

Consultative Group on Biological Diversity (CGBD)

Interview with Mr. Michael Fischer, Executive Director
Tuesday, 27 January 2009

CBD-FS: *Thank you very much for accepting to be interviewed. To our knowledge, the Consultative Group on Biological Diversity is the only coalition of grant-making foundations focused specifically on biological diversity around the world. Have you been involved in the organization from the very beginning?*

Mr. Fischer: No. I am its fourth Executive Director, having been appointed only a year ago. The CGBD was founded in 1987 by the US Agency for International Development (USAID) and several US private foundations. We are currently an unique association, small by design, of 55 funders engaged in environmental grantmaking.

CBD-FS: *So USAID is the founder of the Group?*

Mr. Fischer: USAID was the initiator of the concept. They thought there were many foundations engaged in this large issue, but not coordinating their work. They saw that their own internal commitment to biological diversity, over the long term, might be in question. Therefore, they wisely sought to diversify the funding base. Thus one of the purposes of the Consultative Group is to strategically expand the number of foundations and other funders who are committed to this issue.

CBD-FS: *Then USAID provided some funding for the Group?*

Mr. Fischer: Yes, they provided seed funding to establish the association, and they continue to provide membership support.

CBD-FS: *USAID continues to be involved?*

Mr. Fischer: They do. About half a dozen of their staff members regularly attend our meetings.

CBD-FS: *How many foundations are now in the Group?*

Mr. Fischer: We are intentionally quite small. We have fifty five members. Our by-laws place a cap, or limit, on new members: no more than ten percent growth per year. We seek to promote friendship, intimacy and very close working relationships. All parties are interested in promoting funding for biodiversity conservation worldwide. All want to learn from each other. All are interested in potential collaborative funding efforts.

CBD-FS: *What are the goals the Group tries to achieve? How do you try to achieve these goals?*

Mr. Fischer: The goal of the CGBD is to promote research, education and (especially) collaboration among funders interested in global biodiversity conservation.

The CGBD is an association of grantmakers, no more, no less. It functions as any other professional association would. The CGBD meets this goal in three principal ways. (1) Research. The CGBD conducts research, or commissions research, on funding priorities, strategies and programs of its member organizations, as well as of other philanthropic organizations. (2) Education. Through its convening authority, the CGBD brings funders

together through conferences, meetings, webinars, conference calls, listservs, etc. to educate them on a wide array of biodiversity conservation issues. (3) Collaboration. The CGBD helps to identify and nurture collaborative funding among its members. Though the CGBD is not a grant-maker itself, it seeks to enable its members to increase the leverage of their individual grantmaking programs by mindfully integrating their programs with those of their colleague institutions.

CBD-FS: *One of your activities is research about funding priorities, strategies and programmes.*

Mr. Fischer: We call ourselves a back-office think-tank and collaboration hub for leading environmental funders. Emphasis on the “back office;” hence our opaque name.

CBD-FS: *Do you have any assessment of funding priorities, strategies and programmes of your membership?*

Mr. Fischer: We are convinced that conservation of biological diversity requires a variety of approaches. There never will be no one single approach. That is why we have an intentional collection of working groups taking different strategies. As the old saying goes, “all politics is local,” biodiversity protection, as well, is largely local. The strategies to protect biodiversity in the Mekong Delta will be different from those to protect the Great Reefs, or in the Gulf of California.

That being said, we think there are three principal pillars on which biodiversity conservation must be based.

The first pillar is science, but especially science that is expressly linked to the practical needs of policymakers. This is particularly important now with climate change, which is requiring that we shift from reactive adaptive management to anticipatory adaptive management.

The second pillar, I would call education, but education is such an impoverished word. The second pillar requires we develop understanding on the part of general public, create a sense of awe, a sense of wonder, a sense of appreciation and inspiration for interweaving all living things and emphasizing the interdependence of all living things. It is a matter of ethics, and imparting through many systems of education, information, media programming and enculturation the ethical relationship of humans to other species. This effort has both a local and a “larger-than-local” aspect. The future of the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge, for instance, will be decided not by those who live there, but by politicians representing those who live thousands of miles away, and who will never visit there.

The third pillar is inspiring and developing the enlightened self interest of local populations. There is no way that the Amazon, for example, will be protected without the local populations benefiting from that biodiversity. It also requires that some of the benefits realized by the “larger than local” communities be transferred to local communities so as to enlist their active participation in that locale to protect their own biodiversity.

