

The International Year of Biodiversity—From Talk to Action

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Conservation almost always takes a backseat to human economic concerns even though the human economy relies on nature. The economic turmoil of the last year has reinforced this prejudice, yet the downturn in the economy offers some lessons for conservation professionals. For example, the political leaders who were supposed to provide oversight of economic institutions ignored repeated warnings about weaknesses in the financial system, and when the crisis came they acted shocked and surprised. Their response has been to pump hundreds of billions of dollars of public money into mismanaged businesses to keep the global economy from collapsing while genuine economic reform languishes. If leaders ignore warnings about the economy, their highest priority, then how can conservation professionals make their warnings heard about the dire consequences of losses of biological diversity?

Linking biological diversity to economic concerns will not suddenly attract attention, and not all aspects of biological diversity have obvious economic value. Nor will leaders likely heed warnings about how continued degradation of the natural world will cause much greater human suffering than economic depression. Reminders that it took millions of years following past mass extinctions to recover high levels of biotic complexity and diversity, that a biological depression cannot be short-circuited like a depressed economy, and that humans cannot pump new species into the system like they can inject cash or credit into an economy are too distant or abstract. Also rather abstract for decision makers and contrary to their hubris is the argument that the complexity of biological systems dwarfs that of human economic systems and makes them much more difficult to repair and therefore worthy of protection.

What might encourage political leaders to heed warnings about declines in biological diversity? More than a few voices are necessary. They must be many and pow-

erful voices—voices that are influential because their actions can affect decision makers' ability to rule. The International Year of Biodiversity (IYB), proclaimed for 2010 by the Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD) and the United Nations, offers a major opportunity to mobilize action, influence decision makers, and elevate biological diversity nearer to the top of the political agenda. Many aspects of the IYB offer hope. First, the IYB strategy focuses on results, not just talk. Its primary goals are action by decision makers to implement the CBD and to look beyond the convention. Via the IYB, the CBD seeks to increase awareness of the value of biological diversity to humans and the unpleasant consequences of its loss, but awareness is envisioned as a step toward demanding action. Second, the CBD recognizes that those for whom conservation of biological diversity is a high priority cannot achieve their goals without others: conservation professionals lack clout with many decision makers, and those who have clout are not a critical mass. Therefore, the CBD is calling on its existing supporters, such as sympathetic decision makers in government and business, educators, media, museums, professional and advocacy-oriented nongovernmental organizations, and mass grassroots movements, to not only mobilize themselves, but also to aggressively mobilize new audiences to pressure recalcitrant and timid decision makers.

The IYB strategy also implicitly recognizes what many conservation professionals know: the primary obstacle to effective protection and restoration of biological diversity is not a lack of good science, although the need for better scientific understanding will only grow. The great challenge is to make the science—and the value that protecting biological diversity should be a primary societal priority—count in decision making. It is not enough to *say* how the biological world works and that we think it is good to sustain it. The point is to be heard. It is up to

us (with help from experts in communication) to ensure we are heard. It is not enough to merely hope we will be heard.

The IYB offers four elements of successful campaigns that provide opportunities for Society for Conservation Biology (SCB): focus, coordination, clarity and persistence, and expertise.

Focus

Decision makers, like voters and consumers, can only deal with two or three issues at a time. During the IYB, the CBD has the potential to make decision makers listen by creating a focused campaign to sustain and recover biological diversity. A consistent message, espoused globally but tailored to national and local concerns, can lift communication about biological diversity above the background noise. By producing a variety of compelling materials and organizing high-profile events throughout 2010, CBD can help the global chorus stay on message. Disparate or solitary voices lack influence.

Coordination

The CBD secretariat is organizing partners among sympathetic governments, businesses, nongovernmental organizations, media, and others who can deliver the message of the importance of biological diversity to new and powerful audiences that political leaders, the ultimate targets of influence, cannot ignore. By coordinating the activities of partners and carefully targeting new audiences whose activities also can be coordinated, CBD increases the probability that decisions will be made to conserve biological diversity. The CBD has the capacity and legitimacy to enlist partners that conservation professionals usually cannot.

