

# QUAKER ECO-BULLETIN

Information and Action Addressing Public Policy for an Ecologically Sustainable World

Volume 1, Number 4

November/December 2001

## Biodiversity Crisis: Raising Awareness

by Jose Lopez

“Death is one thing; an end to birth is something else” Michael Soule

Tragically these words are becoming more than rhetoric, as increasing evidence points to the fact that the world is in the midst of another mass extinction which rivals past extinction events (the last one was near the end of the Cretaceous period, ca. 70 million years ago) that wiped out vast numbers of species and organisms. The relatively rapid speed of this extinction event is of the greatest concern. And the contributing factors (e.g. deforestation, pollution, etc.) can be traced back to human activities within the past few hundred years. This article makes the case that the preservation of biological diversity (biodiversity) is vital to the future of life on earth.

### The Problem

The evidence is mounting that biodiversity, the variety of life and organisms in our natural habitats, is decreasing due to habitat loss and overexploitation of our basic life support systems. This past summer, the National Center for Ecological Analysis and Synthesis (NCEAS) reported on the extinction of vital fish species and called for a self-preserving moratorium on fishing in order to save what few individuals are left of several species and allow the populations to recover (see sidebar). The natural world is nothing like what our ancestors experienced only 2-3 generations ago, due to the rapid and

relentless spread of human civilization and technology. Before the industrial revolution and the colonization of the Americas and the Spice islands, these places were rich with diverse and abundant species. Seas teemed with millions of sea turtles and whales, wild salmon and oysters, and manatees. Skies were dark with flocks of carrier pigeons and Carolina parrots. And the land was full of buffalo and wildebeest. We in the 21<sup>st</sup> century do not know what we are missing, though we know we are about to lose the Siberian tiger, rhinoceros, cod and grouper to the incessant expansion of human “progress”.

Variation within and between species is fundamental to the processes of evolution. To destroy biodiversity at our current pace and scale is to jeopardize the continued unfolding of life itself. We must stem the current tide of species’ destruction due to human activity, which is often spurred on by ignorance, greed, and reckless disregard for the future. By ignoring the current biodiversity crisis, we are accomplices not only to the bulldozing, pollution and homogenization of our immediate surroundings into strip malls and cement parking lot, but to the undermining of life as we know it for future generations. Little significant public protection for biodiversity has been enacted in recent years. Though many NGO’s continue to press the issue, the US government remains a bystander by refusing to ratify the RIO Convention

A two-year study of human impacts on oceans over time has revealed past evidence of seas teeming with large animals as well as abundance of oysters and shellfish so vast they posed hazards to navigation and that historical overkill of marine life has triggered ecological collapses. Removal of key predators and entire layers of the food chain set off chains of events leading to ecological instability. Examples include:

- In Chesapeake Bay, overfishing of oysters (which are important as natural water filters) has upset the ecosystem to the point that grey whales, dolphins, manatees, river otters, sea turtles, alligators, giant sturgeon, and hammerhead sharks, once in abundance, have virtually been eliminated.

- Coral reefs and the millions of species they support are being smothered by algal growth resulting from overfishing of large fish.
  - Overkill of the green sea turtle in Florida Bay has led to die-off of turtlegrass beds which has undermined the habitat’s ability to serve as a food source, breeding ground, and erosion protector.
  - Depletion of the great whales by humans has caused the collapse of sea lion and sea otter populations in the Bering Sea as killer whales were forced to switch prey.
- Extinctions make ecological systems more vulnerable to other natural and human disturbances. Various forms of human disturbance have increased and accelerated.

— Science, July 27, 2001

on Biodiversity of 1992. Powerful corporate and economic agendas along with public apathy have obstructed attempts to push back the destruction of habitats and their species everywhere.

### **Biodiversity as an Issue for Friends**

Biodiversity and its imminent losses are factors in the overall aesthetic and spiritual quality of our lives. Meditation, contemplation and connection with inward Light are all practices that are supported and enhanced by contact with a natural world filled with beauty, complexity, variety and wonder. The Everglades, Okefenokee swamp, California redwood forests, Yosemite mountain ranges, tropical coral reefs and countless other places less well known and closer to home are irreplaceable sources of beauty, peace, and strength.

As Friends we often go deep within ourselves to find the Light. The physical and metabolic power for our own inherent Light stems from the earth and its fruits that feed and nourish us. Friends must protect biodiversity and preserve all potential sources of Light.

To assist us in this work, an effort is underway to raise awareness, expand the knowledge base, and inform policy-makers. DIVERSITAS, an international program for the study of biodiversity co-sponsored by six international scientific organizations, has launched the International Biodiversity Observation Year (IBOY) 2001- 2002.

Following the model of the International Geophysical Year (IGY) of 1957-1958, IBOY seeks to advance the understanding of biological diversity and convey the importance of biodiversity to societal welfare. As the IGY led to political gain, such as the Antarctic Treaty, IBOY could inform public policy and lead to international agreements and perhaps the U.S. ratification of the Rio Convention on Biodiversity of 1992.

#### **What Can Friends Do?**

- 1) Be aware of the biodiversity in your local environment. Learn as much as you can so that you can preserve it.
- 2) Lobby for U.S. ratification of the Convention on Biodiversity.
- 3) Support measures to protect biodiversity – declaration and management of protected areas, pollution controls, proper environmental management.
- 4) Challenge public officials to be aware of biodiversity locally and globally.

#### **For More Information:**

- 1) BIONET - <http://www.bionet-us.org/>
- 2) Virtual School of Biodiversity - <http://vsb.nott.ac.uk/vsb/Virtschl7.htm>
- 3) Environmental News Network - <http://www.enn.com/>
- 4) Molecular Studies of Marine Biodiversity (MSMB) - <http://www.nrel.colostate.edu/IBOY>
- 5) *The Diversity of Life* by E. O Wilson (Belknap Press)
- 6) *From DNA to Diversity: Molecular Genetics and the Evolution of Animal Design* by Sean B. Carroll, Jennifer K. Grenier, Scott D. Weatherbee (2001).

**Quaker Eco-Bulletin (QEB)** is published bi-monthly as an insert in *BeFriending Creation* by **Quaker Eco-Witness**, a project of **Friends Committee on Unity with Nature (FCUN)**.

**Quaker Eco-Witness (QEW)** promotes US government and corporate policies to help restore and protect Earth's biological integrity. It works within and through the Religious Society of Friends for policies that enable human communities to relate in mutually enhancing ways to the ecosystems of which they are a part. This witness seeks to be guided by the Spirit and grounded in reverence for Earth's communities of life as God's creation.

QEB's purpose is to inform the **QEW** network to advance Friends' witness on government and corporate policy as it relates to the ecosystems that sustains us. Each issue is an article about timely legislative or corporate policy issues affecting our society's relationship to the earth.

Friends are invited to contact us about writing an article for *QEB*. Submissions are subject to editing and should:

- Provide background information that reflects the complexity of the issue and is respectful toward other points of view.
- Explain why the issue is a Friends' concern.
- Describe the positions of other faith-based and secular environmental groups on the issue.
- Relate the issue to legislation or corporate policy.
- Provide sources for additional information.

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Projects of Quaker Eco-Witness, such as *QEB*, are funded by contributions to QEW.

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