

AUTUMN 2021

COP15: a last chance to save biodiversity?

EVENT REPORT



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Co-funded by the
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Saving the world's biodiversity is a job for all of us. It is clear governments need to set aside differences to ensure effective international action, but the scale of the task requires a mobilisation of all stakeholders, bringing in business, civil society, farmers and citizens around the world.

That was among the key messages coming out of 'COP15: a last chance to save biodiversity?', a debate organised on 28 October 2021 as part of Friends of Europe's Europe-China Dialogue.

Bringing in experts from Europe, Asia and beyond, the online event looked at what Europe and Asia can do together to protect and promote global biodiversity in the context of the United Nations Biodiversity Conference (COP15). Potentially the decade's most important biodiversity debate, COP15 is due to resume next April in Kunming, China, after a first online session in October.

"We are living in a world where species are dying out," cautioned **Zhang Ming**, Ambassador of the People's Republic of China to the European Union. "Biodiversity is at risk; the ecosystem is degrading. This all poses a huge risk to our survival and development as human society."

The ambassador outlined China's efforts to advance conservation domestically and internationally, ranging from President Xi Jinping's 12 October announcement of a 1.5bn yuan (€220mn) fund to assist biodiversity protection in developing countries and the country's massive investment in clean energy, to the support offered by local people and officials to a herd of wild elephants on a much-publicised recent trek through Yunnan province.

"China enjoys a unique ecosystem and a rich biodiversity, that's why [the] biodiversity conservation carries a big weight in traditional Chinese culture," he noted.

Zhang Ming underscored the importance of EU-China cooperation as part of the global struggle to prevent biodiversity loss, hold back climate change and protect against public health threats. He urged nations to put aside differences and unite behind the fight to save nature.

"For the international community to combat these challenges, I believe sincere cooperation is indispensable," he added. If the world is "possessed by mistrust, decoupling, sanctions, blockades and a zero-sum game ... treating partners as rivals, it will be practically impossible to imagine us winning this battle."

As world leaders prepared to head to Glasgow for another UN Climate Change Conference of the Parties (COP26), speakers underscored the importance of international unity in the wider fight to preserve the planet. Without effective action on climate change, participants warned, species loss will continue unabated.

"Conservation itself won't do the trick," cautioned **Hien Nguyen**, National Coordinator of the Mangroves for Future Initiative (MFF) with the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN) in Vietnam. "No matter how hard conservationists try to turn around the extinction rate or to reduce the number of endangered species, or how many protected areas are designated, the extinction drama will intensify if the temperature keeps rising."

Habitat protection is also a key tool in the struggle against climate change, with forests and ocean plant life key to carbon capture. Looking ahead to the Glasgow COP26, moderator **Dharmendra Kanani**, Director, Asia, Peace, Security and Defence, Digital and Chief Spokesperson at Friends of Europe, underlined the linkage between preserving biodiversity and climate change.

“Many people do not understand the impact of biodiversity, it’s the central component in our ecology ... in our fight, our war against climate change, biodiversity forms an asset and it’s a key facet of what we do,” he said. “The two should be related ... as we move forward.”

Returning to the topic of COP15, **Marie Stenseke**, Co-Chair of the Multidisciplinary Expert Panel of the Intergovernmental Science-Policy Platform on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services (IPBES), said the opening, online sessions in October laid a “good foundation”, but much work remains to be done.

She laid out three priorities for the international community in defending biodiversity: building a stronger rule-of-law framework that enforces environmental protection and removes economic incentives for habitat destruction; a revision of economic development measurement that moves beyond the limitations of gross domestic product (GDP) growth; and the expansion of cross-sectoral approaches to mainstream biodiversity protection into all areas.

“Transformative changes are necessary ... for biodiversity. We are not doing enough,” Stenseke said. “To be inclusive and participatory ... is the necessary approach in order to be successful, to halt the loss of biodiversity and reverse the trends. It demands actions from all of us.”

Among the significant barriers to progress are vested public and private interests taking advantage of weak institutions and enforcement tools to destroy habitats for short-term economic gain. “That is a real problem all over the globe,” Stenseke said. International agreements can help, but it is essential to ensure that environmental laws are enforced.

Trade mechanisms can help with that enforcement, asserted **Pascal Delisle**, Head of the Economic, Environment and Development Affairs Section at the Delegation of the European Union to the United Nations in Geneva.

“If we don’t change the economics, we won’t get very far and economics are about regulation, about the supply side; they are also about supply chains,” he said. “We are speaking of commodities that go across borders; we are speaking of cattle; we are speaking about soybeans; we are speaking about a lot of things of this kind that have a huge impact on deforestation and land degradation, so, I think, one of the new dimensions of this conversation is really hard economics and trade.”

Rather than using GDP as the sole measurement of progress, new parameters have to be considered, taking into account ecological, social and economic factors, Stenseke said.

