

# Sustainable Development OPINION

## Curbing UK impacts on global biodiversity: an agenda for action

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Stemming the tide of biodiversity loss is a global issue with national implications. The UK has set up initiatives to reduce its impacts on biodiversity worldwide — but as a government review found in 2006, these have yet to add up to a comprehensive strategy. How can the gaps be filled? New research suggests that action on a number of fronts is key. Many UK policies and practices clearly affect biodiversity even though they do not directly address it. For instance, UK imports such as coffee, cocoa and sugar are linked to biodiversity loss. By integrating relevant mainstream concerns such as trade and exploitation of natural resources into an overall strategy, the UK government could better demonstrate its commitment to reducing biodiversity loss significantly by the target date of 2010.

### KEY MESSAGES:

- **The UK government's commitments to conserve global biodiversity are ambitious, but unlikely to help reduce the rate of biodiversity loss by the UN Convention on Biological Diversity target date of 2010.**
- **In the meantime, some UK commitments, policies and economic activities not directly related to biodiversity have significantly influenced the rate and extent of changes in habitats, notably in forests and marine environments.**
- **As the fifth biggest importer of merchandise in the world, the UK has a commensurate responsibility for conserving global biodiversity.**
- **A coherent biodiversity strategy needs to be agreed across UK government, and this time must include the Treasury, the Department for Business, Enterprise and Regulatory Reform, and the Export Credits Guarantee Department.**
- **Biodiversity also needs to be integrated fully into cooperation with others, notably through Economic Partnership Agreements, Poverty Reduction Strategies, and work on climate change and energy.**

### Missing the target? The race to reduce impacts

In 2002, the Parties to the Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD) committed themselves to meeting a key target. This was to 'significantly reduce' the current rate of biodiversity loss at the global, regional and national level — and so contribute to poverty reduction and to the benefit of all life on Earth. This is now an official target under Millennium Development Goal 7. The European Commission meanwhile went further, and in 2006 committed to halting biodiversity loss in the EU by 2010. Achieving this within four years was always going to be extraordinarily difficult.

In 2004, the UK government had established the Inter-Departmental Ministerial Group on Biodiversity (IDMGB) to address the loss of biodiversity and, in particular, to oversee delivery of the UK's contribution to the 2010 target. IDMGB members have included ministers and officials from the Foreign and Commonwealth Office (FCO); the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Defra); the Department for International Development (DFID); and the Chairman of the Joint Nature Conservation Committee (JNCC).

In 2006, the JNCC completed a review on behalf of the IDMGB of UK government commitments directly related to international biodiversity — including the CBD — and their effectiveness in tackling biodiversity loss.<sup>1</sup> They concluded that these commitments do not add up to a comprehensive conservation strategy, and that putting these alone into action is unlikely to reduce biodiversity loss significantly by 2010.

### The bigger picture: biodiversity and mainstream policy

But what about mainstream UK policies and practices? Which of these are damaging biodiversity, and which offer a means of protecting it?

Following the completion of the JNCC research, the IDMGB commissioned a major study to assess the impacts on international biodiversity of UK policies and practices that do not have an overt biodiversity agenda.<sup>2</sup> A steering group with members from DFID, Defra, JNCC, WWF and IIED managed the project.

The researchers investigated the impacts of UK commitments (such as international agreements to which the UK is a signatory), policies (such as government White Papers) and activities within economic sectors (energy, food supply, forestry, mining, tourism and transport) that have a potential impact on global biodiversity.

**The findings** The study found that the UK is significantly affecting global biodiversity through commitments, policies and economic activities that on the face of it seem to have little to do with the issue.

These commitments, policies and activities include:

- *promoting habitat change through import.* For example, the UK imports 40 per cent of Colombia's palm oil and several valuable 'ecoregions' in Brazil are heavily cultivated for soya export — with few conservation provisions. The study says a notable proportion of habitat change in these areas can be attributed to the UK.
- *promoting trade in potentially damaging products.* For example, the UK is a signatory to multilateral agreements on sugar, coffee and cocoa, all of which focus on facilitating trade and encouraging demand — with few conservation provisions. Cultivation of these commodities can have detrimental impacts on biodiversity. Many of the Important Bird Areas identified by BirdLife International are threatened by coffee and cocoa growing interests.<sup>3</sup>
- *overexploitation of forestry resources.* For example, a recent report by WWF suggests that the UK is the world's third largest (and Europe's largest) importer of illegal timber.<sup>4</sup> Illegal forestry tends to have particularly adverse impacts on biodiversity through logging in protected areas and the targeting of protected tree species.
- *overexploitation of marine resources.* For example, EU fisheries agreements with third countries (that is, neither EU members nor associates) have attracted considerable criticism on environmental and social grounds. A study by the Institute for European Environmental Policy questioned whether partnership agreements were moving towards sustainability, particularly since many fish stocks in West Africa — where fish is a major food source — appear to be overfished.<sup>5</sup>

Moreover, the UK is one of the world's largest economies and the fifth biggest importer of merchandise.<sup>6</sup> Given such effects on biodiversity loss worldwide, the UK should have a commensurate responsibility to conserve global biodiversity.

