

The Business of Biodiversity

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The Business of Biodiversity

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Foreword by Jonathon Porritt

These days, the ‘business and sustainability’ agenda is fast-moving. Business finds itself absolutely on the front line of the battle being waged between humankind (as the dominant species on the planet) and the rest of the living systems and creatures with which we share the planet. This will be seen in retrospect as a collective aberration of monstrous proportions (we are, in effect, making war on ourselves), but it is taking us a very long time indeed to wake up to the consequences of this aberration.

Currently, the agenda is characterized predominantly by concerns about climate change, soaring energy and commodity prices, fair trade and ethical supply chains. There is also a swathe of regulatory interventions by governments around the world to mitigate the worst impacts of pollution caused by a global population of 6.7 billion people today (growing to 9 billion by 2050) seeking a higher material standard of living. But for all sorts of different reasons, biodiversity is not always seen as an equal priority.

‘The Business of Biodiversity’ nails down this mis-prioritization with splendid eloquence. Once business people come to see that biodiversity still represents ‘the primary resource for all our business activities’ the business case for embedding biodiversity right at the heart of corporate strategy grows stronger by the day. By the same token, the societal case for putting biodiversity ‘at the top of the agenda’ rather than treating it as an irritating afterthought becomes overwhelming.

Understanding this broader societal context is important. Hence many treatments of biodiversity take a narrow focus, homing in on particular species, habitats or biomes. Mark Everard keeps bringing the argument back to the way in which all our aspirations (for wealth, well-being, freedom, quality of life and so on) depend on protecting and enhancing the natural systems which underpin life on earth. Understanding this crucial differentiation between ‘interconnectedness’ (which simply reveals the extent of the relationships between ourselves and biodiversity) and ‘interdependency’ (which uncompromisingly compels us to acknowledge the importance of protecting biodiversity as a pre-condition to meeting our own needs and desires in the future) represents a crucial step-change in reframing the way we address ‘biodiversity issues’.

Many of those ‘issues’ are thoughtfully unpacked along the way – in separate chapters on fisheries, forestry, farming, water, climate change and so on. Inevitably, a somewhat grim picture emerges, perhaps the most powerful articulation of which can still be found in the extraordinary Millennium EcoSystem Assessment, which brings together the work of more than 1500 scientists all around the world intent on providing politicians and business leaders with an overall summary of the combined impact of human endeavour on the natural world.

As Mark Everard points out, the speed at which governments managed to bury the report provides an all too telling reminder that they just haven’t joined up the dots as yet, and really do continue to believe that it’s possible to go on ‘trading-off’ the next chunk of biodiversity, indefinitely, without imperilling our very survival.

In ‘Collapse’, Jared Diamond’s magisterial account of why so many civilizations engineered their own demise through the abuse of natural resources and ecosystems they depended on, he speculates as to what must have been going through the mind of that particular inhabitant of Easter Island as he cut down the final tree on the island, confirming his people’s unavoidable extinction. Are we now nearing an equally momentous turning point, ‘teetering as we are on the edge of disaster’, in Mark’s words?

We clearly still have time to pull back from that edge. This text is replete with case studies demonstrating how easy it is (relatively speaking!) to reconcile legitimate economic expansion with the prioritization of protecting biodiversity. Many of these case studies have been made possible by progressive companies all over the world re-defining corporate self-interest by explicitly putting a value on biodiversity – both in the short and the long term. And there’s guidance galore for business leaders intent on bringing forward more detailed action plans to start making a real difference on the ground.

This is not altruism. It is hard-headed business acumen, based on the recognition that commercial success cannot be secured without attending to the basics that underpin each and every business. And the fact that it is also ‘the right thing to do’, from a moral and ethical perspective, massively strengthens the case for urgent, timely intervention by business and governments alike to start re-balancing the relationship between ourselves and our own living home.

Jonathon Porritt is Founder Director of Forum for the Future www.forumforthefuture.org.uk