

Failed Efforts in Protecting Biodiversity



Ahmed Djoghlaoui, the executive secretary of the U.N. Convention on Biological Diversity, says planetary biodiversity is being lost at an unprecedented rate.

NEW YORK — The year 2010 is, among other things, the International Year of Biodiversity.

If you did not know that — and if you are not quite sure what biodiversity even means — you are almost certainly not alone.

In a survey conducted by Gallup in 2007, 64 percent of European Union citizens either had never heard of the word (34 percent) or had heard of it but had no idea what it meant (30 percent).

For the record, the word — a conflation of “biological diversity” — is variously defined, but I will borrow from the Center for International Environmental Law, a nonprofit organization with offices in the United States and Switzerland.

“Biodiversity is the variability of all living organisms,” the center said, “of the genes of all these organisms and of the terrestrial, aquatic and marine ecosystems of which they are part.”

And then there is this: “4 out of 10 children can’t tell the difference between a wasp and a bee,” The Daily Mail reported last autumn on the release of survey

results that examined general knowledge of nature among British children ages 5 to 10. The survey also found that 60 percent of British children could not distinguish between a frog and a toad, and 25 percent could not identify a beaver.

That developed societies are losing touch with the natural world is not exactly news: A 2002 British study, for example, found that the average 8-year-old could more readily identify Pikachu, Metapod and Wigglytuff — characters from Pokemon, the Japanese trading-card game — than native species in their communities, including otters, beetles and oak trees.

Nor, obviously, are such findings confined to Europe. Last year, for example, the U.S. Forest Service, citing numbers from the Institute for Social Research at the University of Michigan, reported that American children spent, on average, 50 percent less time outdoors than they did 20 years ago.

According to Ahmed Djoghlaif, the executive secretary of the Convention on Biological Diversity — an international treaty adopted in 1992 under the auspices of the United Nations Environment Program — the growing disconnect between modern society and the wider biosphere has implications far beyond endangered polar bears.

“We are losing biodiversity at an unprecedented rate,” he said.

The convention — officially adopted by 193 countries, excluding, most notably, the United States — notes that “at least 40 percent of the world’s economy and 80 percent of the needs of the poor are derived from biological resources.”

As well, “the richer the diversity of life, the greater the opportunity for medical discoveries, economic development, and adaptive responses to such new challenges as climate change,” it says.

Eight years ago, parties to the accord committed to achieving by 2010 a “significant reduction of the current rate of biodiversity loss at the global, regional and national level.”

The International Year of Biodiversity arises from that goal, and a meeting is planned in Nagoya, Japan, in October to assess international progress toward it.

So far, Mr. Djoghlaif said, his office has received 110 national reports on biodiversity loss. “There is not a single one, from the U.K. to Haiti,” he said, “in which they achieved their targets.”

Meanwhile, the wildly complex interactions and interdependencies between climate and planetary life are revealing increasingly dire stakes, as global warming leads to the shriveling of biologically diverse — and carbon dioxide-absorbing — forests and wetlands, which in turn contributes to yet more warming.

Pointing to an oft-repeated formula, Mr. Djoghlaif said that each increase of one degree Celsius (1.8 Fahrenheit) in average global surface temperature resulted in the loss of about 10 percent of all known animal and plant species.

If that is true, Mr. Djoghlaif said, then the climate accord reached in Copenhagen in December, in which world leaders agreed — in principle — to try to limit human-driven warming to no more than 2 degrees Celsius, is a sorry affair.

“Our leaders have decided to kill 20 percent of all known species on the planet,” he said.

Mr. Djoghlaif — still an enthusiastic and optimistic defender of the convention’s mission — suggested that the problem with the 2010 goal of achieving a “significant reduction” in biodiversity loss was that there was no real prescription on how to achieve it. “It was a political target with no baseline,” he said.

This year, the parties to the convention aim to change that by developing more specific and tailor-made national goals. And as my colleague James Kanter noted recently in the Green Inc. blog, E.U. regulators have already asserted that the continued loss of biodiversity could have far-reaching consequences for the functioning of the planet.

“We will step up our efforts and put in place a new policy and strategy for the post-2010 period,” said Stavros Dimas, the E.U. environment commissioner. “We

need a new vision and target for biodiversity considering the on-going loss of species and signaling the importance we attach to this issue.”

Efforts are also under way to get the United States to finally ratify the convention, which was signed by President Bill Clinton in 1993 and has since gathered dust in the Senate. Last summer, a coalition of international environmental groups sent a letter to the U.S. secretary of state, Hillary Rodham Clinton, and two members of the Senate’s Foreign Relations Committee, John F. Kerry, Democrat of Massachusetts, and Richard G. Lugar, Republican of Illinois, urging them to support the ratification of the 17-year-old convention.

It seems unlikely that will happen. Mr. Djoghlaif said that in his most recent conversations with U.S. State Department officials, they said their attentions were focused on U.S. accession to two other international treaties that were languishing in the Senate: the U.N. Convention on the Law of the Sea and the Stockholm Convention on Persistent Organic Pollutants.

At least 30 treaties are similarly backlogged.

I asked Ray Anderson, the founder and chairman of Interface, a carpeting company, and the author of the book “Confessions of a Radical Industrialist: Profits, People, Purpose — Doing Business by Respecting the Earth,” where industry fit into the effort to curb biodiversity loss.

“There’s a web of life and we’re part of it,” he said by telephone. “We’re not above it and we’re not outside of it.

“What we do to the web of life we do to ourselves, and it’s foolish to think that we can keep taking and taking and taking without giving back to all the other creatures we share this planet with,” he added.

“I think there’s going to be a lot of pain before human kind really figures this out — particularly the industry end of things. It’s really a question of whether homo sapiens is going to be smart enough to save itself, and I don’t know the answer to that. I just don’t know,” he said.