**The recommendations** The study recommends five top priorities for the UK government, indicating it should:

1. make a stronger, consistent case for biodiversity within government and ensure that all departments, particularly the Treasury, the Department for Business, Enterprise and Regulatory Reform, and the Export Credits Guarantee Department respond to the challenge
2. ensure biodiversity concerns are effectively integrated into Economic Partnership Agreements (EPAs) between the EU and African, Caribbean and Pacific (ACP) states, and that grants and loans provided are 'biodiversity proofed'
3. ensure developing country partners effectively integrate biodiversity concerns into Poverty Reduction Strategy Papers (PRSPs) and promote measures to back this, including Strategic Environmental Assessment and capacity building
4. emphasise the role of biodiversity loss in contributing to climate change and support measures that offer incentives for protecting natural forests through the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change
5. investigate the impacts of rising UK imports of biofuels on global biodiversity and take measures to minimise any inadvertent promotion of biodiversity loss.

The report also lists supplementary recommendations for the UK that will be important for particular issues and places:

- researching the effects of trade and further trade liberalisation (particularly in the agricultural sector) on international biodiversity
- encouraging developing country partners to recognise and respond to the links between biodiversity and poverty reduction and consider biodiversity in implementing the Millennium Development Goals
- ensuring that biodiversity plays a key role in the UK's Sustainable Development Dialogues with Brazil, China, India, Mexico and South Africa
- ensuring that aid for biodiversity-related capacity building in partner countries is not overlooked in the move towards budget support. The UK government should ensure that biodiversity interests get a seat at the table within its partner countries. To complement budget support approaches it will be important to support civil society, strengthen environmental assessment systems and promote environmental democracy.
- redouble efforts to reduce illegal logging and imports of illegal timber and consider measures including the mooted EU ban on illegal timber imports.

More broadly, the report's analysis of economic sectors indicates that there are several potential 'entry points' in the UK for addressing sectoral impacts on international biodiversity:

- an ecosystem-based approach that focuses on the conservation of particular ecosystems, ecoregions or distinct areas of biodiversity value overseas where UK activity may have impacts
- a sector-based approach that focuses on a particular sector or sub-sector where UK activity may have impacts
- a country-led approach that focuses on a particular country with which the UK has close economic and/or political ties and where UK activity may have impacts
- an instruments-based approach that focuses on, for example, the development of certification schemes for particular products.

If implemented together, these recommendations could go some way towards reducing the UK's impacts on international biodiversity and making progress towards the 2010 target.

#### Notes

<sup>1</sup> JNCC (2006) *Review of UK Government's Obligations and Policies on International Biodiversity*. Paper to Inter-Departmental Ministerial Group on Biodiversity (3rd draft).

<sup>2</sup> Scott Wilson Ltd (2008) *UK Impacts on International Biodiversity*. See [www.scottwilson.com/idmgbvol1](http://www.scottwilson.com/idmgbvol1) (executive summary) and [www.scottwilson.com/idmgbvol2](http://www.scottwilson.com/idmgbvol2) (main report).

<sup>3</sup> Gooding, K. (2003) *Sweet Like Chocolate? Making the coffee and cocoa trade work for biodiversity and livelihoods*. RSPB, Sandy, Bedfordshire.

<sup>4</sup> WWF (2007) *Illegal Logging: Cut it out! The UK's role in the trade in illegal timber and wood products*. See [www.wwf.org.uk/filelibrary/pdf/eufishdeals.pdf](http://www.wwf.org.uk/filelibrary/pdf/eufishdeals.pdf).

<sup>5</sup> IEEP (2002) *Fisheries Agreements with Third Countries: Is the EU moving towards sustainable development?* See [www.wwf.org.uk/filelibrary/pdf/eufishdeals.pdf](http://www.wwf.org.uk/filelibrary/pdf/eufishdeals.pdf).

<sup>6</sup> World Trade Organization (2006). *International Trade Statistics 2006*. See [www.wto.org/english/res\\_e/statis\\_e/its2006\\_e/its2006\\_e.pdf](http://www.wto.org/english/res_e/statis_e/its2006_e/its2006_e.pdf).

See also: [www.ukglobalinfluence.org](http://www.ukglobalinfluence.org)