“We really need to question what sustainable economic development means; we need to broaden the prospectus from the limited paradigm of economic growth.” Such changes can refocus consumer thinking, encourage business to act more responsibly and bring the private sector on board in terms of habitat protection.

Individual consumers need to be more aware of how they can play an important role in putting pressure on big companies in food production, energy and other sectors to change their environmental policies, said **Tonny Silas**, ONE Champion with the ONE Campaign, a global movement campaigning to end extreme poverty and preventable disease. “We also need to have more personal individual education around personal actions and responsibilities and what we can do to contribute,” he said.

With the right incentives, private sector players can be brought onside in the fight for biodiversity, argued **Linxiu Zhang**, Director of the United Nations Environment Programme - International Ecosystem Management Partnership (UNEP-IEMP). “If we want to solve the problems, we don’t make the problem-makers enemies, we bring them in as part of the solution,” she told the meeting.

Without change in agricultural business models that favour unsustainable land use, the world is destined to lose the battle for biodiversity, warned Patrick Worms, Senior Science Policy and Communications Adviser for the Nairobi-based World Agroforestry (ICRAF) Centre and President of the European Agroforestry Federation (EURAF). “Around the world, we are ignoring the needs of smallholder farmers. We’re not investing in their knowledge. We’re not investing in their needs. We’re not helping them become better farmers and this is as true in the rich countries, as it is in the poor countries,” he cautioned. “We are hostages to a business model that has failed.”

An easy fix, Worms said, would be to switch the focus of taxation from labour to carbon. “This simple change ... would have rippling effects across the economy that would move us in the right direction,” he said.

The fact that land use is the main driver of biodiversity loss underscores the need for a silo-busting approach to biodiversity that mainstreams the need for species protection into all areas of government, Stenseke argued.

“We need cross-sector cooperation and action very much. Biodiversity cannot be solved by just the ministers of environment alone and the nature conservation sector, we need to bring in agriculture, forestry, mining ... and of course it has to go into transport and urban development,” she said. “This is about mainstreaming biodiversity and that must impact other sectors.”

Such an inclusive, holistic approach should also involve engagement with public opinion and reaching out to all sectors of society, speakers said. Governments cannot fill the gaps in environment protection without engagement from citizens, said **Alexander Fisher**, Director for Sino-German Cooperation on Biodiversity, Climate Change and Environment at the German development agency, GIZ.

As an example, he pointed to a successful crowd-funding initiative in China to protect forests. “The general population is ready to engage and we have to find ways to build on this,” Fisher said. “You have hundreds and hundreds of millions of people signing up for this.”

Local communities, youth and women have a key role in developing the synergies needed to build effective responses, added Linxiu Zhang.

“Indigenous people and local communities contribute to the conservation and sustainable use of biodiversity through the application of traditional knowledge but also innovation and practices and through stewardship of biodiversity on their traditional

lands,” she explained. “The important roles played by women and girls and youth have been broadly recognised.”

To that end, supporting community participation and female empowerment could be a key area for EU-Asia cooperation. “We have more work to do and we can work together but, at the same time, emphasising all the inclusiveness of all parties and all stakeholders, from global leaders to local communities,” Linxiu Zhang said.

Johanna Toivonen, Researcher and Research Funding Specialist at the Biodiversity Unit of the University of Turku in Finland, also highlighted the role of indigenous peoples and said there was much Western societies could learn from them. “For indigenous people, nature is home ... we can engage the local people and learn to protect the environment in a more sustainable way.”

Despite the importance placed on community initiatives and promises of assistance, participants joining the debate from Asia and Africa complained about the lack of resources for grassroots biodiversity projects.

“The funds exist but, on the ground, we don’t see anything,” said **Fadi Noutchemo**, Founder and President of the Young African Aviation Professional Association (YAAPA). “What I want to see, if we all want to save the world, is little initiatives where opportunities are given to people who really care about the world. I’m personally tired of the policies that don’t work.”

Nguyen in Vietnam complained about a lack of resources to monitor illegal fishing and Silas in Nigeria said the COP26 in Glasgow should see industrialised countries agree to work more closely with developing countries to protect the environment. “At the end of the day, it is a fight for all,” he said.

Another important area where Europe and Asia can work together is ensuring best practices can be shared around the world, said **Zhang Fengchun**, Research Fellow at the Chinese Research Academy of Environmental Sciences (CRAES).

“China’s domestic experience can help other countries and regions of the world, including some best practices, successful models and technologies and some concepts that can be directly used by other countries,” he said, urging a greater international effort to translate documents outlining best practices.

Several speakers pointed to the coronavirus crises as showing the linkage between threats facing the global community, as a virus transmitted from animals to humans, and with the likelihood that climate change and habitat destruction will likely make such species-jumping health threats more prevalent.

“The COVID-19 pandemic, of course, shows the link ... between human health and biodiversity loss and setbacks to the achievement of the SDGs,” said Linxiu Zhang. “All these need to remind us to think really in a synergistic way when we want to tackle climate change and biodiversity loss problems.”

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