



The planet gets short-changed again

It's time we looked at planetary ecology as an inter-connected system demanding a comprehensive approach

The 15th Conference of Parties (COP) to the UN Convention on Biological Diversity concluded in Montreal on December 19, 2022. The meeting adopted the Global Biodiversity Framework, which sets the goal of ensuring that by 2030 at least 30 per cent of terrestrial, inland waters and oceans globally are managed as protected areas. It is not clear how these targets will be translated into national targets, or how the high seas falling outside national jurisdictions will be managed. There is an important target relating to the use of chemical nutrients and pesticides which has direct relevance to a country like India. Emissions from the use of chemical fertilisers are sought to be reduced by at least half and use of toxic pesticides by at least two-thirds by 2030. The Indian Minister of Environment has already objected to this provision. There is another target which may be too ambitious — to eliminate plastic waste altogether by 2030. Financing, as always, is a challenge, particularly at a time when the global economy is facing severe headwinds. There is a reference to increasing “financial resources from all sources to at least \$200 billion per year, including new, additional and effective financial resources, increasing by at least \$10 billion per year international financial flows to developing countries”. I interpret this as only assuring \$10 billion per year to developing countries, which would be a pittance. There is a mention of \$500 billion being raised additionally through the retirement of a host of subsidies harmful to biodiversity but this applies to all coun-

tries. It is clear that resources for meeting the targets in the Framework will have to be mobilised by all the parties, without the application of the principle of common but differentiated responsibilities and respective capabilities, or the well-known CBDR principle. While the Framework should be welcomed as a statement of intent by the parties to the Convention, one does not see any sign that the scale of effort and resources required are likely to be deployed.



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An important item on the agenda of the meeting related to the use of genetic resources and the digital sequence information on genetic resources and of traditional knowledge associated with genetic resources for commercial benefit, for example, in the development of pharmaceutical products. One of the goals of the Framework seeks to ensure that benefits from such utilisation “are shared fairly and equitably”, including with indigenous people and communities. There was an agreement to set up a mechanism by which the providers of digital sequencing information (GSI) relating to genetic resources and their users would be able to cooperate with an equitable sharing of benefits derived therefrom. A multilateral fund would be set up to facilitate this. The initiative will be finalised at the next COP in Turkey in 2024. This could be of significant importance to developing countries whose rich biodiversity resources, including rare and valuable medicinal herbs, have long been exploited by developed countries for

commercial benefit with no return to the country of origin. While there has been an insistence on safeguarding industrial intellectual property through patents, there has been a wholesale plunder of genetic resources from developing countries, many of which have not even been aware of the value of what they may have been losing. A multilateral facility for GSI would help protect such resources and allow their utilisation for commercial purposes only through equitable sharing of benefits.

The Framework should have made explicit the integral link between climate change and ecological integrity. It is now clear that climate change is just one component of a much larger and more serious ecological crisis that the world is confronting. There are strong feedback loops between climate change and ecological degradation. The oceans are the biggest carbon sink on the planet, absorbing a large proportion of carbon emissions. The dumping of plastics and other hazardous waste into the oceans, which continues unabated, is leading to acidification and to thermal expansion, which reduces the capacity for absorption of emissions. The earth's forests are the other carbon sink; the more they are destroyed the less their ability to absorb carbon emissions. Plastics in the oceans are becoming a huge threat to marine life. Micro-plastics are being ingested by fish, through which they enter the food chain and affect human health. A rise in ocean temperatures is killing corals and affecting a fragile marine ecology, which is the legacy of millions of years of evolution.

The Framework has referred to the alarming rates of extinction of species and has a target of halting human-induced extinction of known threatened species, and by 2050 reducing ten-fold the extinction rate and risks of all species. Achieving such targets is dependent on urgent and drastic action on other fronts, such as halting further destruction of the natural habitats of the threatened species in particular forests. Over-fishing and trawling of the sea-bed must stop if threatened marine species, such as sharks, are to survive. While recognising that all planetary life is linked together through fragile threads, the Framework settles for generalities.

According to one environmentalist, biodiversity, in a philosophical sense, represents the knowledge learned by evolving species over millions of years about how to survive through the vastly varying environmental conditions the earth has experienced. In this sense, humanity is currently “burning the library of life” through the rampant destruction of biodiversity and alarming species loss. It is this awareness which is still missing from global deliberations. The time has come to look at planetary ecology as an inter-connected system which demands a comprehensive approach. We need to think of a global ecology convention which enables such an approach.

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