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Correction

In yesterday's top story, 'Top Marks for Theory, but a Disaster in Practice', we erroneously attributed the authorship to Patrick Mulvany of ITDG however the story was written by Joyce Hambling. We apologise for any inconvenience this may have caused.

Ecosystem Approach - Really?

By: Dave Pritchard, BirdLife International

Paying more attention to ecosystems must be a good thing. We have an array of legal and policy instruments which seek to safeguard species populations, natural resources, air and water quality and even habitats, but almost none whose focus of attention is ecological processes. Regard to those, and to the ecosystem as a functional unit of management, could be envisaged as the core of an "ecosystem approach" to espouse through the CBD.

But this seems a long way from what the Convention has sought this week to adopt. The exhaustively debated "principles", appended to a conference decision, include a range of important ideas which countries have felt a need to promote in some coherent way. However the relationship between some of these principles and the idea of paying more attention to ecosystems is far from obvious. Why should decentralising management to the lowest level, for example, necessarily serve ecosystems better than its opposite? Bizarrely we can effectively find its opposite in the same text, where another principle speaks of appropriate spatial scales and promotion of connectivity between areas.

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The point highlighted by some delegations, that the principles are intended to be used as an integrated package, may cause difficulties here. On the other hand, one can see the desirability of guarding against individual elements being invoked for a vested interest, out of context, as the “CBD-approved approach”. (After all, context is perhaps what the ecosystem is all about).

Praise is due to delegations, led again by the Seychelles, who have strongly underlined the fact that the ecosystem approach does not preclude other approaches, such as biosphere reserves, protected areas and single-species conservation programmes. The idea that an urgent single-species programme, for example, could be rejected for funding because such a programme is not seen as fitting the “ecosystem approach”, would surely be a bizarre consequence of a supposedly state-of-the-art set of pronouncements from the only global convention to deal with the whole of biological diversity.

A further example is now before us, in the study

on complementarity between the CBD and the Convention on Migratory Species, tabled as a conference information document. Efforts to address the conservation of certain migratory wild animals, not only at the level of single species, but also distinct migratory populations of a species, or groups of related species, may need to have their scope and parameters defined by the migratory ranges, migration corridors or bird “flyways” used by those animals. This could involve a chain of ecosystems or a chain of countries, in some cases spanning the highest to the lowest latitudes and altitudes. Adherence to an “ecosystem approach” as the dominant organising principle might be quite inappropriate in such cases.

The CBD parties have struggled creditably to articulate a package of important ideas for framing more coherent action than in the past. But it seems somewhat questionable whether what they have produced belongs under the title of an “ecosystem approach”. Perhaps that is the portion of the text which should have attracted suggestions for amendment.

Genetically Modified Organisms: A Threat to Food Security and Biodiversity

By Wandera Ojanji

Are Genetically Modified Organisms (GMOs) or the Living Modified Organisms (LMOs) – plants and animals – indispensable in feeding the world, protecting the environment and reducing poverty in developing countries, as the biotechnology engineering companies allege?

“No. They actually are designed for the opposite.” This is position of a growing body of scientists, farmers, NGOs, institutions, and governments opposed to the GMOs. They state that the introduction of GMOs to developing countries, will exacerbate inequality and prevent the essential shift to sustainable agriculture that can provide food security and health around the world. In an open letter to the delegates to the fifth Conference of Parties (COP 5), on the Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD), over 310 scientists from both the developed and developing countries demanded a moratorium on the use of GMOs or LMOs. They are extremely concerned about

the hazards of GMOs to biodiversity, food safety, human and animal health.

“We call for the immediate suspension of all environmental releases of genetically modified crops and products, both commercially and in open field trials, for at least five years; for patents on living processes, organisms, seeds, cell lines and genes to be revoked and banned; and for a comprehensive public enquiry into the future of agriculture and food security for all.”

They argue that GM crops intensify corporate monopoly on food. In order to protect their patents, corporations continue to develop Genetic Use Restriction Technologies (GURTs), like Terminator and Trait-specific technologies.

Terminator technology makes seeds sterile in the second generation, preventing farmers from saving and replanting seed, which is what most farmers do in the Third World. Under these technologies, for instance, a farmer is heavily dependent on the genetically modified seed for

planting which is protected under the intellectual property rights, as opposed to the ancient times when farmers could reproduce, share or store seeds.

