



Dot Earth

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Giving Nature Its Due

By ANDREW C. REVKIN

When today's children are grown, will they only be able to regard today's biological marvels in museums, as my younger son Jack did last March at the National Museum of Natural History in Washington?



Jack was examining one of the trays of extraordinary beetles slid from a cabinet labeled Oh My (shown to us by the entomologist Gary Hevel). These species are still extant. But will that be the case a few decades from now?

Decisions made around the world in the next few years could well determine the answer. At the United Nations today, world leaders will take a step toward giving nature its due as they come together for the first “High Level Meeting On Biodiversity” — putting aside discussions of bullets and bombs in favor of beetles and bears. It would be far better to have such a meeting in the Adirondacks or the Amazon instead of stuffy plenary chambers, but at least it's a start.

There's a long chain of United Nations conclaves that have aimed at blunting the human impact on the planet's biological patrimony. The Convention on Biological Diversity has had mixed results since taking effect in 1993 (and many of its 193 adherents remain frustrated that the United States, joined only by the Holy See and Andorra, has refused to join them thanks to a handful of Senate opponents).

Agreements on trade in endangered species are having an impact, with a living tiger cub recently spotted amid stuffed toys in a traveler's bag in Bangkok and shipments of rare species interdicted around Asia.

But losses, which in the case of extinction are permanent (at least for now), outnumber victories. Even some staunch libertarians, including Indur Goklany, the Cato Institute scholar and author of "The Improving State of the World," agree that the degradation of ecosystems is one of the few global indicators heading in the wrong direction.

To some extent, today's session is just part of the broader North-South tussle over how to share benefits (derived from biological resources) and burdens (from constraining greenhouse gases and adapting to changing climate patterns).

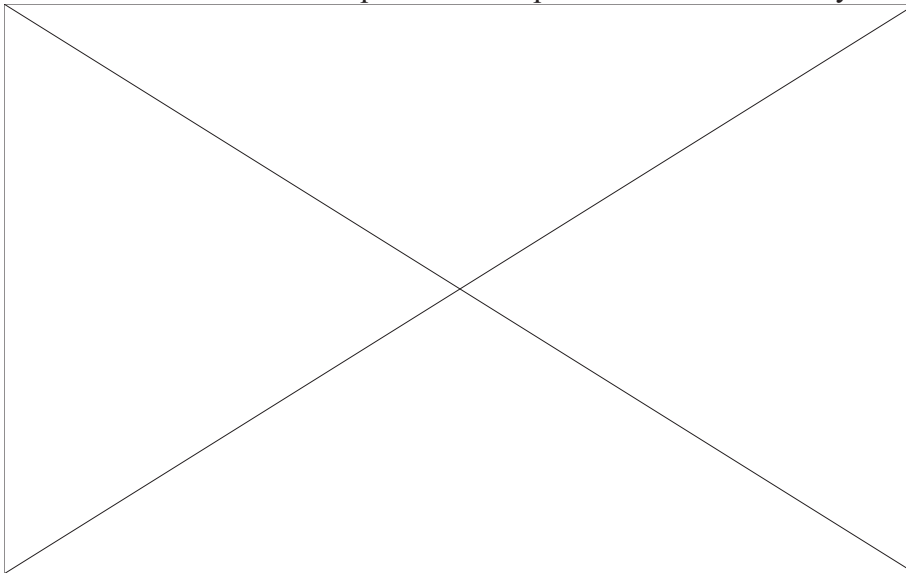
But it does mark a baby step toward deepening consideration of the rising pressures humans are putting on the planet's veneer of life as populations and appetites head toward a mid-century crescendo. And it perhaps indicates that humanity is preparing to take fuller account of the vital services such living systems have for tens of millennia provided free of charge. (For some background, I recommend you explore the 2005 Millennium Ecosystem Assessment and The Economics of Ecosystems and Biodiversity, a 2008 report written by Pavan Sukdhev, a longtime international banker who has spent the last several years assessing ecological economics for the United Nations.)

Given the persistent norms of growth-driven economics, can the values of life, both direct – as in the filtration of stream water – and less effable – as in the howling chorus of a pack of wolves – be better integrated into how communities live today and make decisions about the future?

This is another way of asking the question posed here a week or so ago: Can we avoid "peak everything" before we hit "peak us"?

Edward O. Wilson, the Harvard biologist and much-lauded author, provided some guidance in 2008, in laying out for me what he playfully described as "Wilson's Law": If you save the living environment, the biodiversity that we have left, you will also automatically save the physical environment, too... If you only save the physical environment, you will ultimately lose both.

Here he describes the concept in an excerpt from the documentary "Behold the Earth":



Through Wednesday, I'll be posting more on the meeting, including excerpts from interviews I conducted on Tuesday with two remarkable women involved with this week's events — Isabella Teixeira, Brazil's environment minister, and Julia Marton-Lefevre, the director general of the International Union for Conservation of Nature. That group issued a report in 2008 that meshed agendas for conservation and human advancement around a single notion: building “ a humane future for a diverse earth.” It has a nice ring to it.