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CIRCLE OF LIFE: ON ECONOMIC GROWTH FACTORING ECOSYSTEM

Relevant for: Environment | Topic: Biodiversity, Ecology, and Wildlife Related Issues

The overwhelming message from the global assessment report of the Intergovernmental Science-Policy Platform on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services (IPBES) is that human beings have so rapaciously exploited nature, and that species belonging to a quarter of all studied animal and plant groups on earth are gravely threatened. If the world continues to pursue the current model of economic growth without factoring in environmental costs, one million species could go extinct, many in a matter of decades. Catastrophic erosion of ecosystems is being driven by unsustainable use of land and water, direct harvesting of species, climate change, pollution and release of alien plants and animals in new habitats. While ecosystem losses have accelerated over the past five decades universally, there is particular worry over the devastation occurring in tropical areas, which are endowed with greater biodiversity than others; only a quarter of the land worldwide now retains its ecological and evolutionary integrity, largely spared of human impact. Nature provides ecosystem services, but these are often not included in productivity estimates: they are vital for food production, for clean air and water, provision of fuel for millions, absorption of carbon in the atmosphere, and climate moderation. The result of such skewed policies, as the IPBES estimates, is that the global rate of species extinction is at least tens to hundreds of times higher today than the average rate over the past 10 million years, and it is accelerating alarmingly.

Ecological economists have for years pointed to the extreme harm that humanity as a whole is courting by modifying terrestrial, marine and freshwater ecosystems to suit immediate needs, such as raising agricultural and food output and extracting materials that aid ever-increasing consumption. Expanding agriculture by cutting down forests has raised food volumes, and mining feeds many industries, but these have severely affected other functions such as water availability, pollination, maintenance of wild variants of domesticated plants and climate regulation. Losses from pollution are usually not factored into claims of economic progress made by countries, but as the IPBES assessment points out, marine plastic pollution has increased tenfold since 1980, affecting at least 267 species, including 86% of marine turtles, 44% of seabirds and 43% of marine mammals. At the same time, about 9% of 6,190 domesticated breeds of mammals used for food and agriculture had gone extinct by 2016, and another 1,000 may disappear permanently. Viewed against a shrinking base of wild varieties of farmed plants and animals, all countries have cause for alarm. They are rapidly emptying their genetic resource kit. Reversing course is a dire necessity to stave off disaster. This can be done by incorporating biodiversity impacts into all economic activity, recognising that irreparably breaking the web of life will impoverish and endanger people everywhere.

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