Clarity and Persistence

Changing societal behavior requires that those trying to influence decision makers be very clear on what they want from them. Changing behavior also requires persistence. It is a political axiom that the squeaky hinge gets the grease; but if the squeak goes away on its own, no grease is forthcoming. Looking beyond 2010, the CBD sees the IYB campaign as one means of keeping biological diversity at the top of the political agenda in the future, thereby furthering implementation of existing goals and gaining commitment to new goals. The IYB offers a venue for the creation of partnerships and joint action and for establishing long-lasting partnerships.

Expertise

Few conservation professionals have cultivated storytelling skills, and many of us still do not recognize the need to speak to audiences in a language they understand. The CBD is enlisting expertise in crafting messages

and stories that will resonate with intended audiences. Although the financial resources of the CBD cannot buy saturation levels of outreach like some, action results from messages that touch deeply. The need for money also can be obviated by enlisting messengers strategically, as CBD plans to do.

What role can the SCB, its regional sections and members, and other conservation professionals play in furthering the goals of the IYB while also realizing our goals? How can SCB make use of the opportunities and resources the CBD offers and add value to them? The SCB is well situated to take advantage of the opportunities afforded by the IYB to conserve biological diversity. With our global membership, perspective, and credibility, the IYB can more effectively reach its goals, goals we share with them.

Because SCB's sections and members span the continents, we represent a global chorus that can speak simultaneously on a common theme. We also can speak as regions whose common problems may have common solutions and as locally rooted individuals. The SCB should participate actively at global, regional, and local levels to identify target audiences and the actions desired from those audiences, to craft messages, and to plan and execute IYB events. We are highly qualified to describe changes in the status and trend of biological diversity and what may be necessary and feasible to reverse undesirable changes. To be most effective, SCB, as an organization, should engage the CBD directly and early and issue guidelines to its sections and members for coordinating activities and staying on message during the IYB and beyond.

Because SCB is a global community of professionals in a range of disciplines, we can bring to the IYB integrated perspectives important to identifying and solving the problems associated with losses of biological diversity. We understand the roles of biological diversity, the proximate processes that drive extinction, and the actions necessary to halt extinctions at global, continental, regional, and local levels. This understanding should inform events, publications, videos, and other means of communication. It only can do so, however, if SCB strategically engages the CBD on the basis of clear priorities that recognize our strengths (scientific knowledge, passion for nature, strong community, and credibility). Other participants (mass-based grassroots movements, business, unions, political parties) in the IYB can counter our weaknesses and our meager capacity to reward and punish through their access to decision makers.

Scientists and other conservation professionals have credibility with some important audiences, such as elite media and some political, economic, and cultural leaders. Many influential groups know they have a greater probability of realizing their goals if they base their actions on factual understanding; we can leverage that awareness. If we use our credibility and connections effectively,

the IBY represents a major opportunity for coordinated action among SCB's sections and members, the CBD, and other partners. Our policy office, in collaboration with representatives from our regional sections, should identify SCB members who have stature with decision makers, media, and policy advisers and ask those members to call in outstanding favors. Nation-states are still the primary policy makers; some nation-states have disproportionate power and their actions have disproportionate effects on biological diversity. We should target nation-states that have the greatest impact on biological diversity, the individuals within those nation-states who can influence their decision makers, and focus on how to mobilize the latter. Without careful targeting, and without acting in synchrony with others, our limited resources will have little effect on policy.

The SCB faces many challenges in mobilizing to advance our mission via the IYB. We are trained to act independently and think critically, which can make cooperation difficult. Yet we are a disciplined lot; now is the time to bring that discipline to bear, focus on a common message, and coordinate our actions internally and with others. Now is the time to focus on talking to others rather than ourselves. We should not speak only with sympathetic audiences, but with any audience that can make a difference. Now is the time to learn

the languages and stories of the groups that we need to mobilize. We should become accustomed to repeating our message. Repetition works. Now is the time to take risks.

We should not be shy about sharing who we are. People respond more positively to the facts we promulgate if they understand us: that we care for nature and why we care, that our sense of justice includes humans, other species, and even biotic and abiotic processes. Many audiences will not share our emotional bonds with nature or our sense of justice, but if they are to hear and trust us then our motives must be transparent. Most people may never be biocentric or ecocentric. But we can help them understand that if human societies act toward the natural world with anthropocentric narrowness, then the consequences for people will be dire.

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