



Report of the Webinar

World Environment Day 2020

Theme: Biodiversity – Time for Nature

Friday, June 05, 2020

Background

Since its beginning in 1974, World Environment Day has developed into a global platform for raising awareness and taking action on urgent issues from marine pollution and global warming to sustainable consumption and wildlife crime. It has been celebrated every year on 5 June; engaging governments, businesses, celebrities, and citizens to focus their efforts on a pressing environmental issue. Millions of people have taken part over the years, helping drive change in our consumption habits as well as in national and international environmental policy.

The theme for the 2020 World Environment Day is "Biodiversity – Time for Nature". Biodiversity describes the variety of life on Earth. It encompasses the 8 million species on the planet. It provides the essential infrastructure supporting life on Earth and human development. Recent events, from bushfires in Brazil, the US, and Australia to locust infestations across East Africa and, now, the emergence of COVID-19 has underscored the fact that, when we destroy biodiversity, we destroy the system that supports human life. By upsetting the delicate balance of nature, we have created ideal conditions for pathogens—including coronaviruses—to spread. We are intimately interconnected with nature. If we don't take care of nature, we can't take care of ourselves. Nature is sending us a message.

Consumer Unity & Trust Society (CUTS) observed World Environment Day by organizing a webinar using a virtual platform of Zoom on Friday, June 05, 2020. It was attended by more than 65 participants, mainly representatives of civil society organizations across the country. George Cheriyan, Director, CUTS International

moderated the webinar. The following were the speakers:

1. Pradeep S. Mehta, Secretary General, CUTS International
2. Anubha Prasad, National Coordinator, Partnership for Action on Green Economy (PAGE), UNEP, New Delhi
3. Maria Rydlund, Senior Policy Advisor (Tropical Forest), Swedish Society for Nature Conservation (SSNC), Stockholm, Sweden
4. Naomi Scott-Mearns, Sustainable Consumption Manager, Consumers International, London
5. Dr. Balakrishna Pisupathi, Chairperson, FLEDGE & Regional Vice-Chair of IUCN Commission on Education and Communication, New Delhi



Proceedings

Webinar commenced with the welcome and introduction by George Cheriyan. He explained about the World Environment Day (WED) and the importance of this year's theme: Biodiversity – Time for Nature. He highlighted that the year 2020 is a critical year for nations' commitments to preserving and restoring biodiversity because it marks the end of the United Nations Decade on Biodiversity (2011-2020).



He further added, even though WED celebration has been held annually since 1974, in 1987, the idea for rotating the centre of these activities through selecting different host countries began. This year, Colombia is hosting the WED 2020 in collaboration with Germany. Why Colombia? Because it is one of the largest “Megadiverse” nations in the world to hold 10 percent of the planet's biodiversity. George also highlighted biodiversity loss is the extinction of species worldwide and also the local reduction or loss of species in a certain habitat. He also said, biodiversity also plays an important role in dealing with the pandemic like Covid-19. To talk more on the subject, he introduced speakers and invited them one by one.

Pradeep S. Mehta, Secretary General, CUTS, delivered the opening address on “Why Biodiversity Conservation is necessary for dealing with the Pandemic”. He opined that biodiversity imbalance happens due to consumption patterns and lifestyle and shared anecdotes about the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development, also known as the Rio Summit, or the Earth Summit, which was a major United Nations conference held in Rio de Janeiro in June 1992. The Earth Summit led to the establishment of the Convention on Biological Diversity along with other conventions.



During that Earth Summit, Fidel Castro too highlighted in his speech that an important biological species – humankind – is at risk of disappearing due to the rapid and progressive elimination of its natural habitat. He had quoted then that consumer societies are chiefly responsible for this appalling environmental destruction. Pradeep also focused on the interrelation between biodiversity and pandemic. After the COVID-19 pandemic, India requires to build an economy that is more resilient, diversified, and attractive. However, achieving the ideal balance between making a living and protecting the environment is not always simple. There is a need to bring in some balance among economy, ecology, and equity.

Anubha Prasad, National Coordinator, Partnership for Action on Green Economy (PAGE), UNEP, India, spoke about the economics of ecosystems and biodiversity. She said one million species are now threatened with extinction worldwide. The main reasons for species loss are changes in land and sea use, unsustainable resource consumption, direct exploitation of organisms (like hunting or fishing), climate change, and pollution.



Human is one of the common factors for all these reasons. Biodiversity is fundamental for ecosystems and human beings. Plant and animal species depend, to some extent, on another plant or animal species for its survival through the food chain. Human society is under an urgent threat from loss of Earth's natural life-support systems which leads to loss of lower consumption of food and material goods, loss of mangrove, increasing zoonotic diseases.

She highlighted more than half of the world's total GDP is moderately or highly dependent on natural capital. The natural resource is not valued by the market and is not even counted in GDP. The economic valuation of biodiversity and ecosystem services can be a tool to express the multiple societal benefits of intact ecosystems. She

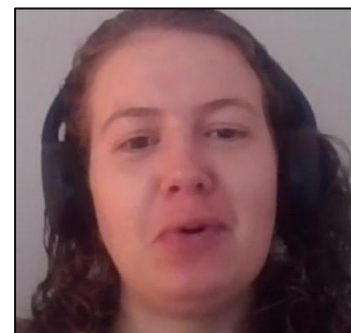
also elaborated on fertiliser subsidy, minimum support price, and tax incentive in the agriculture system. There is a need for a coupled human system, agricultural system, and natural system.

