

BIODIVERSITY, CONFUSION AND WASTAGE OF FUNDS

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The concept of biodiversity was first applied in the early 1980s by U.S. ecologists who tried to alter a political atmosphere that had come to focus on the sustainable utilisation of renewable or natural resources and ignored the protection of species which were not acknowledged as 'resources'. The new concept was readily adopted in international circles, but it soon appeared to be a Jack-o-lantern. It was misinterpreted and misunderstood when it soon served to release considerable financial resources. It led to 'world-wide inventories of genetic resources' for the commercial market. And it led to infantile questions like 'How many species can be lost from the ecosystem before the economy - or mankind - is affected?', 'How small can a nature reserve be?', and 'How many heads of game or timber-logs can be harvested?'

Perhaps the concept of biodiversity may be useful in intellectual circles of ecologists, but in the political arena it is an instrument of confusion. It belongs to the category of catchwords which somehow serve *laissez-faire* development, like participation, integration, and sustainability, more often preventing rather than serving conservation. Since the 1980s, protection is taboo and all marketable biodiversity is sacrificed in *laissez faire* exploitation by 'participating' local expert scavengers, under the euphemism of 'sustainability'. For clarity, I would rather see the old-fashioned concept of ecology restored where it concerns questions of a fundamental scientific nature, and nature protection where it concerns the application of ecological knowledge in the conservation of wildlands. Why would one need to confuse or cheat a potential sponsor for the acquisition of public funds to conduct applied ecological research or nature conservation?

In the early 1990s, the growing public concern for the rapid demolition of tropical rain forest and the imminent extinction of many exotic organisms spurred the Dutch Government to adopt a formal *Government Policy on Tropical Rain Forests*, deploying an annual allocation of 150 million guilders. In spite of the clear public concerns, however, the Policy's objective was opaque, highlighting 'the importance of forests and forestry for the alleviation of poverty'. Dutch pragmatism was further reflected in the skewed differentiation of the allocation: for the largest part, it was to support 'Policy Development' in forestry, and even the 30% intended for conservation had to be shared with the 'sustainable utilisation of the rain forests'.

Hence, one should not expect too much of the Dutch Government Policy on Tropical Rain Forests in terms of conservation. The main responsibility for implementing the Policy is delegated to the Directorate General for International Cooperation (*DGIS*). It has an overriding humanitarian mission and appears to regard the conservation of biodiversity as being additional to a forestry policy. Why is there no constituency with sufficient ecological insight in the Netherlands to challenge this sort of humbug?

The report of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, entitled *Bossen en Bosbouw: Projecten in Ontwikkelingssamenwerking* (1997), reveals that in 1996 a total of 1,200 million guilders had been allocated for 119 field projects for forests and forestry in developing countries and an additional 21 institutional support projects world-wide. And although two-thirds of the projects have no bearing on conservation (or even sustainable utilisation), yet, for the general public, the glossy, lavishly illustrated

publications of the Department may well suggest that the whole allocation somehow contributes to the conservation of rain forests and biodiversity.

Be that as it may, it is not easy for Dutch institutions and people who devote their careers to the conservation of species and rain forest ecosystems, to be deployed, or to conduct projects, from the meagre 30% share of the forest and forestry resources. Established Dutch field expertise in international conservation is starved of support, and is dying out; there is hardly any support for the transfer of knowledge in this field, and developing expertise is obliged to corrupt their commitment and adjust to the commercial consultancy market. Where government should support independence of expertise in this field, the Dutch Government rather denies its major institutions for nature conservation to seriously and structurally partake of the allocation, while enforcing their demise in privatisation. All project opportunities are usurped, either by the rural development sector, or by non-Dutch organisations, although 1.6% can be deployed for research in the Tropenbos programme. In the entire list of more than 20 organisations implementing the forest and forestry projects, the Dutch daughter organisation of the Department for International Cooperation, SNV, ranks 6th place with 37.2 million as the first and major Dutch technical input. It is followed by the Netherlands Committee for IUCN with 29.4 million. One may perhaps imagine that the latter concerns active conservation, but it does not. The allocation is meant to be distributed to a scatter of local NGOs in a few selected developing countries through a limited desk-top transfer function of the Dutch IUCN bureau, which is fully throttled by the regular *DGIS* policy-line and without opportunities for opposition or feedback. Finally, the Tropenbos Foundation ranks 11th with a total of 21 million for 6 years of research - to be shared by at least nine institutions (i.e. anything between some 100,000 and 600,000 Nlg/institute/year).