Each of these pillars is designed to motivate human beings to work together. So science is not sufficient, politics is not sufficient, education is not sufficient, local and individual actions are not sufficient, but they must all work together. The Consultative Group was created in order to further all three of these pillars, since no one foundation can cover all the three. Individual foundations select their own targets and strategies, but they are able to undertake their programs in light of the larger picture of what other foundations are doing. Together the foundations can be

much more effective than when foundation act separately in ignorance of what others are doing.

CBD-FS: *Yes, it takes the whole society to take care of biological assets. Can you talk about the working group on conservation science?*

Mr. Fischer: The mission of the CGBD’s conservation science working group is to encourage pragmatic, creative solutions to current and future biodiversity-related environmental problems by advancing the profile and practice of the science that informs such conservation solutions.

This conservation-driven science necessarily includes the social and the natural sciences as well as scientific knowledge drawn from both personal experience and formal theory and experiment. It includes a wide range of knowledge including information concerning the drivers of change, trends and conditions, human uses, economic and cultural benefits, and policy, institutional, technological and behavioral responses.

The Conservation Science Funders group assists grant-makers in addressing the following questions:

- Best science practices: How do we encourage rigorous and creative conservation science? How can we encourage “policy-based” science? What is the system of

production for sound conservation science that is relevant to solving, forestalling, or preventing biodiversity-relevant environmental problems? What kinds of financial support will be needed to support that system?

- Access to science: Where do our grantees, partners, and decision-makers get their conservation science? How can we enhance their access to the information they need?
- Science dissemination: How do we translate conservation science so that governments, nonprofits, funders, resource managers, and the general public can best engage with it? How will we best integrate science into policy development and implementation and place-based conservation?

CBD-FS: *How about the working group on land and fresh water conservation?*

Mr. Fischer: Its mission is to protect biodiversity in global terrestrial and freshwater ecosystems by strengthening grantmaking and providing a vehicle for information sharing, dialogue, strategy development and collaboration among funders.

The goals and objectives are to:

- Increase the level of funding available to NGOs and campaigns focused on protection of terrestrial and freshwater ecosystems.
- Ensure collaboration and coordination among foundations with programs devoted to terrestrial and freshwater conservation, by providing opportunities for information sharing, dialogue, and development of complementary grantmaking strategies.

The programs include:

- A series of conference calls on terrestrial conservation issues, including: protection of the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge, defense of the federal Endangered Species Act, defense of the National Environmental Policy Act, invasive species policy and management, national forest management, energy development, conservation thresholds, state strategies to protect wildlife, national park and wilderness protection, sustainable forestry and certification, regional conservation efforts (including the Southeast U.S.), and community-based conservation.
- A series of monthly conference calls on freshwater conservation issues, building upon the results from the funder briefing on freshwater conservation convened in Berkeley, California in October of 2006. Conference call topics may include: the ideal water law; water conservation; climate change and water management; water markets; energy and water management; national legislation; dynamic flow regimes; federal energy regulatory commission relicensing; water adjudication and allocation; water trusts and land trusts; and nonpoint source water pollution.
- Ad hoc conference calls as necessary to respond to urgent priorities;
- Initial planning for a briefing on US public land policy and management, to be convened in conjunction with the Environmental Grantmakers' Association federal policy briefing in Washington, DC in February 2009; and
- Other meetings of sub-groups of the entire Working Group or sub-groups as necessary.

CBD-FS: *And the working group on marine conservation?*

Mr. Fischer: Its mission is to save the global oceans and the biodiversity contained therein by strengthening marine conservation grantmaking and providing a vehicle for information sharing, dialogue, strategy development and collaboration among funders.

The goals are to:

- Promote collaboration and cooperation within the marine conservation community;
- Increase collaboration among foundations devoted to addressing the challenge of global marine conservation;
- Increase the level of investment in the field, especially foundation funding;
- Reach out to other foundation networks as well as new funders; and
- Identify key entry points and leverage opportunities to advance strategies to address marine conservation.

The objectives are to:

- Ensure funder coordination and collaboration on long-term strategies to implement the recommendations of the Pew Oceans Commission and the National Oceans Commission;
- Investigate strategies to improve the effectiveness of public advocacy for the oceans;
- Educate funders on a wide range of international marine conservation issues, looking for strategic linkages to US domestic issues; and
- Monitor developments on a wide range of marine conservation issues, including (but not limited to) fisheries management reform, establishment of a worldwide network of marine protected areas, reducing the global environmental impacts of mariculture, and promoting a worldwide consumer seafood movement.