Rural Advanced Foundation International considers the terminator technology, the most offensive application of agricultural biotechnology to the 1.4 billion people who depend on farm-saved seed. Trait-specific GURTs are technologies that make it possible, using an external inducer, to switch on and off specific characteristics of a plant such as resistance to diseases. The result of this is that farmers will be obliged to apply particular chemicals to ensure that their crops thrive.

This is not only increasing farmer dependency on chemicals and the genetic engineering companies, it is also driving many farmers to destitution. A consortium of over 25 NGOs at the COP 5 warn that this is a dangerous diversion that is preventing the essential shift to sustainable agriculture that can guarantee food security and health around the world. "Beyond being an admission that genetically engineered crops are not safe, biosafety at the expense of food security is not an acceptable trade-off"

The consortium is worried. Currently, almost all of the major companies that control the agricultural engineering technology markets – like AstraZeneca Novartis Monsanto of the USA and Advanta Seeds of UK - have patents on the Terminator technology. And despite promises by the biotechnology companies last year to abandon the technology, 50 new GURT patents have been issued. The consortium claims that AstraZeneca has already admitted to conducting field trials on GURTs.

The scientists want the patents banned because they threaten food security, sanction biopiracy, of indigenous knowledge and genetic resources, violate basic human rights and dignity, compromise health care, impede medical and scientific research and are against the welfare of animals.

To the scientists and the Regional Alliance for Conservation policy in Latin America and the Caribbean (ARCA), these technologies only answer to the need of biotechnological

companies of intensifying the dependency of farmers on these products and other farm inputs prescribed by sister or same companies. The scientist say the technologies are a source of many problems like drop in crop yields, increased herbicide use, erratic performance, and poor economic returns to the farmers."

A survey, *Evidence of the magnitude consequences the Roundup Ready Soybean Yield Drag from University based Varietal Trials in 1998*, carried out on 8200 field trials of the most widely grown GM crops – herbicide tolerant soybeans – revealed that they yield 6.7 per cent less and required two to five times more herbicide than non-GM varieties. Products resulting from GMOs can also be hazardous. For example, genetically modified Bovine Growth hormone, injected into cows in order to increase milk yield, not only causes excessive suffering and illness for the cows but also increases IGF-1 in the milk, a substance linked to breast and prostate cancers in humans.

The scientists also feel that the form in which genetic modification is currently practiced is inherently unsafe. Secret memoranda of US Food and Drug administration revealed that it ignored the warnings of its own scientists that genetic engineering is a new departure and introduces new risks. Interestingly, the first GM crop to be commercialized – the Flavr Savr tomato - did not pass the required toxicological tests, according to the secret memorandum. Some GM potatoes in the UK have also been found to be toxic, an effect the research scientists, Dr Arpad Pusztai and his collaborators attribute to genetic transformation during the making of the GM plants.

Invasive Species : The Second Biggest Threat to Biodiversity

By Wandera Ojanji

One of the greatest threats to both managed and natural ecosystems throughout the world is the growing number of harmful alien species that invade the ecosystems. The invasive alien species, where they strike, have profound, negative impacts on biological diversity at local, regional and global levels. They are the second largest cause of biodiversity loss after habitat destruction.

The invasive alien species pose serious economic and ecosystem challenges. The Convention on Biological Diversity recognizes the seriousness of the problem and consequently calls upon governments to face up the challenge. Article 8 (h) of the CBD calls on governments to “prevent the introduction of, control or eradicate those alien species which threaten ecosystems, habitats, or species.”

The Global Invasive Species Programme (GISP), a collaboration between UNEP, CABI, IUCN and SCOPE, in consideration of the urgency to comprehensively tackle alien species and the grave threat that they pose to the conservation of biological diversity and the sustainable use of its components have a proposal to COP 5.

They are urging COP 5 to provide a workable mechanism to continue the CBD’s work on alien invasive species issue after COP 5 and in time for inclusion in COP 6 discussions.

This can be achieved by the COP 5 requesting the secretariat to develop a detailed and realistic workplan with explicit deadlines and financial implications to address the tasks identified in the recommendations.

This should be done in collaboration with GISP and other relevant partners like FAO and WHO.

Announcements

- The Ecosystem Conservation Group meets from 9-12 noon in room R-311.
- During the CBD, there will be an NGO coordinating meeting each day at 9 am. in Tent 2.
- Meeting of the German Deputy Minister with NGOs will occur between 11-13 In conference room 7.
- “New Zealand - Setting priorities and designing projects’ meets in the UNESCO room.



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