However, 87% of the allocation (1047 million) is channelled through international organisations. The highest ranking is the Global Environment Facility with 121 million, followed closely by FAO with 91.3 million. It is perhaps needless to say that there is no way to control or even supervise the objectives, direction, and cryptic strategic progress of such multi-national molochs; if any support is provided for nature conservation through these channels, it is conditional to a traditional development project. A project called 'Technical Support and Policy Research' was given to the World Resources Institute (7.7 million), while the Dutch Government has established a renowned institute for policy research, namely the Institute for Forest and Nature Research (*IBN*), with up-to-date expertise in tropical forestry and international nature conservation. Yet the major point is that the implementation of the Dutch Rain Forest Policy is mainly delegated to foreign organisations, with overruling missions in rural development, resource use, and production.

Some ignorant people may be inclined to challenge this conclusion by pointing at a third place for the World Wide Fund for Nature (WWF) (60.7 million) and a fifth place for the World Conservation Union (IUCN - 46.6 million). According to the statutes, WWF is supposed to be a fund-raising organisation and IUCN the alleged 'ecologic conscience of the world', but neither was designed for project implementation, and both have a poor record in the field. Yet, for both organisations, the same basic objections apply; they are corporate molochs with their own socio-political agendas, but without any effective bearing on nature conservation at the field level, and few opportunities for conceptual adjustment - and Dutch deployment. Through their World Conservation Strategy, both organisations have adapted their missions since the early 1980s, and have joined other international development corporations so as to focus primarily on the supposedly sustainable development of rural people, rather than on nature conservation. Could it be that the lure of such vast potential financial resources for what is euphemistically called 'integrated conservation of biodiversity', even if it could be expected only from the peculiar Dutch xenomaniac policy, has played a role in adapting their missions? Anyway, how can one expect to achieve the conservation of rain forests and organisms through a disproportionate

emphasis on alternative measures such as sustainable development and forestry? The point is that there is neither leadership nor solid commitment to nature conservation in a world dominated by false compassion for poor people and a real interest in money.

As a scientist devoted to the conservation of nature, it is well beyond my comprehension how a Government policy can cheat with the public concern for the demolition of the rain forest and the extinction of species. Has the Government installed any monitoring and feedback mechanism for its policy implementation? Is the Directorate General susceptible for empirical evidence from the field that is revealing an increasing level of destruction? What kind of democracy would allow such a muddled treatment of its public resources? Maybe one has to accept that international political promises must be kept, and can mean that two-thirds of an allocation must be discarded for diplomacy. However, it drives me mad to find that the meagre 30% which is supposedly meant to support field projects for the conservation and sustainable use of the rain forests, is so constrained by irrelevant conditions that they cannot possibly achieve the stated objective - i.e. conserving the rain forest. Is it not odd that the responsible Directorate General for International Cooperation is unable to deal with many of the countries that have the last vestiges of pristine rain forest and the greatest stock of remaining richness of biological diversity, such as Indonesia, because of its humanitarian standpoint? Is not the global importance of the rain forest and its biodiversity of a higher order than temporary local politics? Would there be any reason for the Department to have an obsessive lack of confidence in Dutch organisations for implementation? And why must any deployment of the allocation be focused on the development of local rural people, and primarily serve the alleviation of poverty? Why must protection of unique, sensitive areas be thwarted with euphemistic concepts such as 'participatory management' of biodiversity in conservation areas?

For a simple ecologist with very extensive anthropological experience, it is incomprehensible to me how these constraints can be related to the conservation of biodiversity and the rain forest - in an inverse relation. After all, scientific evidence shatters the illusion that the alleviation of poverty and raising the standard of welfare would somehow diminish the destruction of rain forests and the depletion of biodiversity! Why has there been no special policy-allocation to collect such 'sensitive' evidence as a major task for a Tropenbos programme?

More serious, however, is that it must be expected that once the public discovers the utter ineffectiveness of the considerable public allocation, the political arena will retract all support for rain forests and biodiversity. Perhaps the fact that a politically virtuous project like the Tropenbos programme is gradually but inevitably being starved of support, rather than being guided, was a first sign. Another sign is a new project called 'Accelerated Implementation of the Government Policy on Tropical Rain Forests', to be implemented through the Netherlands Committee for IUCN, in order to spend 19 million in three years on small-scale local NGO projects in developing countries. It has the eerie aura of a sell-out, and may well be the omen of a dying political will to support what the public might have believed to be international nature conservation. All the scientific results of the Tropenbos programme will not be able to alter that fate. One day, politicians will ask: 'Can someone show us where our national allocation of 1.2 billion guilders for forests and forestry has contributed significantly to the conservation of biodiversity and rain forest?' In spite of beautiful glossy propaganda of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, I have great difficulty finding even a diplomatic answer. Indeed, when the Minister presented a similar question with reference to the Tropenbos programme to the general assembly, it struck me that nobody in the hall had convincing replies close at hand. The answer, of course, would have been: 'Hardly any cent of the allocation was put into the effective conservation of the rain forest.' Your simple humanitarian policies focusing on poverty alleviation have prevented that; they have no bearing on conservation because they are ambiguous and based on false ideology

rather than on scientific knowledge.

