

In order to save biodiversity, society's behaviour must change

September 9 2010



Photo credit: Juan Pablo Moreiras of Fauna & Flora International

(PhysOrg.com) -- Leading conservationists warn that in order to save biodiversity, society's behaviour must change.

An innovative grouping of conservation scientists and practitioners have come together to advocate a fundamental shift in the way we view biodiversity. In their paper, which was published today in the journal *Science*, they argue that unless people recognise the link between their consumption choices and biodiversity loss, the diversity of life on Earth will continue to decline.

Dr Mike Rands, Director of the Cambridge Conservation Initiative and lead author of the paper, said: "Despite increasing worldwide

conservation efforts, [biodiversity](#) continues to decline. If we are to make any kind of impact, it is critical that that we begin to view biodiversity as a global public good which provides such benefits as clean air and [fresh water](#), and that this view is integrated not just into policies but also into society and individuals' day-to-day decisions."

The conservationists, from conservation organisations as well as academia, recognise that biodiversity loss is typically the result of unintended human actions and therefore raises unique difficulties. They state, "The impacts of a particular action are often distant in space and time. This makes effective regulation difficult, as no single body has jurisdiction over the world's biodiversity."

As part of a solution, the authors advocate managing biodiversity as a global public good. They argue that an appreciation of biodiversity as a public good with economic and societal value, providing benefits that far outweigh the cost of conserving [ecosystems](#), should be central to all policy making that impacts on the environment.

They believe it is essential that biodiversity not be considered in isolation as part of the nation's environmental agenda, but must extend across all sectors of government from treasury to defence. This is especially important as some of the policies that most damage biodiversity, such as agricultural, transport and energy subsidies, are not overseen by most governments' environmental regulators.

Internationally, they stress the need for greater support to conservation efforts in developing countries that are rich in biodiversity, including the crucial task of building institutional capacity (the strengthening of the institution through improved regulations, governance and organisational support)

They advocate for economists and [conservationists](#) to work more closely

together with policy makers to develop strategies that use incentives and regulations to shift individuals, governments, businesses and civil society toward more biodiversity-friendly behaviour.

Dr Rands continued: "Valuing biodiversity is vital to changing the way we view this important resource. Because we have received the benefits of biodiversity for free, we take it for granted. The costs of conserving biodiversity are massively outweighed by the benefits. As the United Nations General Assembly meets for a special session to discuss biodiversity, this is an especially timely and important message for world leaders to take on board.

"It is critical we incorporate the view of biodiversity as natural capital into management decisions and, more importantly, public policies which reward positive individual actions and penalize negative ones."

The paper emphasises this point, stating, "The value of biodiversity must be made an integral element of social, economic and political decision-making, as is starting to happen with carbon and climate change. Government, businesses, and civil society all have crucial roles in this transition."

Currently, the key pressures driving biodiversity loss are the degradation, fragmentation and destruction of habitats, pollution, overexploitation of species, invasive species and climate change.

As these pressures on biodiversity increase, the number of species faced with extinction continues to rise, with 21 per cent of all known mammals, 30 per cent of all known amphibians, and 12 per cent of all known birds under threat. Additionally, nearly a quarter of plant species are believed to be at risk.

More information: The paper 'Biodiversity Conservation: Challenges

Beyond 2010' by Rands MRW, Adams WM, Bennun L, Butchart SHM, Clements A, Coomes D, Entwistle A, Hodge I, Kapos V, Scharlemann JPW, Sutherland WJ & Vira B will be published in the 10 September 2010 edition of *Science*.

Provided by University of Cambridge

Citation: In order to save biodiversity, society's behaviour must change (2010, September 9)
retrieved 2 May 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2010-09-biodiversity-societys-behaviour.html>

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