

WHAT'S INSIDE

- Top Marks for Theory 1
- Cultural & Spiritual Values 1
- Conference on Medicinal Plants 4

ECO has been published by the NGO (non- governmental organisation) community at most Conferences of Parties of the International Environmental Conventions.

The opinions, commentaries, and articles printed in ECO are the sole opinion of the individual authors or organisations, unless otherwise expressed.

Cultural and Spiritual Values of Biodiversity

Ruth Liloqula,
an Indigenous Person from Kukumaquina
Tribe in Solomon Islands

To me and the society to which I belong and identify with, as an indigenous person, and a woman, spiritual and cultural values of diversity – must be taken into account when one talks about conservation and sustainable use.

In my society, the role of women and men in conservation, in respect to the gifts of nature, is given equal importance and value, which the modern world finds difficult to support and recognize.

continued on page 3

Top marks for Theory, but a Disaster in Practice

By: Patrick Mulvany, ITDG

The world's press and in particular the European press was last week raging about the incidental planting over the last 2 years (and therefore at least the last 3 or 4 planting seasons) of oilseed rape mixed, contaminated, call it what you will, with seeds containing genetically engineered constructs not approved for use in Europe. The seed company concerned, Advanta Seeds and the UK Ministry of Agriculture knew by mid April of this contamination of the crop growing in the field and the seed in the distribution chain. While Advanta sent out the message to halt sales of Hyola, the variety that had been cross-pollinated with Round Up herbicide resistance genes at the seed bulking stage in Canadian fields, the UK sat on the information for a full month.

As the news broke across Europe, the range of reaction displayed by both the press and the governments of the 5 countries directly involved may indicate their bottom line attitude to the Biosafety Protocol. The Canadian press seem to have gone a long way towards understanding the European public, as well as hearing the warning bells as the right of Canadian farmers to plant the most marketable (non-GM) oilseed rape is steadily eroded. Over 70% of OSR in Canada is now

continued on page 2

transgenic, and the cross-pollination that has occurred in this particular case is estimated to have taken place over a distance of 800m, which is further than industry guidelines for commercial growing and SCIMAC regulations for field tests and farm scale trials.

The French and German press have been perhaps swifter than their governments in understanding how the public would react to yet another safety scandal in European farming, while the British were lambasted this weekend by their own appointed advisory body, English Nature, for failing to inform the public immediately. In fact, if the British had made public the information more promptly, then many farmers could have avoided planting the contaminated variety this spring as heavy rain delayed planting in the UK until the beginning of May.

Aided by a BBC news article that may well have been lifted straight from a MAFF press release, the British position has been to play down any risk, endorse the harvesting of the crop and meanwhile institute spot checks for agriculture seed purity from June. Until now they have only done spot checks on food grade commodities.

The more cynical here in Nairobi see press releasing the story a week before the Ministerial signing of the Biosafety Protocol here tomorrow as a blatant trivialisation of its core principles.

Only the Swedes seem to understand the fundamental points of law. They have ordered the immediate destruction of the crop.

Robert Andren, an official from the Swedish delegation said 'If a variety hasn't got consent in the EU, it is illegal to use it. If any given variety has not been filed for approval in the EU, it means there has been no risk assessment, so we simply do not know if it is safe or not. This is a perfect example of the need for the Precautionary Principle, and this is what we have acted upon. We had problems 2 years ago with a field test of transgenic OSR, when the company involved, Swalof Weibull found that instead of 2 transgenic lines, their samples contained 4 lines, which the Canadian seed company had not informed them about. This crop was also destroyed.'

It makes a mockery of the law, and the de facto moratorium at present in place in EU, if any of the countries where these accidental releases have occurred do not immediately follow Sweden's example. To play down the illegal status of this crop, and encourage its harvest shows their complete unwillingness and incapacity to address the issue of liability and financial redress.

The fact that Europe is a centre of diversity for oilseed rape, as well as an area that has some considerable problems with volunteer OSR escaping the fields and colonising our roadsides must scream a message to the rest of the world that we are neither caring nor competent in the preservation of our biodiversity. Countries of the South, who are so much richer than us in terms of genetic resources have been taking particular interest in the story, as the idea that the North will lead the way in Biosafety implementation wears a little thin.

The Secretary of State for the Environment for Portugal (who currently hold the EU presidency) Rui Goncalves freely conceded this morning that in the light of stories such as this, there may be a pressing need to tighten the current legislation in a number of areas. He said that even if a system for exporting country responsibility and liability redress was implemented, it would not function in practice without a robust mechanism for widely available testing, traceability along the entire supply chain and a real investment in capacity building, even for industrialised countries.

For any individual farmer looking for compensation, they might like to look up a salutary tale of some US cotton farmers, who it took over 2 years to be awarded compensation by the court against Monsanto – and that in the most litigious country on Earth. Which is maybe why it was the Like Minded group, and African countries in particular who pressed for strong practical language in the Biosafety Protocol, enshrining the Precautionary Principle at its very core. One day, the world will come to thank them from the bottom of their hearts. In the meantime, European nation states need to put their theory into practice, if their signatures are to mean anything at all.

