

Conservation with a human face

The world is witnessing a drastic decline of its natural capital. Plant and animal species worldwide are vanishing at an unprecedented pace, 100 to 1000 times the natural extinction rate. The planet's most endangered ecosystems are located in developing countries, and thus depend on some of the world's neediest communities for their preservation. Conversely, the poor are the first to suffer from deterioration of their natural environment. But in the developing world, immediate economic needs often override long-term imperatives, and protecting a fragile environment is rarely a priority at national level.

The fact is that the biodiversity hosted by the world's developing nations provides both local and global services. Local, because the most fragile communities often rely for their survival on the biological resources that surround them, which constitute a precious source of food, energy and income. The World Bank estimates that natural capital constitutes a quarter of total wealth in low-income countries, as compared to 3 percent in our economies. Global, because the array of services natural ecosystems provide, such as cleaning air and fresh water, benefit people far beyond national borders. And the destruction of these precious natural environments generates international ills. Consider climate change: few people realize that tropical forest destruction contributes 20 percent of overall carbon emissions, which is more than the world's cars, trucks and airplanes combined. Halting the cutting and burning of tropical forests, which are found almost exclusively in developing nations, is amongst the most readily achievable and effective possible steps to reduce carbon emissions into the atmosphere.

On the grounds that the environment in countries of the South provides unique ecological services to the whole of mankind, some would have them prevent their populations from exploiting the exceptional natural resources on their territories. But it would be wrong and ineffective for industrialized nations to attempt to deny developing countries and their poorest communities the right to reap the benefits of their natural resources. Ethically wrong because developed nations have largely destroyed their own primary forests and ecosystems on the path to industrial development, and continue to import large quantities of raw material extracted in the South. Ineffective because developing countries will – legitimately – refuse to take on by themselves the burden of protecting the world's biodiversity to the detriment of their economic growth.

What is at stake is thus to reconcile the urgent need to help some of the world's poorest people with the protection of irreplaceable ecosystems. Addressing this twofold challenge implies expanding the ability of local communities to manage the natural resources on which they depend. The Critical Ecosystem Partnership Fund (CEPF), an international initiative launched eight years ago, is based on the principle that local communities themselves are the best trustees of the environment that surrounds them, and that their economic growth will advance their capacity to care for nature. By focusing on "biodiversity hotspots" – regions of unique and highly threatened natural environments – this program relies on the common sense principle that protecting what nature provides

for free is a crucial element of a sustainable economic development. The Fund, through the delivering of financial and technical assistance to people and places that need it the most, has helped create more than 9 million hectares of new protected areas, which covers a region larger than Portugal.

Such conservation-based development projects prove that economic growth and environmental protection are not incompatible, much to the contrary. Mounting environmental challenges in some of the world's economically deprived regions will not be overcome in a context of poverty. Developers and environmentalists must thus urgently work towards the convergence of development and conservation priorities. This is the kind of progress the world needs if it is to address effectively one of the most pressing issues of our time: providing a healthy, sustainable planet for rich and poor alike.

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