The programs include:

- Annual winter meeting (March 2008, location TBD) to educate funders on a variety of marine conservation issues and to investigate opportunities for collaboration;
- Series of monthly conference calls on marine conservation issues, with an initial emphasis on issues which arose in the funder-only roundtable at the 2007 winter meeting in Portland;
- A survey of marine conservation funding, collecting information on current and future funding by members of the CGBD Marine Working Group. The information gathered serves as the basis for strategic discussions at the Working Group's annual meeting and is a resource for funders to use in identifying potential funders with whom to collaborate;
- Development of strategic "white papers" to outline key marine conservation issues, with an emphasis on areas for potential funder collaboration; and
- Other meetings of the Working Group (or sub-groups) to address strategic collaboration opportunities in a timely manner.

CBD-FS: *You also have a working group on climate and energy?*

Mr. Fischer: The Vision of the Climate and Energy Funders Group is one of U.S. leadership in international action to reduce global warming pollution and in the transition to a clean energy future. The mission is to expand the field of climate and energy philanthropy, and to promote collaborative, strategic grantmaking among its members. The goal for the last three years has been to develop and launch a strategy to win mandatory national policies to reduce global warming pollution by 2010.

CBD-FS: *Could you also talk about the Health and Environmental Funders Network (HEFN)?*

Mr. Fischer: HEFN's mission is to build and strengthen philanthropy – and the movements supported by it – at the nexus of health and the environment. This mission includes:

- Increasing funding addressing health and the environment;

- Promoting better-informed grantmaking through information services and peer learning; and
- Supporting more strategic and collaborative grantmaking.

HEFN's strategic areas of focus in the upcoming years include: moving policies and markets towards safer chemicals; strengthening environmental justice and women's leadership in the environmental health movement; and supporting solutions-based philanthropy on green chemistry and green & healthy economic development.

HEFN advances these priorities by providing information services to HEFN members, by partnering with other funder groups in offering funder programming, and by supporting strategic collaboration among HEFN funders through the Catalysts Collaborative, the Women's Environmental Health Work Group, the Environmental Health and Environmental Justice Working Group, and the HEFN-California Working Group.

CBD-FS: *Beside the thematic programmes, your Group also has a programme geographically focused on Gulf of California*

Mr. Fischer: The Group's meeting is to protect biodiversity in the Gulf of California (or Sea of Cortez) and the five surrounding Mexican states –Baja California Sur, Sonora, Sinaloa and Nayarit – an area of extremely high marine species diversity. The region has among the highest rates of endemic species in the Western Hemisphere, and highly productive fisheries. The Gulf's islands, which are comparable to the Galapagos in rates of endemism, harbor some of the world's largest colonies of seabirds. The region contains important terrestrial and coastal habitats such as coastal lagoons, mangroves, dune systems, oases, and desert scrubland. The Gulf itself also hosts important marine protected areas (MPAs) and sensitive marine ecosystems.

It has the following goals and objectives:

- Ensure coordination and collaboration among foundations with programs supporting conservation work in the Gulf of California, by providing opportunities for information sharing, dialogue, and development of complementary grantmaking strategies.
- Increase the level of conservation funding available for the region in protecting Gulf of California biodiversity and ecosystems (terrestrial, coastal and marine).
- Reach out to potential new donors interested in the GOC region, including international funders and government agencies.
- Educate funders on a wide range of international marine conservation issues, looking for strategic linkages to Gulf of California conservation.
- Provide an accessible interface to Mexican government leaders and civil potential organization.

Its programs include:

- Program-focused funder meetings to strategize on topics of shared interest;
- Facilitate the development of a multi-donor marine protected area (MPA) endowment for the Gulf of California;
- Funder site visits to the Gulf of California region;
- Series of monthly funder conference calls on Gulf of California conservation issues; and
- Host delegation of Mexican government officials.

CBD-FS: *Your Group has a focus on collaboration.*

Mr. Fischer: Yes, the entire purpose is to inspire collaboration among foundations.

CBD-FS: *But in practice, there seems to be a wall between governmental sector and the foundation sector. Basically, foundations have been talking to each other within the foundation community, and the public sector has been doing their own work. There seems to be no much collaboration between the two processes. What is your assessment from the perspectives of the foundation sector?*

Mr. Fischer: I will give you two answers. Yes indeed, there is seldom close collaboration between the public sector and the independent sector. I regret the fact that USAID is no longer quite as active in our work as they were at the beginning. But if you go down to local or more targeted areas, for instance, in our work in the Gulf of California, where Mexican Government made into US foundations and vice versa. So there is quite close collaboration in that situation. Our staff member at the Consultative Group, Marina Cazorla, is in essence an ambassador from half a dozen of US foundations to Mexican governmental officials. She makes it possible for them to collaborate with our foundations without Mexican officials having to understand the difference, say, between the Walton Foundation and the Packard Foundation. Each foundation is so different from the other. It would be hard for governmental officials to understand the internal politics of each foundation. Our staff member at the Consultative Group is a coordinator for foundation relationship with Mexican government and vice versa.

