Developing targets that work for Biodiversity and climate change

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Abstract:

It is necessary to learn from past targets why the Aichi targets failed to achieve their goals. Aligning carbon and biodiversity targets can provide more benefits, maintain vital ecosystem service provision, and maintain biodiversity whilst facilitating climate targets. Mainstreaming biodiversity and aligning climate and biodiversity action are essential if we are going to meet future targets and have a more secure future.

Key words:

Post-2020 Global Biodiversity Framework, biodiversity targets, climate change targets, synergizing action, mainstreaming sustainable development

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2021 is known as a super year for biodiversity, a year of meetings of global and lasting significance to the future of this planet. In the CBD COP the post-2020 global biodiversity framework is meant to be developed. This framework is meant to set targets to "bend the curve of global biodiversity loss", but to do this it must first understand why the predecessor to the Post-2020 global biodiversity framework (GBF) –the Aichi targets failed to achieve their goals.

Learning from past targets

The Aichi targets aimed to prevent global biodiversity loss through set goals which ran over a "decade of biodiversity" from 2010-2020. Yet whilst these goals were ambitious, many of them were not measurable, and many did not include the steps necessary to be effective, setting a target with no path of how to achieve it. Whilst none of the Aichi targets was completely filled, understanding why these targets failed to gain traction is critical the GBF garnering greater success. Firstly commitment; Aichi was not negotiated by senior political figures and the will to implement was very variable. Secondly; practicality, as few targets were integrated with national legislation they were not actionable, and in addition many did not target the mechanisms for global biodiversity loss such as why deforestation is occurring. As a consequence whilst targets were all "equal" this fails to acknowledge that biodiversity is not evenly distributed, with developing Nations hosting a disproportionate amount of global biodiversity. Yet, the production of commodities for developed Nations is an enduring issue, and one that drives loss of habitat across the most diverse parts of the planet. Tackling these issues will require mechanistic targets that ensure that supply chains and commodities are produced sustainably, and countries are responsible for their imported footprint. Hence in the GBF the term

“common but differentiated responsibilities” acknowledges that how countries act on targets must be representative of the diversity they have and the pressures within that country. To that end a third reason the Aichi targets were largely not successful is that they were not measurable, and achieving targets with no milestones to measure success and ensure that the trajectory is being followed is a major reason why achieving most targets was not possible. To counteract this the GBF aims to set SMART targets (specific, ambitious, measurable, realistic, timebound) to ensure that these targets both meet the drivers of biodiversity loss, can be measured and can be achieved.

Finally, funding was not available for many countries even for the development of the National Biodiversity Strategic Action Plans, many of which were drafted late or never completed, and few of which will be entirely successful. Developing means to support these developing Nations through funds, technology and capacity will be essential to developing the biodiversity baselines needed to develop effective and meaningful targets, and funds like the new Kunming Biodiversity fund can help Nations develop, measure and achieve new targets. It is important not to understate the importance of these targets, from the food we eat to the clothes we wear and the water we drink, we rely on biodiversity. Furthermore mismanaging the environment has unintended consequences, from local-level landslides from a loss of native habitats, to the risk of zoonotic disease outbreaks from mismanaging environments and creating novel interactions between stressed wildlife, domestic animals and humans. Biodiversity is not an optional extra, it is our life-support mechanism, and ensuring we have a healthy environment is essential for our own welfare as well as that of future generations.

Synergizing action

Biodiversity is still seen as optional extra, and whilst a climate-change COP will attract tens of thousands of delegates, and major funding, biodiversity continues to remain overlooked with only thousands of delegates. Yet climate change targets without ecological considerations can have unintended consequences, the EU biofuels initiative increased deforestation both within and outside Europe, REDD has fueled the growth of plantations at the expense of forest across much of the planet, and habitats continue to be destroyed in the name of trees such as the Billion tree tsunami in Pakistan (where they aim to plant a billion trees, largely Eucalyptus, which may be vulnerable to climate and disease) or the Great green wall in the Sahel, which like its namesake (the great green wall of Poplars in China) is expensive, is likely to fail (in China disease and drought undid the tree planting efforts) and destroys native ecosystems. Functional ecosystems do more for climate change, and prioritizing adding trees to areas they do not belong (whether that be a savannah, desert or simply somewhere they are not native) is unlikely to be a sustainable way to counteract climate change. Furthermore, functional ecosystems sequester more carbon, including in the soils, and the continued loss of forests such as the biodiverse peatland forests of Indonesia will produce more carbon dioxide than these new endeavors will prevent. These inappropriate targets should be seen as little more than political signals, which fail to tackle or acknowledge that better and more integrated targets are needed for both climate and for biodiversity.

Yet, we have an opportunity. Whilst focusing on climate change alone would prioritize the large extants of intact "wilderness" across temperate and boreal regions, aligning carbon and biodiversity targets can provide more benefits, maintain vital ecosystem service provision, and maintain biodiversity whilst facilitating climate targets. Such approaches need to be mechanized and mainstreamed so that economically viable ways to protect key areas and sustainably develop elsewhere are possible. Such targets also fit with approaches such as China's ecological Conservation redline policy, and thus provide economically viable targets that serve us as well as protecting biodiversity.

Mainstreaming sustainable development

Until sustainability is mainstreamed, it will not be effective, yet unsustainable actions have not only ecological consequences but also threatens our food security and our safety. Mainstreaming biodiversity and aligning climate and biodiversity action are essential if we are going to meet future targets and have a more secure future. To do this will take everyone, it requires a holistic understanding of how we interact with the planet, how we use resources, and how we could do better. In terms of food production, taking less (less waste), eating better, eating greener are crucial, this means ensuring that as only conserving intact ecosystems is insufficient for biodiversity we need whole system efforts to maintain biodiversity. From green and diverse fieldmargins, to more organic and low chemical spray agriculture, and reducing meat consumption we can substantially reduce the pressure on land, and on native ecosystems for food commodities; and with lower fat, and lower chemical intakes also benefits for human health. Buying of clothes and other commodities should also aim for sustainability, durability and not a disposable economy that continues to require more resources, and supply chains must be tracked for sustainability. In development, engagement processes, green finance and loans contingent on independent environmental impact assessments are necessary. Ultimately we need to think about how individuals make choices, and facilitate greener choices through engagement, education and empowerment to act. Reaching a new greener future will take us all, and requires us to consider how we live, and for every part of society, from government, business to citizens to make choices which will provide a more sustainable and secure future for them, their children, and the planet.