act partly results from shortcomings in communication. The scientific community has not been able to effectively communicate its concerns to decision-makers — at least not in a way that sufficiently prioritises biodiversity conservation within a political agenda predominantly

concerned with employment and economic growth.

Discussions on a new set of targets for protecting biodiversity over the next decade are already well under way, and are due to be agreed in October at the next CBD review conference, to be held in Nagoya, Japan.

The new targets must not only be more realistic and concrete, but must also be accompanied by a more sophisticated communications strategy.

Missed connections

This strategy must address the weaknesses found in current approaches. For example, the issues scientists think most important often seem abstract and far removed from the day-to-day concerns of ordinary people. The rate at which the world is losing species is a typical example.

Even the term 'biodiversity' suffers from this weakness, lacking the concreteness of concepts such as sea level rise. Some media advisers even suggest avoiding the term wherever possible for that very reason — not very promising to those trying to create a global campaign around the same word.

Too much media coverage of biodiversity fails to connect with the issues directly affecting people's lives. Even concepts such as 'the web of life', used to emphasise the interrelatedness of living systems, does not immediately explain why we should be worried about the declining number of insects or plants in distant locations.

Finally the apocalyptic tone sometimes used in attempts to drive a message home can further hinder the case for constructive action. Too often, it promotes either cynicism or apathy among those who cannot relate these disaster scenarios to their own personal experience.

Climate change campaigners have experienced this in recent months, when trying to make the case for preventing global warming during the coldest winter that the northern hemisphere has experienced for several decades.

Hard science, compelling reasons

Forging an effective communications strategy that avoids these pitfalls is clearly one of the biggest challenges facing the biodiversity community as it plans for the next decade.

And if researchers are to rise to the challenge, they must first firm-up the scientific case for action. The damage that recently-aired scientific flaws are causing climate change campaigns is a reminder that, with the stakes as high as they are, sloppy scientific reasoning can have a broad and lasting impact.

Equally important is the need to embed this scientific evidence into viable but sustainable economic growth and development strategies. And that means generating a public discourse that directly relates the needs of the environment to social priorities such as jobs, food and health.

The components for such a dialogue — such as how natural products are potential sources of new medicines — already exists. But much more needs to be done to forge these into a viable and effective political strategy to reverse current trends.

If the failure in Copenhagen can act as a wake-up call to the biodiversity community, that itself will have been a positive achievement.

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[http://www.scidev.net/en/editorials/biodiversity-loss-matters-and-communication-is-crucial.html?utm_source=link&utm_medium=rss&utm_campaign=en editorials](http://www.scidev.net/en/editorials/biodiversity-loss-matters-and-communication-is-crucial.html?utm_source=link&utm_medium=rss&utm_campaign=en_editorials)