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Major biodiversity initiative needs support

An effort aimed at protecting ecosystems, modelled on the agency battling climate change, will need protecting from powerful enemies, warns **Ehsan Masood**.

There was something different about Rajendra Pachauri, chairman of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC), when he rose to address a major conference on biodiversity in Bonn, Germany, late last month. His signature green tie was absent; a red alternative hung in its place.

Red for danger, Pachauri said, to acknowledge the peril facing ecosystems and much of the natural world. Danger, he added — pausing for effect — was not a word he could use in the highly politicized context of climate change. Researchers who investigate and log Earth's diminishing biodiversity, he was hinting, have yet to encounter the kind of distortions and politicization that are a regular feature for those who work on global warming. But for how long will that continue?

The Bonn conference was the third plenary meeting for a major initiative that explicitly aims to mimic the workings and impact of the IPCC, including eventually drawing up laws that would put a scientific brake on rampant development. As such, it is likely to make powerful enemies. One of its first reports will assess the state of pollinating insects. Others will explore the highly charged question of how to value ecology. The red tie is a sign of things to come.

The initiative — the Intergovernmental Platform on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services (IPBES) — was set up three years ago, although the idea was first mooted in the 1990s. The mood in Bonn was upbeat as delegates agreed its annual US\$9-million budget and put the seal on a busy programme of work for the next five years.

Recent controversies over the IPCC — claimed errors in its reports and debate about whether the panel should even continue in its present form — might seem to make the organization a dubious role model. Does the world really need another lumbering process that involves hundreds of scientists, who anyway need to have their final work signed off by representatives of politicians?

Such a view underestimates the IPCC's impact in one crucial area: to provide political impetus and an evidence-backed mandate for international legislation. The agency's second assessment report, the one confirming a human fingerprint on climate, overcame political dissent at the time and led directly to the 1997 Kyoto Protocol, which remains the only agreement that legally binds states to reduce their greenhouse-gas emissions. The protocol is unfashionable in some climate-policy circles now, but the IPCC remains the model to drive a majority of the world's governments to change laws in response to scientific findings.

The founders of the IPBES want something equivalent to protect biodiversity. The need is urgent. The existing United Nations biodiversity

convention, an international agreement in which member countries promise to protect, sustainably use and share the benefits of biodiversity, lacks teeth and has made little impact on slowing biodiversity loss. One-eighth of birds, one-quarter of mammals and one-third of amphibians are understood to be facing the threat of extinction, IPBES chair Zakri Abdul Hamid told the conference. The present consensus is that the rate of extinction is somewhere between 100 and 1,000 times the pre-industrial background rate.

The first global report from the new biodiversity panel — similar to the periodic landmark assessment reports from the IPCC — is due in 2019. The initial shots in the conflict that could follow have already been fired. The United States so far finds itself unable to pay for its scientists to contribute; most of the money for the exercise, moreover,

is coming from European countries. Not coincidentally, the United States has still to ratify the biodiversity convention, which many lawmakers, Republicans in particular, regard as anti-growth.

Still, insiders expect the US government and its national institutions to play a bigger part in the coming months. One of its tasks, along with Europe and Latin America, will be to protect the role that conservation and industry groups have in the IPBES as observers. Some countries, notably China, seem to want to restrict this.

There is one major difference from the IPCC. Each IPBES assessment must include reference citations to indigenous knowledge, and every review panel must include experts in this. That is partly a concession to some developing countries that, for many years, resisted the idea of the IPBES, fearing that it would be based, like most

IPCC reports, on studies in peer-reviewed European-language journals. It also reflects the fact that, by definition, most of the planet's remaining biodiversity is in developing nations.

In the science ministries of powerhouse nations, the study of indigenous knowledge is viewed as soft, flaky even. Compared with fields such as plant genetics, it is also less likely to be recognized by many leading science academies. Already, some representatives from Europe have complained that they cannot find suitably qualified individuals to conduct or review assessments.

Anticipating this, the IPBES has set aside funding to train and identify suitable experts, especially from developing countries. IPBES leaders should cast the net further, and draw in more experts from the social sciences and others — through learned societies of humanities scholars, for example. Biodiversity needs all the help it can get. ■

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