

## Remarks: Biodiversity and Its Management Implications

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We're in a snowstorm—a veritable blizzard—of buzzwords and ideas meant to be conveyed by those buzzwords. We hear about “bioengineering” and “biotechnology.” We are reminded of “sustainable development” and its thousand variations. We hear about “biodiversity” at every hand and we are content and comfortable.

We are comfortable because these shotgun terms, used as if they had the specificity of a .250-3000, mean whatever we wish to have them mean. There are definitions of each of these terms (I have collected more than 50 for “sustainable development” alone) and we enjoy the ability to make the definition fit every situation, like expensive athletic socks, one size of which fits everyone. We develop the mental image of biodiversity, say, and it suits our experience, our understanding, and our desires. It's like daydreaming about having a Lhamborgini automobile: the exercise is great fun and we have the assurance we'll never have to test our reaction to really owning one.

It will be important for managers to arrive at a common understanding of “biodiversity” in terms of the ideas derived from it. Managers must, as an old mentor of mine used to say, make sure everyone has the same sheet music, otherwise the resultant dissonance and disharmony can be devastating, even fatal.

Biodiversity is a term generating increasing interest and currency these days. The word is circulating widely. It is the subject of legislation and it is the topic of international discussion—and maybe even international agreement, someday, possibly soon. The problem may be that no one quite knows what “it” is and therefore may agree to—or reject—things without realizing what's involved.

There are people who see biodiversity as a state of grace that can be maintained only by keeping hands off. For them it is something that thrives and flourishes as Mother Nature and her minions smooth out the rough places and bring tranquility where once chaos reigned. There are others who see biodiversity as another word for opportunity, an opening for inventing a whole new set of disciplines and specialties, of marketing the same stuff in different packaging—as is often done in the world of popular psychology, and almost always done in politics.

We in the conservation/environmental business have to agree on what biodiver-

sity is, no matter how sure we are each of us knows. I recommend some real effort to arrive at a common understanding of the matter, even if it takes some compromise to get agreement. Without that understanding there will be trouble ahead.

Make sure you do agree—as I think you must—that biodiversity as a concept (is that what it is?) can survive, thrive, and continue even with human intervention. As a matter of fact, in some, if not a lot of cases, human intervention, once begun, must be continued or biodiversity will decline. This business of human intervention has been controversial far longer than I have been around. Unfortunately, the controversy too often is deliberately obscured by arguments about whether humans should intervene, when the controversy is really how that intervention should be done.

No matter what the name—“biodiversity” or anything else—you will confront the issue of management. That’s another term that gets interpreted in whatever way the user wants. I don’t have to tell any of you how that works. Management is intervention, and in many quarters—particularly in the United States and in other developed nations—it is taking on a pejorative coloration. That “colorizing”—to borrow a TV term from Ted Turner—has been going on for a long time and it will not stop soon.

No, intervention/management/stewardship (the latter another term that is handy in that it can have as many interpretations as there are points of view), is here to stay. There’ll be no change there, and you can count on that.

Don’t get comfortable, though. There is major change in the wind, and it is coming at us with hurricane velocity. We get complacent about continuing to manage, to intervene in the ways we think are best, to practice some kind of stewardship in behalf of society, and we relax, secure in the knowledge that what we’ve done we’ll continue to do, because it’s the way it should be—the right way. It is the way it always has been done.

Don’t get too far from the sea anchor, don’t tuck your seatbelts under the cushion, don’t forget to look in both directions before you cross the street—things are not as they were and they never will be the same again.

A major change is taking shape on the international front and it bears watching. It is the growing interest in a global environmental conference, to be held in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, in June 1992. Its somewhat cumbersome title is The United Nations Conference on Environment and Development, or UNCED. The international arena is as replete with acronyms as any U.S. bureaucracy, but in this case it is taking on a popular understanding—at least in other parts of the world—denied most of the acronym-laden efforts with which we are familiar.

This conference may be the largest international meeting ever held and has powerful potential for assembling 200 heads of state, more or less, a world record. It will involve those who are traditionally concerned with the natural environment, and it will embrace the participation of many thousands of persons from non-governmental organizations, called NGOs for short.

