



Environment and Resources - Wildlife

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While the World Waits: Environmental groups determined to see U.S. ratification

By Emily Holding

Biodiversity update -- Research shows that DNA is being lost at alarming rates. Populations of freshwater fish have declined by nearly 50 percent and populations of terrestrial and marine species have fallen by around 30 percent since 1987, according to a May 2008 article coauthored by Ahmed Djoghla, executive director of the U.N. Convention on Biological Diversity; Sigmar Gabriel, Germany's environment administrator and Achim Steiner, the executive director of the U.N. Environment Program.

Biological diversity is a vital issue because, according to a publication from the Secretariat of the Convention on Biological Diversity, about 70 percent of the world's poor live in rural areas and depend on biodiversity for their well-being, more than 3 billion depend on marine and coastal resources and 1.6 billion rely on forests and forest products for their livelihoods.

"The greater the diversity of life, the greater the opportunity for medical discoveries, economic development, and adaptive responses to such new challenges as climate change," states the text of the U.N. Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD).

The CBD was created at the 1993 "Earth Summit" to counter this loss of biological diversity.

In 1993, President Bill Clinton signed it. After Clinton signed the Convention, it would have to be passed in the Senate before it became law. The Senate Foreign Relations Committee recommended the Convention to the Senate floor in a bipartisan 16-3 vote, but the Senate never voted on it. Now, 17 years later, it still has not gone to a vote on the Senate floor, and the United States is one of only two countries that have not ratified it. CBD's executive director, Ahmed Djoghla, announced in December of 2009 that the other country, Andorra, would soon ratify the Convention.

In February, a coalition of environmental groups sent a letter to the U.S. Secretary of State, Hillary Rodham Clinton, and two Senate Foreign Relations Committee members, John F. Kerry (D- Mass.) and Richard G. Lugar (R- Ill.), urging them to "support U.S. ratification of this critical international agreement."

The Senate is currently focusing on the U.N. Convention on the Law of the Sea, which deals with use of the oceans, establishing guidelines for businesses, the environment, and the management of marine natural resources.

Peter Jenkins, director of international conservation for Defenders of Wildlife, says that the CBD and the Convention on the Law of the Sea go hand in hand because they are both general framework approaches to preserving the oceans and biological diversity, although the scope of the CBD reaches beyond marine life. Jenkins says the notion is that the Law of the Sea, which was created in the 1970s, would be ratified first and the CBD after that, but that it would be possible for the Senate to discuss and ratify them together.

“There is no reason for the U.S. to stand alone” as a non-party to the CBD, Jenkins says. Ratification would not call for any new laws and there is no strong opposition to the CBD.

William Snape, senior counsel at the Center for Biological Diversity, agrees, saying “the treaty has proven itself to be useful and effective and not to interfere with U.S. sovereignty.” The issue just has to be made a priority in the Senate.

Although ratification would not change or create any U.S. laws, it would still have an effect on both the United States and the rest of the world because it would allow the United States to vote in agreements regarding genetic resources and engage in the planning processes. Currently the United States sends delegates to the meetings, but they have no voice in the decision-making.

As the leading country as far as expertise and resources in dealing with biological diversity loss, Jenkins says it is important that the United States has a “seat at the table” in order to share that expertise.

“It’s all about reversing the decline in biological diversity,” he says. “The U.S. has a tremendous amount to offer... We need to help the rest of the world.”

Both Jenkins and Snape see no reason the Convention will not eventually be ratified. Snape says a campaign has been launched by environmental groups, hunters, pharmaceutical companies and many other professionals who would like to see it ratified. “I think that includes the American public,” he says.

While Jenkins says it will take a “major effort to get it across the finish line,” he believes the CBD is regaining the momentum it had in the early 90s.

“Clinton signed it, and now his wife is secretary of state,” he points out, adding that other key officials have supported the CBD and now there is a Democratic administration and a Democrat-led Senate. Republicans have supported the Convention as well, but Jenkins says they have just not made it a priority.

With this momentum, he believes the CBD will finally be made a priority within the next year or two.