Maria Rydlund, Senior Policy Advisor (Tropical Forest), Swedish Society for Nature Conservation (SSNC), Stockholm, explained land-use change and its implication on biodiversity and humans with regard to the pandemic. She said biodiversity crisis is as big as climate change and is also very important for the economy. Biodiversity loss, however, is happening at a very high speed and will soon affect our economies because “natural systems that support lives and livelihoods are at risk of collapsing”. She also pointed out the World Economic Forum’s ‘One Trillion Trees Initiative’ to grow, restore, and conserve one trillion trees across the world by 2030. The global initiative is aimed at restoring biodiversity and help fight climate change.



She also underlined the two main drivers for loss of biodiversity, i.e., land use and overexploitation. She also highlighted that deforestation is leading to more infectious diseases in humans. The conversion of forests into agricultural plantations is a major cause of deforestation. Sustainable Development Goal 15.2 deals with sustainable management of forest and how we should address this using a holistic approach. Also, she pointed out that almost 60 percent of the mammals on Earth are livestock, 36 percent are humans and just four percent of the living mammals on the planet are wild animals. This gives us a perspective on the very dominant role that humanity now plays on Earth.

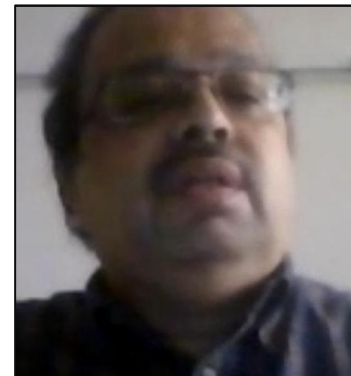
Naomi Scott-Mearns, Sustainable Consumption Manager, Consumers International, London, explained about consumers and biodiversity. She began by pointing out that today people are looking for a little inspiration on how to make better environmental choices. According to Google Trends, over the past 90 days, people have searched more “How to live a sustainable lifestyle” and this has increased by more than 4,550 percent. COVID-19 has, therefore, strengthening the idea of a sustainable lifestyle. She highlighted the importance of sustainable consumption and consumer information to make an environment-friendly decision. Eco-labelling is an effective way of informing customers about the environmental impacts of selected products and the choices they can make. However, Biodiversity literacy is a slow process and it takes time.



While highlighting sustainable activities happening around the world, she discussed the recently released UNEP report “Can I recycle this?” It is a global mapping and assessment of standards, labels, and claims on plastic packaging. The report assesses the global labelling on plastic packaging related to recycling. She also highlighted the Green Action Week – an initiative by the Swedish Society for Nature Conservation (SSNC) carried out in coordination with Consumers International. It is a global campaign to promote sustainable consumption.

She then touched upon the fact that the pandemic is a stark reminder of the vulnerability of humans and the planet in the face of global-scale threats. Unchecked damage to our environment, therefore, must be addressed and biodiversity becomes more urgent in this background. While Consumer associations are trying their best to protect consumers, there is still the need to build biodiversity after the lockdown.

Dr. Balakrishna Pisupathi, Chairperson, FLEDGE & Regional Vice-Chair of IUCN Commission on Education and Communication (for South and Southeast Asia), explained about Nature-based solutions. In 2020, everything is centred around biodiversity and nature conservation. But, despite so many works, biodiversity is losing at a great speed. Evidence on the ground suggests a very wide gap between the policy and programme intentions and reality. Land degradation and unsustainable consumption practices remain a challenge.



He also pointed out that the Covid-19 pandemic and the resulting restrictions that led to a slowdown in economies around the world have had a direct impact on our planet. The Global Footprint Network announces the Earth Overshoot Day – the day when humanity’s demand for ecological resources and services in a given year exceeds what Earth can regenerate in that year. In 2019, it was July 29 but this year Earth Overshoot Day will fall on August 22. This three weeks improvement is due the impact of pandemic all over the world which reduced the human consumption.

The two driving factors behind this change were a reduction in the consumption of the world’s forests and the decline in CO2 emissions from fossil fuels. This points out that there is a need for change in consumer behaviour patterns. The biggest worry would be how we are going to reduce the speed of consumption and we need to work in this area.

He highlighted three important things: 1. We need to change our behaviours, behavioural changes are vital 2. Biodiversity has to be a citizen's involvement and not just limited to a few experts 3. Nature provides lots of opportunities. There is a need to effectively utilise it.

Conclusion

George Cheriyan summarized the session and opened the floor for discussion. During the discussion, various queries were raised by the attendees, which were suitably answered by the panellists. Regarding a query on rebuilding after lockdown, a panellist underlined the need for a cautious approach in going forward, not with the 'business as usual' approach. The other important questions were:

1. The link between environment and health needs more attention and any policy enactment in the future cannot be just focused on economic and social development alone.
2. How can we increase awareness of environmental protection and sensitising people to environmental needs?
3. What are the implications of COVID-19 for the Environment and Sustainability?
4. How can awareness be raised about Sustainability standards and certifications?
5. What should be the five focus areas for citizens groups post Covid-19?

These questions were suitably answered by the panellists.

Panellists also emphasized that there is a lot of difference between education and experience. Unless a person experiences nature, he cannot understand the value of nature, behaviour has to change. Unfortunately, our education system doesn't provide such an experience. The issue of greenwashing was also discussed and it was observed that instruments/measures like having effective legislation, availability of reliable information by reliable institutions, promoting ecolabels, coming up with voluntary codes, etc., are effective in curbing such fake claims. More importantly, one should engage all stakeholders while addressing any of the environmental issues.

George Cheriyan summed up the webinar and proposed a vote of thanks to participants and speakers.

Video recording of the webinar: <https://bit.ly/3dpNaoC>