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OPINION:

BIODIVERSITY CONVENTION NEGLECTS CRUCIAL COMPONENT

By Fred Allendorf, University of Montana, and Linda Laikre, Stockholm University

All eyes are on Denmark this month, as delegates from 190 nations converge on Copenhagen to work toward a new framework for mitigating global warming. The agreement will replace the Kyoto Protocol when it expires in 2012. As countries assess their progress under one multinational agreement, it may also be time to take a close look at another.

The 1992 Convention on Biological Diversity, like the Kyoto Protocol on climate, is an international treaty aimed at tackling global environmental issues. The goal? To develop strategies to preserve biodiversity and combat species extinctions. While 192 nations are now parties to the Biodiversity Convention and some strides have been made in conservation at the species level, there is an alarming lack of progress on a more fundamental level of biodiversity — genetic variation. If we’re going to meet our targets for 2010 and beyond, we need to develop and implement strategies for protecting not just species and populations, but also the genetic diversity within them.

Scientists widely acknowledge that the world is experiencing a biodiversity crisis. The latest figures for the International Union for Conservation of Nature Red List, an inventory of the conservation status of nearly 50,000 plant and animal species, show that more than one in three
is threatened with extinction. But if species conservation programs are already in place, why bother with genetic variation? Because experts argue that failure to maintain genetic diversity undermines efforts to maintain biodiversity at all other levels.

An international team of 20 scientists recently reviewed the action plans of 24 member countries in the Biodiversity Convention. Despite widespread recognition of the genetic component of biodiversity, actual efforts aimed at monitoring and conserving this crucial element get token lip service at best. Most plans for meeting genetic diversity goals focus only on domesticated populations of crops and livestock, while less than half also set conserving the genetic diversity of wild plants and animals as a goal.

If we want to move from words to action, the task of sampling and monitoring genetic diversity will require expertise, tools, incentives and funds. Currently, less than 1 percent of multilateral funds aimed at supporting biodiversity projects concern genetic diversity. When developing international conservation policies, we need to develop explicit strategies to conserve genetic variation.

Less than one month remains to the “2010 biodiversity target,” when a significant reduction of biodiversity loss at all levels – from genes to ecosystems – should have been reached. As we move to devise conservation targets beyond 2010, we urge nations to assess and monitor all levels of biodiversity, including genes. Without meaningful indicators and targets for conservation of this crucial component of biodiversity, the ability of all wild and domesticated species to adapt to changing environments in the future is in doubt.

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