These will include environmental groups from around the world, where NGOs have proliferated at a dizzying pace during the past decade. It will include activists

who have had a part in toppling governments, changing public attitudes, and who are feeling their power. It will involve traditional development interests, including the world's financial aid organizations, the human rights and social equity groups, and—for the very first time—representatives of transnational corporations. These are the heavy-hitters of the international corporate world, eager to have something to say about how the world will look as the new century dawns and the new millennium approaches.

The UNCED has as one of its aims the formal acceptance of international agreements covering a wide array of matters, including global climate change, worldwide forest management, international accords on fresh water and ocean protection, and biodiversity. These agreements will not be easy to secure, obviously, but there will be great momentum developed to see them accomplished, if not in Rio, then soon after.

It is important to note this evolution. It is one full of tensions, particularly as between the developed nations, now called The North and the emerging countries, referred to as The South.

The South is developing solidarity on a major and important principle: that The North cannot simply ask The South to accommodate the interests of The North—to stop using their resources, or to forgo opportunities to activate their own economies through the use of their own resources—without major concessions from The North. This may involve payments of large sums of money to make up for the opportunities foresworn by The South. Further, this must be new money, not just the shift of emphasis of funding from traditional assistance to new applications of the same old array of dollars.

Another possibility envisioned by The South is a major change in the level of consumption of The North. In short, a commitment to a profound change in lifestyle so there is room within the envelope of environmentally sustainable economic development for the emerging nations to enjoy some of what we in the developed nations have taken for granted since the Industrial Revolution.

This conviction by the nations of The South is why it is no longer possible for us in The North to say to Brazil, for example, that it should no longer exploit the resources of the Amazonian forest for its own economic improvement and to expect Brazil to do so. Brazilians, no strangers to what they see as a colonialist point of view, make it clear that theirs is a sovereign nation, able to do as it pleases with its own resources.

To add strength to that altogether realistic view, they are not above pointing out to us that we have little room to criticize, when we in The North are doing to our remaining primary forests in, say, the Pacific Northwest of the United States and Canada, precisely what we are suggesting they should *not* do.

In brief, these countries are no longer interested in “taking up the slack” in environmental affairs so that developed countries can continue to consume as we always have and therefore to live as we have: in a frenzy of conspicuous consumption. They see our consumptive traditions as being quintessentially unsustainable, and they are not interested in helping us deplete the world's resources so that our small

segment of the world's population can continue to live as we do. In so doing, they say, we compel the rest of the world to continue to endure poverty, despair, and hopelessness.

The times are changing and the custodians of the bulk of the biological diversity of the planet are determined to be beneficiaries of that change. They are hopeful because they see in UNCED and its processes a great, perhaps a last great, opportunity to take part in creating that change.

What does this mean to us? I suggest it means a vital need to get our own resource house in order, to be prepared to accept the precepts of biological/environmental/economic sustainability and to help developing nations to enhance their own state of grace. This means helping with economic improvement, with the development of rational and continuing processes of resource use, and recognizing the fundamental equity which must become a reality to the people for whom none of these things have as yet been a part of their lives.

We can talk about managing the planet's forests in ways that can be continued indefinitely, but before that is possible we must understand that our own management programs must reflect a commitment to the idea of sustainability. We must revere our own biological diversity, where it remains, with the same fervor we wish the peoples of Ecuador or Malaysia or Botswana to feel for their own resources.

We have an opportunity in UNCED and beyond June 1992 in Rio. We have always had the opportunity, but we have not chosen to do more than tread lightly around the edges. Now we are confronting the reality that the environment and economic and political stability and progress are welded together and that none can succeed for long unless all are made to succeed.

A good place to begin the effort is here and now, as we define and debate "biodiversity" and its implications. For us it may yet be only a poorly-defined concept, but it is a vital part of a globe-wide idea that has form and substance. It has velocity and energy, too, and it may pass us by if we take too long in the process of getting it squared away.

This is no longer a process engaged in by groups of fish and wildlife managers here and there, or slightly eccentric private conservation organizations, or segments of governments here and there around the world. It is one being engaged in by an increasing number of people, simply because the process of making change, as exemplified by the concept of biodiversity and its unbreakable connection to economic well-being, is the last great opportunity these people believe they have. It behooves us to be leaders or we will surely be followers.