It would not be difficult to deploy a mighty annual allocation of some 100 million US\$ in a much better way, so that, after some six years, one can show where rain forest is being saved from demolition, and biodiversity is being conserved. However, that would in the first place require the issue of international nature conservation being lifted above the petty concerns of politicians with an overriding humanitarian mission. It would require guidance by scientific knowledge and realistic opportunism, directing significant attention to a few selected places where biodiversity can be saved from further depletion, irrespective of our western evaluation of the structure and beliefs of a local society. In the second place, it requires a policy free of all irrelevant or secondary constraints, such as poverty alleviation, the role of women, and other ideological issues. Finally, it would require a straightforward objective - e.g. conserving this or that rain forest or umbrella species.

Most important, however, in consideration of the recent history of skewed, ineffective allocation, one should ask: Should it not be prescribed that the design and implementation of a clear, accountable policy is to be delegated to a non-governmental professional organisation? - It has been done for many other sectors of international cooperation (e.g. SNV, Ecooperation, and the co-financing organisations NOVIB, ICCO, and HIVOS), and there is ample reason to apply it in the field of international conservation.

If the concept of biodiversity is meant to serve the conservation of nature, either in the form of reliable scientific information and propaganda, or as an empirical basis for protection management, then the issues of research interest can be differentiated in the following way - from fine to coarse-grained, or from a fundamental to an applied level:

- An inventory and analysis of the legal basis of conservation, and the establishment of appropriate monitoring hardware (including GIS) and skills;
- An inventory of spectacular (keystone or umbrella) species to create a simplified image of the main structural components of a natural ecosystem - to be applied in monitoring the integrity of the system;
- An analysis, on all socio-political levels, of the local threats to the structural integrity of the ecosystem (and, where necessary, determining thresholds of steady-state in structural terms for controlled harvesting in some selected sectors or buffer-zones);
- Experimental approaches towards undoing the analysed threats and the effectiveness of protection; to be continuously monitored for feedback;
- Attempts at restoration and guidance on regeneration;

And on a general level, the most important issue:

- A regular comparative evaluation of nature conservation projects for strategic feedback.

The audience will note that, in this strategic approach, there is no place for deep inventories or sophisticated ecological studies. There are professional conservation experts who are familiar with all the causes of destruction and are able to produce tailor-made strategies for conservation, if only conservation could be sponsored unfettered by irrelevant objectives. Saving rain forests is politics and power-play, but has little to do with ordinary biology, and producing articles. It has even less to do with compassion for poor people, or any other aspect of proper government by other governmental and public sectors. Yet, strategies need up-to-date information on the status and conditions of what must be conserved, and on the threats and opportunities to defuse those threats. As a consequence, any research subject must be part and parcel of the strategy, and it must be integrated so that an active protection programme can be composed. In this respect, Tropenbos can play an important role.

The Tropenbos project in Indonesia has so far been concerned mainly with research on the techniques of establishing timber plantations, and on the selective, minimum impact extraction of timber. Especially the latter research has real significance for the conservation of rain forest and its structure of biological diversity, although it approaches the problem from a pragmatic, if not essentially destructive, angle. It is also important, however, because it has yielded tremendous credit for the Programme in circles of modern Indonesian forestry, and has demonstrated opportunities for a professional exploitation sector to contribute somehow to the conservation of biodiversity. In addition, some research has been concerned with taxonomy, and skims the surface of restoration, for which the knowledge gained in the plantation research may be useful. The Programme is even involved in a minor aspect of species protection, with powerful media attraction potential, namely the rehabilitation of Orang-Utans. However, the Programme has so far not been tuned to seek the design of a strategy; the research subjects are an opportunistic scatter with a diffuse effect on conservation. The primary objective of the Tropenbos programme must be the conservation of rain forest. Considering the upcoming political scrutiny of the effectiveness for conservation, while responding also to the gradual re-orientation of Indonesian society towards conservation, it is imperative that the Tropenbos project in Indonesia directs its main interests towards the issues enumerated above in order to compose a conservation strategy. Only then can it significantly contribute to the conservation of the last remnants of natural rain forest ecosystems in Indonesia, and get so much credit in political circles that a public allocation can be sustained.

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Challenges and Problems; Information Needs

- The funding and attention by politicians for protection do not reflect the public concern for disappearance of species and ecosystems.
- Little of the funds earmarked for forests and conservation is used for species protection, in favour of humanitarian and people-oriented projects.

Points for Future Research

- Part of financing and responsibility of forestry policy should be delegated to NGOs.

Conclusions

- Spectacular species (keystone species, umbrella species) are a useful tool to create a simplified picture of the state of the ecosystem.
- Protection of species and habitats should be accomplished through a analysis of threats and systematic removal of these.