

Spice of life

Why we're talking about diversity.



Take your pick: A world in which we all dress the same, speak the same language, eat the same food and listen to the same music. All our natural areas are ploughed up for roads, buildings and corn plantations, and all that's left of wildlife are battery-farmed chickens and dairy cows—a world without diversity.

Or, a world that is prosperous, peaceful, healthy, colourful, vibrant and resilient—in short, a diverse and sustainable world.

There is growing recognition that diversity—biological as well as linguistic and cultural diversity—is the lifeblood of sustainable development and human welfare. Diversity is key to resilience—the ability of natural and social systems to adapt to change. Every week brings news of yet another devastating flood, landslide or hurricane while the conservation community shakes its head in dismay—protecting people from the full force of these disasters could be so simple and so cheap if we let nature act as a buffer.

Mankind has drawn on diversity throughout history, for basic needs such as food and shelter, but also in much deeper cultural and spiritual ways. People are drawn to the beauty of nature for recreation, relaxation and inspiration. In recent years, we're seeing diversity in increasingly practical terms—as a source of cures to diseases and helping us adapt to changing conditions such as global warming.

But we are rapidly losing diversity, despite all the warnings. We know that ancient civilizations collapsed because of environmental damage. We understand how monocultures contributed to agricultural disasters like the Irish Potato Famine. Excessive development and consumerism are destroying our natural systems, standardizing landscapes and eroding cultures. Stress,

obesity and community breakdown are increasing rapidly. We know current growth rates are not sustainable and are not leading to the life we want. The world knows it has to change and has the means to do so. So what's stopping us?

In the western world, we have become so far removed from biodiversity that we've forgotten how much we use it in our daily lives and how seriously we're affected by its loss. When we eat a wild salmon steak, we rarely think of the species that the salmon depends on to thrive. When we fell a mature tree to make a table, we lose a host of lichens and invertebrates; part of an entire web of life is lost. Yet people in the developing world know exactly what's at stake as they set out each morning to gather fuelwood from a dwindling forest, travel ever further to hunt animals for food and collect medicinal plants to treat their sick children.

While many believe we're on a fast-track to self-destruction, many others refute this apocalyptic world vision. They believe the battle is alive in keeping the world's myriad landscapes, species, cultures and languages intact. They say the mainstream media is largely to blame for peddling feelings of doom and gloom and, that with awareness of environmental and social issues at an all-time high, the tide is finally turning. The world is connecting as never before. As Paul Hawken puts it in *Blessed Unrest*, the combined environmental and social movements have, like nature itself, organized from the bottom up, in every city, town and culture, from multi-million dollar NGOs to single-person causes, and are expressing people's needs worldwide. We are starting to reconnect with our environment and with each other.

But this issue isn't dedicated to *how* we save diversity, it's about *why* we need it in the

first place. Conservationists feel they are banging their heads against a wall because the rest of the world doesn't seem to be listening. Or, more likely, we're not doing very well at getting the message across. That's why, in the run-up to the IUCN Barcelona Congress with its theme, *A Diverse and Sustainable World*, we're going back to basics, asking the question: How can we expect to tackle poverty and climate change if we don't look after the natural wealth of animals, plants, microorganisms and ecosystems that make our planet inhabitable? By making the scientific, social, economic and cultural case for keeping diversity, the articles highlight just how much it supports nearly every aspect of human life. But the arguments for conserving biological and cultural diversity should not be all utilitarian. For many people, we should save it simply because it exists, and has done for millennia.

If we don't hurry up and convince governments, politicians, business leaders and the public why we need diversity and how urgent it is that they mobilize to save it, the world will move on and our fate will be sealed. We need to do better at showing how much progress has been made and how much more can be done. It's time to get our collective act together. In Barcelona the world will be watching us. ■

What is?

Biodiversity: the variability among living organisms from all sources including terrestrial, marine and other aquatic ecosystems, and the ecological complexes of which they are part; this includes diversity within species, between species, and of ecosystems.

An **ecosystem:** a community of plants, animals and smaller organisms that live, feed, reproduce and interact in the same area or environment.

An **ecosystem service** is a service people obtain from the environment. Ecosystem services are the transformation of natural assets (soil, plants and animals, air and water) into things that we value. They

can be viewed as **provisioning** such as food and water; **regulating**, for example, flood and disease control; cultural such as spiritual, recreational, and cultural benefits; or **supporting** like nutrient cycling that maintain the conditions for life on Earth. Ecosystem 'goods' include food, medicinal plants, construction materials, tourism and recreation, and wild genes for domestic plants and animals.