We do understand that public sector and foundations should, in selected instances, closely collaborate. Many United States NGOs receive grants to aggressively advocate for political (or public sector) action. In those situations, there is an inherent conflict of interest between receiving public funds, say, and then lobbying or litigating for more enlightened public action. Frankly, in the United States, collaboration with an antipathetic federal government has been very difficult for the last eight years. In Europe, that was not the case. We look with envy at how European foundations and European governments collaborate in making grants, particularly in the developing world. We hope those days will come with the new administration in Washington DC.

CBD-FS: *Taking your membership as a whole and roughly speaking, do you feel that grants from US foundations to biodiversity have increased or decreased in the past few years?*

Mr. Fischer: Grants to environment and biological diversity have been increasing up to the beginning of last year. I would say that in the last twenty years, the amount of foundation grants in this area has more than tripled. But in the last year, with the stock market and economy in the slump, the grant-making budgets of our foundations have been reduced by up to 30 percent. So we see our grant-making this year 2009 will be roughly equivalent to grant-making we experienced in about 2001. We have been set back quite a bit: by seven years.

CBD-FS: *Now my question is more about way forward. Based on your experience, what would be effective ways to engage grant-making foundations in supporting biological diversity?*

Mr. Fischer: Well, I can not give you a single answer to that because all foundations are so different from each other. Influencing foundations really happens through their boards of trustees, and influencing boards and trustees is much like influencing the general public. That is the second pillar I mentioned: education, inspiration, a sense of wonder, a sense of awe, a sense of loss, a sense of threat. Quite a number of foundations put climate change on the top of their priorities. Funders who used to focus on human health are now understanding that they must focus on climate change. Funders who used to only focus on scenic views along ocean coastlines get involved in climate change funding. Those who were interested in protecting biodiversity hotspots see that with climate change, their funded hotspots are losing, losing more in many cases

in which they have invested so much. So how to engage people is through a combination of, on one hand, wonder and love, and on the other hand, a sense of threat, and the third thing is to give these foundations the opportunity to see, for example, that if I fund these three grantees, what steps will be taken to protect these things I love, which are under threat, as a strategy to address the love and threat about which I have come to learn. So to engage more foundations, first is to share that wonder and love, and to help them understand there is a real threat. There are so many philanthropies, and each foundation gets to be attracted from different angles. Again, that is the reason why the Consultative Group exists. We can make a myriad of effective grant-making approaches available so that community-based funders collaborate and each funder can leverage against each other.

CBD-FS: *What is the percentage of grants going to international from your membership?*

Mr. Fischer: Of 55 members, only three are non-US based. About half are making grants not only in North America, but also in the developing world. For instance, two of our foundations make grants in Europe and Russia. A group of them is quite engaged in China, South America, Africa, or Southeast Asia. I can say that most of our foundations are fully aware of philanthropic opportunities in developing world. They would like to learn more about effective opportunities there, preparing for the day when their endowments grow again to enable new initiatives.

CBD-FS: *So you are open to membership from other countries.*

Mr. Fischer: Yes, we are.

CBD-FS: *Is it expensive for them to join your Group?*

Mr. Fischer: Our dues are established on a sliding scale, depending on the amount of money granted each year in the environmental area. Our largest funders, like the Packard Foundation, Moore Foundation, pay dues of fifty thousands dollars a year. Our smallest funders, pay dues of one thousand five hundred a year. Our average dues are seven to ten thousand dollars a year.

CBD-FS: *What can Governments do to promote biological diversity among grant-making foundations?*

Mr. Fischer: Most of our grantees are non-governmental organizations, and many of these non-governmental organizations are advocacy organizations. They seek to influence the decisions of governments, whether they are regulatory decisions or they are funding decisions. We actually see investment programmes of governments as a parallel investment track. Seldom, not never, do we find an opportunity to weave our investment programmes effectively with investment programmes of the public sector. Having said that, however, the public sector has assets that are far greater than the cumulative assets of the philanthropic world. So it is very much in our interest to influence the investment decisions of the public sector. We are certainly open to mutual investment programmes. But I frankly think history has shown that there is an arms-length relationship on both sides, from governmental agencies to independent foundations and vice-versa.