Biodiversity is the very core of my existence, and that of my community. As a member of my community, my tribe and my biodiversity, I identify with my father, mother, brothers, sisters and my extended families, through blood ties and land ties, clans and tribes. I identify with the land that is given to me, that of the tribal community, with the trees, the streams and the rivers that run through it, with the living and non-living things that are found in them, the birds and the many creatures that are in the forests, and the spirits of the trees and the land of my ancestors, that use it as their home after death.

These live in vicinity, to protect and guide in the way in which I use and respect my biodiversity, and to redress me for misuse and abuse. I also identify with the sea and the creatures that live in the sea such as the turtles, the crocodiles and the dolphins.

The biodiversity in the land acts as my calendar for when to plant, to hunt, to fish, to refrain from harvesting, and what to harvest.

As an indigenous person, the spiritual nature of the biodiversity, maintains my linkages to ancestors long gone. The forest is not just the forest, but it is the place where I walk and fend on the same land where my ancestors walke. It is where I touch base with the spirits of the trees and other biodiversity, and where I touch base with my ancestors in times of trouble, sadness, and happiness. It is a place where I touch base with the supernatural for my wellbeing.

For these many values, it's the place where using part of it, I must give thanks to the spirits that live on it, the spirit of the trees and other biodiversity that must be destroyed or asked to live.

The spirits of the biodiversity have given us valuable knowledge for our survival and well being. With this strong belief in my culture, the knowledge that my ancestors may have died with, is never lost.

When the time is right, and a suitable member of the family or tribe is identified, the spirits of our ancestors will give that person the knowledge. Important traditional knowledge is never lost because of the spiritual value that we put on the spirits in our biodiversity.

For me, and my indigenous people, biodiversity in its entirety is a world where spirits of nature exist, where our sacred sites are, where our plants, and animals live, where the sun's and the moon's rays impregnate the earth so that it can give birth to new life and say farewell to those that have passed on to the spirit world all around us, and where the woman baths the earth with blood while giving birth, and giving her the equal responsibility of an equal partner with her husband to bring up their children to respect and care for biodiversity in order that it

will also care for them and their children and that of their children.

It is my sincere belief that it is time for biodiversity programs to give equal priority to the spiritual and cultural value of biodiversity.

This is the view that most

indigenous people touch base with and it provides the tangible reasons for conservation we identify with. It means the survival and sustainable use of our resources, our identity, culture and existence.

People must learn to have great respect for our biodiversity, and the spirits that live in it, and take care that our dealings with her, and never violate her integrity. We need to ensure that there is a balance between all things, the spirits of nature, of our ancestors, of our animals and trees, our culture and identity.

“It is my sincere belief that it is time for biodiversity programs to give equal priority to the spiritual and cultural value of biodiversity.”

Conference on Medicinal Plants, Traditional Medicine and Local Communities of Africa: Challenges & Opportunities of the New Millennium

Environment Liaison Centre International

The conference focused on the identification of the current status of traditional health care in developing countries, and the threats posed to it by cultural change, lack of legal and economic policies and environmental degradation.

The main topics covered were:

- 1) The place and role of traditional health care systems and traditional medicines in public health;
- 2) Intellectual property rights, development of medicinal plants, genetic resources and drug recovery;
- 3) Sustainable use, trade and conservation of medicinal plants;
- 4) Status of research and its contribution to local primary health care and to sustainable use and development of medicinal plants, traditional medicines and pharmacopoeia.

The conference worked towards a contribution to the outcomes of COP 5 on issues relating to indigenous health knowledge and protection of IPR and biodiversity. It assessed the status of the traditional medicine sector in order to consolidate/disseminate information from fragmented research initiatives, and advised action and coordination in the supply and sustainable development of medicinal plant production.

Priority diseases were identified as HIV/AIDS and malaria. Areas of major concern include the lack of official recognition of traditional health practitioners in many countries, and the inadequacy of conservation policy.

Announcements

- Birdlife International/Nature Kenya lunchtime side-event on 23 May. BOOK LAUNCH...Lunch and drinks will be provided.
- During the CBD, there will be an NGO coordinating meeting each day at 9 am. in Tent 1.
- NGO representatives wishing to help put ECO together can meet at the Jacaranda Room at Landmark Hotel, at 8:00 p.m. each evening. This venue is also available to NGOs wishing to hold meetings in the evenings to address upcoming COP agenda items.
- "Towards Regional Biodiversity Strategies and Action Plans: Lessons from the East African Cross Border Biodiversity Project" hosted by ACTS. Wednesday May 24, 1:00 Lunch is provided.



ENVIRONMENT LIAISON CENTRE INTERNATIONAL

Office for Africa
P.O. Box 72461
Nairobi, Kenya
Tel. 254-2-562022
Fax. 254-2-562175
barbarag@elciafrica.org