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Research highlights on biodiversity and society, poverty and conservation

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APPROPRIATE RESPONSES: CONFLICTS OF INTEREST AND THE BIODIVERSITY 'CRISIS'

The Millennium Ecosystem Assessment (MA) has been remarkable for highlighting priorities that reflect *both* ecosystem and human well-being. Thus, for example, drylands have emerged as a top priority, rather than many more established biodiversity hotspots. The MA's latest output is the report of the Responses Working Group – *Ecosystems and Human Well-being: Policy Responses.* Again, a weighty MA tome has broken new ground, by exploring the strengths and weaknesses of current approaches to managing ecosystems for the wide range of services that people value. It is also pretty clear that the elusive "win-win" of ecosystem conservation *and* improved human well-being is still far from commonly realised.

While biodiversity is not considered to be an ecosystem service itself, it is recognised as underpinning ecosystem services and so merits a dedicated chapter – coordinated by Jeff McNeely, Daniel Faith and Heidi Albers – which assesses responses to the current crisis of biodiversity loss. A dilemma is immediately apparent: while biodiversity conservation is essential for maintaining ecosystem services in the long–term, it can clash with other needs of society – most critically, the immediate livelihood needs of poor people in developing countries.

At the global scale, biodiversity generates human well-being in places far removed from where the valued biodiversity is found – elephants in Africa make people in Europe and America feel good. This global feel–good factor can, however be a local feel-very-bad factor – especially if you are a poor farmer whose entire crop has been eaten or destroyed in one night of pachyderm partying. Such divergences between global and local values of biodiversity – and there are many of them – presents huge challenges to its conservation. McNeely *et al* highlight that "focussing exclusively on either global or local values often leads to failure to adopt responses that could promote both values or reconcile conflicts between the two".

Of the nine different responses to biodiversity loss that are identified, the most effective of these to date include protected areas and species–based approaches to conservation. Unfortunately, these approaches are often highlighted as major factors behind the conservation–livelihoods clash. Meanwhile, although it is acknowledged that "working with local communities is essential to conserve biodiversity in the long term", helping local people to capture biodiversity benefits is considered as one of the two responses that we have not yet got right (the other being effective decentralised governance). Weak land tenure and property rights are often the main obstacles to success: "win-win opportunities for biodiversity conservation and benefits for local communities exist, but local communities can often achieve greater benefits from actions that lead to biodiversity loss."

What can be done to move the win-win scenario from a naïve ideal to a workable solution? Successful responses are those that 1) are coordinated – across sectors (forestry, fisheries, wildlife) and scale (local, national, global); 2) employ transparent, participatory approaches to planning and decision–making; 3) are based on informed choices that address potential trade-offs and conflicts of interest – between generations, between ecosystem services, between stakeholders; and 4) have mainstreamed ecosystem concerns into broader economic and development policies – and strategies. Governance is central to each of these. Integrated regional planning – the so-called "ecosystem approach" advocated by the CBD – appears to incorporate most of these ingredients, but is still limited by weak incentives and prevailing knowledge gaps.

It is clear that better information is needed on the links between biodiversity, ecosystem services and human well-being if we are to respond more effectively to biodiversity loss. A first step, however, is to acknowledge that there are distinct and different (and sometimes competing) biodiversity values at global and local levels. Only then will we be in a good position to use that information to better manage the tradeoffs and synergies between them.

The Millennium Ecosystem Assessment (MA) was an initiative conducted between 2001 and 2005 to assess the extent of ecosystem degradation and its consequences for human well–being. 1360 experts from 95 countries were involved in the MA, which was guided by a Board

that included representatives of five international conventions, five UN agencies, international scientific organisations, governments, leaders from the private sector, non–governmental organisations, and indigenous groups.

SOURCE

McNeely, J.A., Faith, D.P. and Albers, H.J. (2005) 'Biodiversity.' In: Chopra, K., Leemans, R., Kumar, P. and Simons, H. (eds) *Ecosystems and Human Well–being: Policy Responses. Millennium Ecosystem Assessment Series,Volume 3.* Island Press, Washington DC.

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