

An Intergovernmental Panel on Biodiversity – could it make a difference?

On 20 July, in *Nature*, Loreau & Oteng-Yeboah (2006) wrote that ‘There is .. clear scientific evidence that we are on the verge of a major biodiversity crisis. Virtually all aspects of biodiversity are in steep decline and a large number of populations and species are likely to become extinct this century. Despite this evidence, biodiversity is still consistently undervalued and given inadequate weight in both private and public decisions’. This is not news to the readers of this journal, but Loreau & Oteng-Yeboah went further: ‘There is an urgent need to bridge the gap between science and policy by creating an international body of biodiversity experts.’ The authors and the 17 signatories to their commentary noted the acceleration of global biodiversity loss (with, as they noted, 12% of all bird species, 23% of mammals, 25% of conifers, 32% of amphibians and 52% of cycads threatened with extinction) and wondered ‘Given the magnitude and urgency of the biodiversity crisis, why has the societal response been so slow and inadequate?’

The authors went on to make a comparison between the Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD) and the Framework Convention on Climate Change (FCCC), two multilateral agreements drawn up at the 1992 Rio Earth Summit. They noted that the FCCC built on the existing Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) to inform political negotiations over climate change, whereas the CBD does not have the means to mobilize the scientific community to inform governments. However, as a result of calls for the creation of a biodiversity advisory panel at a number of recent biodiversity conferences, the French government is funding a consultation process to assess the need and scope for such an international mechanism of expertise on biodiversity. Loreau & Oteng-Yeboah concluded by calling upon all scientists interested in biodiversity to become involved and to seek the participation of their governments. This short commentary in *Nature* clearly struck a chord with news agencies, and the piece received wide coverage. The BBC’s environmental correspondent noted that one of the reasons behind a call for the establishment of an intergovernmental panel is that, although the CBD commits governments to achieving at least a significant reduction in the rate of species and ecosystem loss by 2010, the picture painted

year after year by successive Red Lists makes it clear that progress is not fast enough (Black, 2006b).

Climate change has been the leading environmental news item for most of this year, and this makes the comparison with the IPCC particularly timely. Any international panel focusing on biodiversity would do well to look carefully at both the successes and failures of the IPCC, formed in 1988 by the World Meteorological Organization and the United Nations Environment Programme. The Panel has published three global assessments, in 1990, 1995 and 2001, and the fourth will be finalized in 2007. These are its successes: all landmark reports put together after extensive peer review, summarizing the best available evidence, and providing information for governments and policy makers in the form of potential scenarios. However, despite the alarm signals put out by each IPCC report and despite the fact that the Panel is funded by governments, it is only this year that there seems to be some hope of political movement. Has it taken 18 years for the IPCC’s assessments to filter through to governments and news agencies, or did Hurricane Katrina and Al Gore’s film, *An Inconvenient Truth*, finally focus minds on the potential effects of global climate change?

One of the most interesting developments this year was the publication of the UK government’s Stern Report (Stern, 2006) in October. This argued that climate change could shrink the global economy by a fifth at a cost of up to GBP 3.68 trillion unless drastic action is taken, but that taking action now would cost just 1% of global gross domestic product. The conclusion was that the benefits of strong, early action against climate change will largely outweigh the economic costs. This sounds like good advice and should be the main driver for government policy shifts. However, only a few weeks later, in November, the UN climate change conference in Nairobi (the second meeting of the Parties to the Kyoto Protocol) failed to make any real progress. A plan was approved to work towards limiting global warming after 2012 when the present agreement governing greenhouse gas emissions expires, and developing countries will receive financial and technical help in adapting to the effects of global warming. However, there was no deal on another round of mandatory cuts in emissions to follow the Kyoto Protocol, and no firm timetable for negotiating cuts. Even the UK Environment Secretary David Miliband

acknowledged there was a large gap between the emissions cuts that science suggests are necessary and the level of political commitment to making those cuts (Black, 2006a).

The level of attention that climate change has received this year has ensured that, although the UN declared 2006 as the International Year of Deserts and Desertification, the year will probably be remembered unofficially as the Year of Climate Change. When I highlighted the Year of Deserts in my January Editorial (Fisher, 2006) I was hoping to draw attention to the general neglect of the biodiversity and problems of this major ecosystem. However, apart from a very useful report, *Global Deserts Outlook* (Ezcurra, 2006), deserts have received little attention. Next year is the International Year of Planet Earth, scheduled to be largely about the geosciences. This will be followed in 2008 by the International Year of the Potato, by which time I'm sure the links between food security and climate change will be clear. There has yet to be a Year of Biodiversity. Could this be 2009, to coincide with the launch of the Intergovernmental Panel on Biodiversity?

It is difficult to avoid the feeling that, after 18 years of research and reporting, it is only now that the carefully reasoned scientific advice of the IPCC is being given any credence. Any intergovernmental panel on biodiversity will need to consider carefully the level of tension that exists between science and politics, and what lessons can be learned from the successes and failures of the IPCC.

Conservation NGOs around the world are now considering their positions on climate change but they have not been directly involved in the IPCC. Loreau & Oteng-Yeboah (2006) recommended that an intergovernmental panel on biodiversity should include NGOs. I would go further than this: it will be critical for non-governmental conservation organizations to be involved. They have the practical skills in conservation that could ensure this new initiative does more than produce carefully researched and reasoned reports. I also add a further plea: that any intergovernmental biodiversity panel includes climatologists, both because of the close links between climate change and biodiversity loss and because of their experience on intergovernmental panels.

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References

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Note from the Editor

In the January issue of this year I noted that *Oryx* is now available through a number of organizations that provide free or discounted electronic access to journals for qualifying institutions in a number of transition and developing countries (AGORA <http://www.aginternetwork.org/>, eIFL.net <http://www.eifl.net/>, and INASP <http://www.inasp.info/>). I am pleased to announce that *Oryx* is also now available through a further new initiative, Online Access to Research in the Environment (OARE). OARE (<http://www.oaresciences.org/>) is an international consortium coordinated by the United Nations Environment Programme, Yale University, and science and technology publishers that enables developing countries to gain free access to a large collection of environmental science literature. Information for institutions interested in obtaining access to *Oryx* and other journals through one of these systems is available on the relevant websites.

Submissions of articles to *Oryx* have continued to increase throughout 2006, and submissions overall for the year are about 15% greater than in 2005. To enable the Editorial Office to handle this increase in an efficient and timely manner authors may now submit their articles online at <http://www.epress.ac.uk/oryx/webforms/author.php>. One advantage of the new system is that authors are provided with a unique link to their article enabling them to check progress through the refereeing process. Use of this new system, epress (<http://www.epress.ac.uk/>), has enabled the Editorial Office to respond to authors more quickly. Since we introduced this system in June the average time from submission of an article to providing an author with a decision has been 36 days. Updated Instructions for Contributors for the journal are now available at <http://journals.cambridge.org/action/displayJournal?jid=ORX>

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