


CAN WE HEED ALARMS ON BIODIVERSITY?

After a half-century of warnings, the loss of species is accelerating. We must summon the will and accelerate efforts to save our life-support system.

 by Zakri Abdul Hamid



Zakri Abdul Hamid, a 1996 TWAS fellow, is science adviser to the Prime Minister of Malaysia and a member of the UN Secretary-General's Scientific Advisory Board. He is the founding chair of the UN Intergovernmental Science-Policy Platform on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services (IPBES). He sits on the Global Leadership Council of the Sustainable Development Solutions Network and is the 2014 co-recipient of the Zayed International Prize for the Environment.

At the World Summit on Sustainable Development in 2002, the international community pledged to halt the loss of plant and animal diversity within eight years. That unmet target was replaced in 2010 with another, set in Aichi, Japan: to halt biodiversity loss by 2020. Will the goal be achieved this time? With just five years to go, optimism is difficult.

Around the planet, fish, animals, insects and even plants are moving out of their normal home ranges in an unprecedented response to changing climatic conditions and the loss of habitat because of human activities. Not all can move, or move fast enough. Species extinctions are occurring at a rate 100 times or even 1,000 times greater than the natural rate.

This problem directly threatens humanity's health, prosperity, food, fuel, clean water and air. Indeed, our very existence depends on the incredible diversity of other living things. We are destroying our life-support system.

Public awareness at both local and global levels is heightened, and modest progress has been achieved in several areas.

Most sorely needed are talent and expertise to help articulate the need for and how to halt biodiversity loss. Mobilising that expertise from disparate organisations – academies of science, scientific and non-governmental organisations, to name a few – while integrating indigenous and local knowledge needs to be concerted and focused. And a mechanism is needed to link that expertise with policymaking.

Such were the considerations behind the creation of the Intergovernmental Panel on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services (IPBES).

It took years for governments to give the green light to IPBES and approve its first work programme in 2013, but we are now well into its implementation.

IPBES is mandated to build national capacity for biodiversity assessments, to make use of indigenous and other forms of knowledge beyond Western science, and to catalyse information and knowledge to fill outstanding gaps.



These efforts of the scientific and academic communities, including those in the social sciences and humanities, have never been more urgently needed, especially in the developing world.

Environmentalists first sounded the alarm bells on the biodiversity issue 50 years ago. We have not reacted with appropriate urgency. Meaningful steps are now being taken, but we should all show support for accelerating protective efforts at every level – from the smallest communities to capitals of every nation. ■