

Biodiversity: Green Gold or Sacred Teacher?

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Global corporations are using their instruments of world-wide governance, such as the World Trade Organisation, to facilitate their access to biodiversity resources. This directly influences the livelihoods of indigenous peoples and the biodiversity upon which they depend. This article looks at the origins and implications of these developments and proposes activities to counteract this tendency.

We are living through an unprecedented moment in the Earth's history. Never before has one species of the planet developed mechanisms which actively destroy the life-support systems of the Earth, to the point that it is likely to annihilate the continuity of life as we know it today. Over the last few hundred years, a fraction of time in the Earth's history, these destructive processes have reached global proportions.

The main instigator of such devastation is the western industrial worldview, which sees nature as a resource to be dominated and used to satisfy human needs. Over the last few decades global corporations have consolidated their control over nature and society to the point where they are more powerful than most nation states. They have forced governments to participate in the World Trade Organisation, also called 'the new Global Government'.

Through the WTO the corporations are able to further concentrate their control, not only over minerals, fossil fuels and genetic material of living organisms, but also over scientific research, public institutions and indigenous knowledge. The slogan 'free trade is good for you' has penetrated deep into the psyche of individuals and societies around the world. Even in the most isolated parts of the planet communities are tempted with the promise of corporate wonder-products, like 'super-seeds to feed the world', if they hand over their biodiversity and knowledge to corporate control.

New green gold

New developments in genetic engineering have been monopolised by corporations to develop instruments of draconian control, such as the terminator technology that prevents seeds from germinating. This technology forces farmers to buy new seed packages each year. These new possibilities of mixing and matching genes have turned commercial attention to biodiversity, 'the new green gold'.

An example is Shaman Pharmaceuticals, a bio-science company based in the

US that has found a use for indigenous people: by using Shamans, the local healers, the time needed to identify commercially interesting plant properties is significantly decreased. Thus a new era of colonialism is introduced where both living organisms and indigenous knowledge are reduced to saleable commodities, controlled by western commerce. A rationale is developed which asserts that this is the natural course of progress for the benefit of mankind.

The philosopher Brian Swimme considers that western society has developed powerful tools through its reductionist world view, but it has not evolved the emotional maturity to use these tools with discrimination and compassion. The Kogi indigenous people from Colombia see it this way: "The white man is like a younger brother who rebels against the laws of life, without realising the consequences of his actions".

The whole movement of western development creates uniformity, standardisation and mono-cultures in nature and in society. However, nature abhors uniformity: it produces not only species diversity but also individual diversity. Human communities throughout history have contributed to this through the free exchange of knowledge and biological specimens. Property and individual rights therefore encroach on what are essentially communal knowledge processes, blocking the very capacity for their generation.

How to respond?

Essentially, there are two schools of thought responding to global trade interests in biodiversity and local knowledge. The one believes that the commercialisation of living organisms and knowledge is an inevitable trend. This pragmatic viewpoint aims at extending intellectual property rights to communities and getting them a financial deal in exchange or benefit sharing. This is thought to be a just and fair demand under the circumstances, but is proving difficult to achieve.

The other school sees this trend of commercialisation of living organisms and

knowledge as a self-destructive, one-dimensional reality. Further dissection of nature, knowledge and culture will lead to greater disintegration of biological and cultural systems and human potential.

At such times of deep crisis in the human community, the archetypal hero myth in all cultures calls upon the more adventurous members to go beyond the status quo, with imagination and courage, to search for new insights. Ailton Krenak, an inspired leader of the Krenak people in Brazil sees it this way: "We need to build 'affectionate alliances' amongst people from different cultures and perspectives, to fertilise imaginative responses to this challenge".

Say it as it is

When fundamental life principles are being violated, there is no place for negotiating a sweeter touch to the poison. We must bear witness to what we see so that others can be warned. Gandhi demonstrated the moral strength necessary to withdraw support from the offending systems of violence and control and to give attention to those practices that enhance diversity, democracy and self-reliance.

