

**UNITED NATIONS RESEARCH INSTITUTE FOR SOCIAL
DEVELOPMENT**

DP 72

**BIODIVERSITY
AND
HUMAN WELFARE**

by Piers Blaikie and Sally Jeanrenaud

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February 1996

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ISSN 1012-6511

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◆ Preface

The loss of biodiversity as a result of human activities has become a central preoccupation among natural scientists, and many social scientists as well. Although we do not know the exact scale of the problem, in particular the extent to which human beings have been responsible for the loss of biodiversity as compared to the natural evolution, the process of species extinction, green house effects and critical changes in the earth's biochemical cycle are now increasingly emphasized.

The concept of human welfare is equally tangled. In general terms, it relates to the provision of improved conditions of living. Human welfare is linked with the preservation of biodiversity in varieties of ways. Biodiversity forms the basis of a global-life support system. Human beings have fulfilled many of their needs by taking advantage of the existence of many genes, species, as well as a "balanced" ecosystem. For instance, many plant species have formed the basis of food, fibre, medicines and many other useful items. There are also many aesthetic and ethical values of plant and animal species.

This paper considers the complex relationships between biodiversity and human welfare. It shows how biodiversity and human welfare are perceived differently by a wide range of actors. These contested meanings constitute the problematique of biodiversity, an understanding of which has profound implications for conservation policy-making. The authors examine, in particular, how biodiversity has been seen by different groups of people and how they interact in the arena of biodiversity. It not only looks at the level of dependence that different sections of the rural poor have on biodiversity either as use values or for petty commodity production, but it also examines such groups as policy makers at the international level, state functionaries, entrepreneurs, corporations and timber traders which have frequently more influence on the discourses surrounding the protection and use of biodiversity. To illustrate this, the paper includes three detailed case studies involving Russian forests, tropical forests and wildlife in Cameroon and marine biodiversity in Greenland.

The paper suggests that international conservation policy and practice are undergoing rapid transformation from the previous predominately nature preservation orientation to sustainable use of natural resource for livelihoods. Many groups of policy makers and scholars at the international level perceive a synergy between biodiversity conservation and human welfare. However, few concrete policies and strategies have so far been developed to implement these ideas in practice. There have been formidable political problems in the way of negotiating biodiversity conservation at the international level. There have also been serious questioning of the capability and will of many states to implement conservation policies on the ground. At the local level, conservation efforts have led to the definition and appropriation of the biodiversity resources by outside forces, and this in turn has generated conflicts over these resources. The paper argues that while the contemporary debate about biodiversity appears to represent elements of a new moral dimension about "human-nature" relationships, it is also a testimony to familiar political-economic divisions. These involve divisions between international, national and local interests; between North and South; between science and politics; official and folk; and power relations at the local level deriving from differences of class, ethnicity and gender.

The central conclusion of the paper is that there are strong pragmatic and political grounds for paying detailed attention of the impact of biodiversity erosion and conservation upon human welfare, particularly in cases where conservation efforts may possibly affect local people directly. The pragmatic grounds are that coerced and enforced conservation tends to fail in the long run. The political grounds are that other considerations such as the abuse of human rights and the accentuation of inequalities are related to environmental degradation, and so conservation efforts must be seen to address these issues too, and not to exacerbate them.

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This is one of the several thematic papers commissioned under the project on the social and environmental impacts of national parks and protected areas. The Institute has collaborated with several leading organizations for the preparation of these papers. This particular paper is an outcome of joint efforts between UNRISD and the School of Development Studies/Overseas Development Group, University of East Anglia, Norwich. The project on the social and environmental impacts of national parks and protected areas is co-ordinated at UNRISD by Krishna Ghimire.

February 1996

Dharam Ghai
Director

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1. THE MAJOR ISSUES

◆ Introduction

This paper examines the complex relationships between biodiversity and human welfare. It aims to show how biodiversity and human welfare are perceived differently by a wide range of actors. These contested meanings constitute the politics of biodiversity, an understanding of which has profound implications for conservation policy-making. The main questions addressed are:

- (i) How has biodiversity been understood by different groups of people?
- (ii) What aspects of human welfare are affected by biodiversity degradation and by conservation?
- (iii) Who bears the costs and reaps the benefits of biodiversity degradation and conservation?
- (iv) What are the practical mechanisms “on the ground” that will deliver such benefits?

