

Future Directions in Biodiversity Conservation

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THE ISSUES

The task of determining how best to conserve biodiversity involves resolving three distinct but interrelated types of issues. First, there are ethical issues that need to be resolved. Then, there are ecological issues and, finally, there are issues of practicability.

Ethical Issues

The health and well being of humanity is a fundamental ethical value that underlies most, perhaps all, social philosophies. Social contracts also recognise that to ensure such wellbeing, often certain sacrifices to be made and costs paid. One ethical dilemma is : who should pay these costs and who should consequently benefit.

In the context of conservation, this translates into determining whether it is justified to expect the poor, mainly rural, communities to face the brunt of the deprivations that conservation might imply. It also involves deciding whether future generations, which have no voice today, should have to pay the costs of the insensitivity and indolence of their ancestors. Do people own natural resources? Do people get special rights because of geographical proximity? It also means determining whether animals have any rights or are they only to live and be free as long as it is convenient to human beings.

There are also issues of social morality. Whether nations and national governments have global obligations regarding the common planet they share with others? How participatory must decisions about conservation be? Can a group of people, even if they unanimously decide to do so, have the right to destroy nature? Is the conservation of nature a fundamental principle which no social institution, however democratic or decentralised, has the right to disregard?

Ecological Issues

There are critical ecological issues that need to be dealt with, once the moral issues are resolved. What does conservation involve? What are the basic requirements? How much of what needs to be conserved, and where? What are the minimum

viable populations for different species? What should be the minimum size of a conservation unit? How much human use or interference can be tolerated? What are the indicators of degradation or regeneration?

Clearly, the answers to these questions need to follow from the answers given to the earlier ethical questions. How much needs to be conserved, where and how, cannot be determined without first knowing why conservation is being attempted. For example, if animal rights are acknowledged, then what must be left for the animals would be different to if they were not. Similarly, if obligations are seen as primarily global, rather than local or national, then the scientific requirements to fulfill such obligations might be different to if conservation was only a local issue.

Issues of Practicability

Conservation is not practiced in isolation but as a part of a social, cultural, political, economic and administrative ethos. Therefore, conservation strategies, while being faithful to the ethical values prescribed and the ecological requirements determined, need to find the best way forward in a world full of constraints and limitations. Some or many people might not be willing to acknowledge the ethical and scientific imperatives for conservation. There might be a lack of capabilities, of integrity, of resources and political will. There might be immediate crisis which make long term values seem abstract and theoretical. Or, most people might be too busy fighting for their immediate survival to care about what happens even in the very near future. Credibilities might have been comprehensively lost, or history might have taught the people bitter lessons, which militate against conservation.

SOME CURRENT DEBATES

Participation, Decentralisation and Ownership

Understandably, perhaps the most vigorously debated issue relates to the ownership of biodiversity. Who owns these resources and, consequently, who has the right to decide how they are to be used or conserved? Do those living, historically, in close geographical proximity to them own them primarily or solely? Should not those who have historically protected these resources, or most immediately desisted from destroying them, have the first or sole right over them?

These are essentially questions of social ethics. But, often, mixed up with these and other such questions are questions of practicability: can biodiversity be

conserved without the co-operation and support of the "local people" or the people located geographically proximate to such biodiversity? Would such support be forthcoming if these "local people" were not given some rights or say over such resources?

There are also other issues, related both to science and practicability. Do not people who are closely living with nature know more about it than distant scientists and experts? Should not, then, their decisions on how to manage these resources be scientifically more credible than those of "external experts"?

Alternative Resources and Replaced Incomes

Another raging debate is on whether it is correct and practical to divert human pressures from conservation areas by identifying or developing alternative sources of biomass and incomes for those depending on such areas. In this debate, the ethicality of such a strategy is questioned as it is argued that these people were the owners of these resources and therefore they should be handed back these resources rather than be excluded, with sops in the form of alternatives. The science is questioned when it is argued that there is no need to curtail or prohibit the use that people make of this area, as such use is not incompatible with conservation.

The practicability is questioned when it is argued that such a strategy will not work, as the people will either continue to degrade the conservation areas even while they receive alternatives, or that these alternatives will make them rich and therefore even a greater threat to the surrounding biodiversity.

Pristine Areas and their Size

Another raging debate, basically centred around national parks and sanctuaries, is about the extent of such areas and the restrictions they imply. Many feel that there is no justification in carving out huge chunks of land (or the ocean) as protected areas, where little or no human use is allowed. The objections to these are, again, on all three counts.

It is seen as unethical to deprive human beings, especially the rural poor, of access from such abundant resources. It is also seen as oppressive and against human dignity, as the restrictions are often enforced insensitively. The preference seemingly given to animals over human beings, and even to the elite tourist and wildlifer, over the poor villager, are also seen as unethical.

It is seen as unscientific as it is argued that there is no need to demand pristineness and that, in any case, nothing on earth is really pristine. It is also argued

