UN environment

GEO MATTERS

GEO-6 GLOBAL ENVIRONMENT OUTLOOK

HEALTHY PLANET HEALTHY PEOPLE

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And the outlook for 2030 and beyond is… uncertain with a hint of optimism?

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On 13th March 2019, the world's environment ministers agreed to the sixth edition of the Global Environment Outlook (GEO-6), UN Environment's flagship integrated environmental assessment, at the fourth United Nations Environment Assembly.

While the last truly global assessment on the environment as a whole was published in 2012, major environmental assessments are coming thick and fast at present. These are requested by governments in response to specific issues of common concern—for example, in February the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations' State of Biodiversity for Food and Agriculture was published, and in April the Intergovernmental Science-Policy Platform on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services will launch its Global Assessment on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services, the successor to the Millennium Ecosystem Assessment.

Of course, such assessments don't focus exclusively on the relentless historic decline in biodiversity and the state of the world's ecosystems, though sadly that is a consistent underpinning message. As well as taking stock of the present state of our environment, assessments also look at how effectively policy has addressed this situation and, even more importantly, many look ahead at possible pathways based on scenarios and modelling to show how the world might move to a different and more sustainable kind of future, bending the downward curve of environmental degradation.

The full GEO report is an independently produced, rigorously reviewed assessment prepared by nearly 200 scientists over a period of two years which covers a huge amount of ground—examining air, freshwater, oceans, land and biodiversity in turn, as well as numerous cross-cutting issues. I have been privileged to have seen this process from the inside; UN Environment coordinates this mammoth process and I have played a small part in its production by coordinating the biodiversity chapters and working with a great team of authors from around the world who have weighed up the evidence published since 2012 and drawn robust and well-argued conclusions from it.

That said, most decision makers will go straight to the Summary for Policy Makers, a document linked umbilically to the full 700-page report but summarising the science into bite-size conclusions. The summary also provides a road map for change, fusing independent scientific conclusions with the political reality of diverse national interests and perspectives on policy solutions. This document represents the meeting of the scientific and policy community—two groups who speak rather different languages and who don't meet as often as they should!

The forecast

So what has GEO-6 concluded? Some of the key messages agreed at its launch event at the United Nations Environment Assembly have been summarised as follows:

- A major conclusion is that environmental policy efforts are being hindered by a variety of factors, such as the unsustainable production and consumption patterns in most countries, and by climate change.
- It shows that the overall environmental situation is deteriorating globally and the window for action is closing.
- It shows that a healthy environment is a prerequisite and foundation for economic prosperity, human health and well-being. The world is not on track to achieve the environmental dimension of the Sustainable Development Goals, and other internationally agreed environmental goals, by 2030. The social and economic costs of inaction also often exceed the costs of action and are inequitably distributed, many times being borne by the poorest and most vulnerable in society including indigenous and local communities, particularly in developing countries.
- Current environmental policy alone is not enough to address these challenges. Urgent cross-sectoral policy actions, through a whole-of-society approach, are needed to address the challenges of sustainable development

A hint of silver lining

However—transformative change that achieves the Sustainable Development Goals and other internationally agreed targets is possible and achievable with political will. Such change must include a tripling of today's decarbonization rate as we head towards 2050, a 50% increase in food production and the adoption of healthy and sustainable diets across all regions. Food, energy and transport systems as well as urban planning and chemical production are primary examples of systems of production and consumption needing innovative, effective and integrated policies. For transformation to take place, localised change, lifestyle shifts and innovation need to happen—and soon.

And what have I concluded from the past two years of involvement? It has convinced me once and for all that changes in biodiversity policy in isolation will not solve the biodiversity crisis we face, described so eloquently by the authors. I have also become even more convinced of the importance of integrating or 'mainstreaming' biodiversity knowledge, policy and capacity into the very sectors which drive its loss but who unwittingly depend upon it. I have seen very clearly the disconnect between globally agreed diagnoses of an ailing planet and national inertia to contribute sufficiently to its treatment and rehabilitation.

Yet I have also seen that rigorous analysis of the knowledge we have now can demonstrate the art of the possible for the future; the data show that we can change the trajectory we are on. To do that requires more than data—it requires political leadership and recognition of how national and local decisions can support or detract from the global good.

As Professor Paul Ekins one of the report's Co-Chairs said so passionately at the launch—"this is not a story about people in the future, this story is about the future of the people we know and love right now".

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