



Editorial

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Conservation Biology, Vol. 1, No. 2. (Aug., 1987), pp. 95-96.

Stable URL:

<http://links.jstor.org/sici?sici=0888-8892%28198708%291%3A2%3C95%3AE%3E2.0.CO%3B2-7>

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The professional conservation community is fighting a brave battle in the tropics, but it is losing. And it will continue to lose, and thus everyone will lose, unless there is a dramatic change in the number of participants on the conservation side of the war. The Library of Congress is being pulped while we write and read our journals.

Our academic and research generation has the last chance to make the difference. Many of us have had the privilege of seeing portions of the tropics as it was and have experienced the pain of seeing it as it is; the next generation will lack that perspective. If there is not a free and aggressive infusion of new action, thought, and material resources into the war to save tropical biodiversity, there will not be any tropics for the next generation to argue about. The twenty-first century is less than 13 years away.

What can the academic and research community do? Significant input can be anything from voluntary secretarial work for a fund-raising drive to a megamaniacal effort to bootstrap an entire tropical country into a permanent conservation ecosystem. There is a place for muddy boots, Washington wheeler-dealers, teachers, beetle fanatics, riverboat gamblers and shy persons. If you like tinkering with fancy machinery, do it for a tropical conservation project. If you fancy administration, offer your skills in that direction. If you are a fanatic about Peruvian paramo, focus there and to hell with the Amazon basin. Indulge yourself within the confines of doing what must be done to be sure that tropical wildlands are still here in 50 years.

If you administrate and evaluate, then create a reward climate that favors young people to put a substantial portion of their careers into the conservation of tropical biodiversity. If you are a professional conservationist, open your doors and arms wide to stumbling amateurs with an abundance of serious commitment. Hard core researcher? Ask why you sneer at your colleague who is fund-raising to buy a sweaty, goeey, mosquito-ridden swamp in Brazil. Whatever you are, recognize that your fitness is measured in biodiversity conserved into perpetuity; it does not matter whether you achieve it by selling bumper stickers at a scientific meeting, revising a nationwide environmental management plan, or experimentally demonstrating that tropical dry forest is more resilient in the face of destruction than is tropical rain forest.

Think about it. If 100,000 biological academics and researchers in the United States were to put an average of 20 percent of their time and funds into the conservation of neotropical biodiversity during the next five years, the game would be closed. If we suppose an average annual income of \$25,000, this resource of \$500 million plus 20,000 man-years per year would provide enough energy, purchase power, and endowment to solve virtually all neotropical conservation problems. Now extend this to biologists in other nations and the rest of the world's tropics.

A substantial tithe for five years on behalf of the conservation of tropical biodiversity requires tropical social systems that will accept these resources responsibly rather than squander them on petty political battles, lost causes, and personal fortunes. It is not enough to buy fine forests and hire guards. A significant part of the tithe will have to be expended on development of conservation-oriented educational infrastructures in the recipient countries.

Tropical biodiversity is a substantial portion of the resource base that supports our entire academic and research edifice. We did not push the tropical wildland world to the edge of the precipice, but we are standing here watching it slide off into the abyss.

We can spend the next 30 years generating a pile of gorgeous reprints in our research areas or racking up a fistfull of distinguished teaching awards. And when we are done, our academic offspring will have a marvelous time reading about the tropics while sitting by the roadside in the glare and wind of pastures, cane fields, and mahogany plantations.

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Conservation Biology is printed by Allen Press, Inc., 1041 New Hampshire Street, Lawrence, KS 66044. POSTMASTER send changes of address to Blackwell Scientific Publications, Inc., 52 Beacon Street, Boston, MA 02108.

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