While policy makers and writers at the international level perceive a synergy between biodiversity conservation and human welfare as an unproblematic “vision” of conservation, from the level of practice their supposed relationship more often appears as rhetoric. There have been formidable political problems in the way of negotiating biodiversity conservation at the international level. There has also been serious questioning of the capability and will of many states to formulate and implement conservation policies on the ground. At the local level, conservation efforts have led to the definition and appropriation of biodiversity resources, usually in the name of the state, and this in turn has precipitated struggles over those resources. Finally, there are crucial ambiguities and contradictions in the formulation and practice of biodiversity conservation, particularly in the role of science and “facts” in the biodiversity discourse. Thus, while the contemporary debate about biodiversity appears to represent elements of a new moral dimension of “human-nature” relationships, it is also a testimony to familiar political-economic divisions. These involve divisions between international, national and local interests; between North and South; between science and politics; official and folk; and power relations at the local level deriving from differences of class, ethnicity and gender.

Bearing these issues in mind, it is easy to see that analysis of the relationship between biodiversity and human welfare cannot be only a matter of scientific research. While scientific methods may be powerful ways to identify and present the problems of biodiversity erosion, they are not the only ones. Biodiversity is constituted as a range of resources, which are the focus of both commercial exploitation and livelihoods. The debate is thus highly politicized. Even within the academic and international policy-making environment, we need to be critically aware of the social forces that withdraw and confer credibility to various scientific ideas. A sociology of scientific knowledge indicates that scientific “facts” are used to support various intellectual projects, upon which reputation, promotion and consultancy fees depend. Therefore discourses take place at many different levels and by a wide cast of protagonists. This paper attempts to identify different actors and stakeholders in the biodiversity arena, their interests, how they are perceived and articulated, and then promoted in the face of other different and often competing ones.

An analysis of biodiversity and human welfare must not confine itself only to the economic concerns of the actors involved. It must also involve a critical review of the ideas and ideologies of biodiversity. In other words, it is naive to expect that one can “read off” notions about biodiversity from the structural position which actors hold, or that they will create and use ideas that somehow are explainable in terms of their being instrumental to their economic interests. Rather, different actors create their own ideas about biodiversity, appropriate and adapt others, and experience and use them in different ways in different

arenas. It is thus necessary to focus on the ideas themselves as well, and a section on different paradigms for biodiversity conservation is devoted to this task, bearing in mind that actors will use parts of these paradigms, sometimes in an eclectic and contradictory manner, in pursuit of their own “projects”. Actor-oriented approaches have recently been developed to analyse the “development interface” by Long and Long (1992) and others, with particular reference to how various actors pursue their “projects” within the context of their “life-worlds”. While a full treatment of the life-worlds of actors who appear in the arena of biodiversity would be too ambitious for our purposes here, it is useful to extend the analysis of biodiversity and human welfare beyond a mere representation of the interests of different stakeholders (e.g. biotechnology prospectors, wildlife protection groups, forest dwellers in the tropics, etc.). It is necessary also to understand how the ideas that different people have about nature are formed and articulated; how those arguments are used and supported by recourse to scientific “facts” or to natural justice and inalienable rights.

In this way we develop an approach in which people have specific interests in very particular natural resources or species for precise purposes. We argue that “nature” is not only perceived and valued from various cultural and ideological perspectives, but that powerful economic incentives are involved in shaping and conserving particular aspects or constituents of it. By no means all of these different interests and normative notions about biodiversity concern human welfare, although they may be invoked in its name.

The main objective of this paper is to contribute to a more consistent and effective strategy for the conservation of biodiversity, and to identify clearly how and who conservation will and should benefit. For a more effective policy to emerge, the vision must be deconstructed into its often contradictory parts, and deepened to accommodate social dynamics. As a first step, we argue, this requires changes both within and outside the conservation movement. The conservation movement itself must recognize and work with the political economy of biodiversity erosion and conservation. It is not only a matter, as Pimbert (1993) suggests, of a “new professionalism”, one which works closely with local groups and which integrates thinking from both the social and natural sciences. We support this initiative, but it also requires two others — a partial rapprochement to the political economic realities in the local and global political economy, and also the advocacy to change some of the most damaging of these realities in terms of biodiversity erosion and implications for the undermining of human welfare. This change mainly implies the development of effective policies at the international, state and local levels, but at the same time understanding the political and institutional obstacles which stand in its way. These obstacles must not be characterized simply as “lack of political will”, corruption or administrative inefficiency and somehow externalized from the policy-making process. They must be worked with and tackled in arenas other than biodiversity conservation alone — for example in trade and tariff agreements, the structure and volume of international aid to developing countries, human rights for indigenous peoples — in short a number of enduring political issues revolving around human welfare, which may be only indirectly related to biodiversity conservation.

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