

# The Nagoya biodiversity summit, a cynical fraud in global politics

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The Nagoya summit on biodiversity has received little media coverage. This is in marked contrast to the Copenhagen climate change summit. Copenhagen failed to reach an agreement to deal with the potential catastrophe facing humanity from greenhouse gas emissions because of conflicting national interests and rivalries. But it received extensive media coverage.

The few reports that did appear about Nagoya suggested a successful outcome to the two week of negotiations. The British-based *Guardian* hailed the Nagoya agreement as a victory for “goodwill and compromise,” a “morale booster” that even restored confidence in the United Nations after the fiasco of Copenhagen.

Much is at stake. It is widely established that many of the world's wildlife species are under threat. The tiger population has declined by 40 percent in the last decade due to poaching and land clearance. Altogether, 20 percent of vertebrates are endangered or threatened with extinction.

But even more important is the sustainability of the world's food and water supplies. Threats to rain forests, coral reefs, rivers and wetlands present major issues for the future of society. Transnational corporations are responsible for land and water pollution on an enormous scale. The recent BP oil spill in the Gulf of Mexico was the most spectacular case in a general pattern of environmental damage. Then there is the impact of the drive for profit on marine resources, with over-fishing resulting in the near extinction of key species.

Conservation of habitats, species and genetic resources is second only to climate change in

presenting an enormous and complex challenge to humankind. Tropical rain forests, according to the UN Food and Agriculture organisation are still vanishing at an alarming rate. After shrinking as much as 16 million hectares each year in the 1990s, they are still declining at 13 million hectares a year in the last decade. Such forests soak up huge amounts of carbon dioxide, the main greenhouse gas, and so curb the rate of climate change. They are also water catchment areas, and a home to countless different species of flora and fauna.

Like the Copenhagen summit on climate change, the Nagoya conference was based on a UN agreement, the Convention on Biological Diversity, established in 1993. As the United States is not a signatory, it did not take part in Nagoya, leaving the Japanese hosts and a European Union negotiating team to steer through an agreement between 193 nations.

The main “lesson” from Copenhagen that politicians seemed to have learned was to scale back expectations that any significant or binding commitments would emerge from the Nagoya summit. Without the US, with China showing little interest, and with even the German environment minister leaving after 24 hours, it was possible to tie up hundreds of minor government officials and NGO representatives in hours of talks that were a fraudulent and cynical exercise.

Non-binding targets were agreed to increase the amount of land designated as nature reserves from the present level of 13 percent to 17 percent by 2020. Ten percent of marine and coastal areas are supposed to be made into reserves, up from the present 1 percent. The target of 10 percent was already agreed in 2002. A commitment made in 2002 to “significantly” reduce the

rate of biodiversity loss by 2010 was a complete failure.

As at Copenhagen, there were major conflicts between developed and developing nations, with the latter demanding financial assistance from the richer countries in return for protection of the environment. All that was agreed was a commitment to have a plan to raise the sums needed – amounting to hundreds of billions of dollars – by 2012. Only Japan promised to contribute \$2 billion, apparently wishing to offset its bad image among environmentalists for attempting to stop the ban on whaling and refusing any restrictions on bluefin tuna fishing.

Some green campaigners, who perpetually sow the illusion that pressure on governments can achieve results, expressed satisfaction at the outcome of Nagoya, with WWF International declaring “countries are ready to join forces to save life on earth.”

Others were less given to self-deception. British environmental campaigner George Monbiot, in a blog entitled “We’ve been conned. The deal to save the natural world never happened”, pointed out that the so-called international agreement had not even been published or released to journalists. Even the British government did not have a copy. After a press release that “secured the headlines it wanted,” the UN biodiversity staff had gone to ground.

Monbiot claims that such an evasion is unprecedented: “The draft agreement, published a month ago, contained no binding obligations. Nothing I’ve heard from Japan suggests this has changed. . No government, if the draft is approved, is obliged to change its policies.”

Monbiot points out that a third of the countries present at Nagoya did not even bother to send a minister, and the countries represented by a head of government or state were Gabon, Yemen, Guinea Bissau, Prince Albert of Monaco and a fifth that he couldn't identify.

It should be stressed that as in the area of climate change, hundreds of scientists are carrying out serious

research and attempting to achieve scrupulous objectivity in their assessment of biodiversity changes. In May a team of scientists published a paper in *Science* magazine (\*) which demonstrated that most indicators showed a decline in biodiversity and an increase in pressures on biodiversity. They found that “the rate of biodiversity loss does not appear to be slowing.”

The team pointed out that global biodiversity had been included in the UN's Millennium Development Goals because of its impact on human well-being. Their report warns that “more than 100 million poor people live in remote areas within threatened ecoregions and are therefore likely to be particularly dependent upon biodiversity and the ecosystem services it provides.”

They conclude “efforts to stem biodiversity loss have clearly been inadequate, with a growing mismatch between increasing pressures and slowing responses.”

Their observations document the immense drive for profit irrespective of human needs and the inability of a global political system based on competing nation-states to plan a rational pattern of resource use that will benefit the majority of the population.

(\*) “Global Diversity: Indicators of Recent Declines,” by Stuart M. Butchart et al, *Science*, Vol 328, 28 May, 2010.



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