Recently, the genetic engineering issue has re-awoken this spirit and given strength to many civil movements, across the world. They have naturally combined their rejection of genetic engineering, with support for non-corporate, locally controlled indigenous and ecological alternatives.

Intercultural alliances

A concerted inter-cultural effort is needed to understand the dynamics of diversity and complex systems, so that we can better defend them. Examples of such an inter-cultural commitment are the COAMA Programme and the Tropenbos projects in Colombia. These projects have helped to transform the negative historical relationship between indigenous and occidental traditions, thus creating the possibility for mutual respect, reciprocity and innovation. Suggestions for concrete actions for these alliances will now be described.

Areas of protection

Corporate exploitation is moving rapidly into the most isolated areas of the planet. Civil groups and local and indigenous communities need to redouble their commitment and capacity to protect areas of major cultural and biological importance. The aim of this strategy is to ensure that some areas on the planet are able to follow their own evolutionary path, as reference points at least, for the future.

It is essential, however, to insist that these areas are protected on their own terms and not distorted or compromised by commercial interests. These are non-negotiable areas, protected for future generations. Examples exist in Colombia where broad areas of cultural and ecological significance have been demarcated for protection. The details of 'management' and 'development' are left to the communities to evolve at their own rhythm and according to their own cultural criteria and practices.

A new jurisprudence

The World Trade Organisation is in the process of creating global rules for all countries. In the area of biodiversity and knowledge, the Trade Related Intellectual Property Rights Agreement (TRIPs) is an attempt to force countries to allow commercial monopoly control of plant varieties.

Objections to the injustice of excluding communities and countries from developing their own biodiversity resulted in the World Intellectual Property Organisation (WIPO). This programme wants to extend intellectual property rights to communities. Some projects, such as the People's Biodiversity Register programme in India, support this strategy as providing the best deal under the inevitable circumstances.

But the few studies that have been done show that, simply from an economic point of view, communities and poor countries would never be able to participate in this game. The cost of the necessary scientific research and legal support required to claim patents, and later on to maintain and defend them, are prohibitive. In other words, in a match between two grossly unequal worlds, it is an illusion to believe that communities or even developing countries can benefit.

Instead, our energies should be channelled into developing a new jurisprudence that genuinely protects the dynamic collective processes that generate human knowledge. A jurisprudence that truly reflects the laws that govern life on the planet, rather than the interests of the

powerful. There are signs of this world-view emerging in law in South America and in Africa, where the multicultural, collective nature of societies and their relationship to biodiversity are being protected in jurisprudence (OAU Legislation). If the human species is to survive in the future, with the species which it has not annihilated and upon which it depends, this project is urgent.

Sacred teaching

The anthropologist Jeremy Narby, in his ground-breaking work 'The Cosmic Ser-



Photo: Gaia Foundation

pent' argues that Shamans through hallucinogens, are able to see the molecular structure of living organisms. The role of the Shaman is to maintain a dialogue with other species and elements of nature in order to help keep the balance between the individual, the society, and the environment. For this they are trained to move easily between different levels of perception.

Speaking from this worldview, one of the Huitoto shamans of the Colombian Amazon, Oscar Ramon, reflects on the idea of intellectual property rights:

"It will never work. Plants have a spirit of their own. They can never be owned and controlled. People who try to do this will get burnt. It will leave confusion and unhappiness, and it will never work. We must not let this interfere with our tradition of sharing knowledge freely. That is

the condition; knowledge has to be shared, otherwise you get sick."

The confusion already created by intellectual property rights is undermining research and development, even in the competitive occidental world. Researchers guard their findings and do not dare to publish, in case someone 'steals' their ideas. Indigenous and local communities are potentially set to battle between themselves for monopoly rights on common crops and cures.

This is no way to generate knowledge and understanding as the spontaneous joy of sharing discoveries and innovations are choked by the spirit of greed. Jeremy Narby opens up new dimensions of intercultural exploration, including the dialogue with the rest of nature (Narby, 1998). But this requires, however, a genuinely free spirit of exploration and exchange, from which we experience the Earth's reality: to violate any life is to violate ourselves.

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