

COP15 (Montreal): Biodiversity loss, the sixth great extinction and the need for action

Friday 27 January 2023, by [BONHOMME Marc](#), [PRICE Susan](#) (Date first published: 23 January 2023).

Green Left's Susan Price spoke to Canadian ecosocialist Marc Bonhomme about the 2022 United Nations Biodiversity Conference (COP15), which took place in Montreal from December 7–19.

Susan Price: COP15 in Montreal received far less media attention than COP27 in Egypt. Why is this?

Marc Bonhomme: This COP was much less publicised than the one on climate, although the current catastrophe it is supposed to fight, the sixth great extinction, is of the same magnitude.

A lot of people certainly notice and deplore the disappearance of insects, especially honeybees, or the extinction of some large mammals, especially in Africa, or the destruction of habitats, especially the destruction of the Amazon forest and forests in Indonesia due to palm oil plantations, but do not think that their impacts are as dramatic as various climate extremes that make headlines every day.

Heads of state were not even invited to COP15. The Kunming-Montreal Global Biodiversity Framework (GBF) is not legally binding, not to mention the all-purpose term “sustainable” appearing 15 times, though a voluntary Paris-like follow-up mechanism was agreed on.

The Intergovernmental Science-Policy Platform on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services (IPBES), the equivalent of the United Nations Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, produced a powerful report on the subject. Out of an estimated 8 million animal and plant species on earth (including 5.5 million species of insects), the current rate of species extinction in the world is higher than the average of the last 10 million years by tens and even hundreds of times and this rate is accelerating.

Up to 1 million species are threatened with extinction, many within the next few decades. According to a report by The Guardian on COP15, “the international community did not fully achieve any of the 20 Aichi biodiversity targets agreed in Japan in 2010 to slow the loss of the natural world”. Carbon Brief reported that “analysis published in February [2022] found that governments around the world spend at least \$1.8 trillion each year on subsidies that exacerbate biodiversity loss and climate change. This figure is equivalent to 2% of global GDP”. The GBF agreed to suppress and/or redirect — for what purpose and to where, we don't know — a bit more than a quarter of this amount (\$500 billion).

What do you make of the refusals of rich nations to commit the necessary funds to preserve biodiversity?

The main objective of the Montreal COP was to reach an agreement on preserving 30% of the

world's land and oceans by 2030 (known as "30x30") — an aim backed mainly by the wealthy old imperialist countries — rather than try to reach an agreement on how this objective should be funded — which was the main preoccupation of the dependent countries (of the global "South").

The strategic habitats, the tropical forests and mangroves, are in the South but the money is in the "North", which is the main culprit because of its mode of consumption. The South demanded that US\$100 billion be put into a designated fund — a fraction of what is needed to implement the framework. Neither aim was achieved.

The climate mitigation fund in favour of dependent countries agreed upon by the climate COPs has not yet reached the level of US\$100 billion per year from 2020. The new fund for loss and damage decided by the COP27 has yet to be filled, and the one for biodiversity seems out of the race from the starting line.

It is not the anti-diplomatic blow of the abrupt departure from the meeting room of some 60 delegations from countries of the South that changed the situation. In addition, the countries of the old imperialism sowed discord within the countries of the South by distinguishing, not without reason, the emerging countries from the other countries of the South. They say that China, Brazil and other large economies, which have grown substantially in the last 30 years since the UN's environmental treaties were agreed upon, should be contributing a lot more.

Under a halo of victory to save the biodiversity of the planet, the countries of the old imperialism, in collusion with the emerging countries — an alliance symbolised by the China-Canada co-presidency temporarily reconciled for the circumstances — succeeded in imposing a consensus on the countries from the non-emerging South, in particular African countries. Three African nations explicitly and strongly rejected the so-called "consensus" on the GBF.

The frustration of the non-emerging countries of the South is understandable. Under the final agreement — supposed to be the equivalent of the Paris Agreement for the climate — the rich countries will put in the kitty only a ridiculous \$US20 billion by 2025, which will rise to US\$30 billion by 2030.

While the US\$200 billion needed yearly "to implement national biodiversity strategies" will come from "public and private resources", the small North-South subsidy will "includ[e] official development assistance". That is not all. The private sector will also benefit from the US\$500 billion in redirected yearly subsidies.

As an ecosocialist, why is preserving biodiversity so critical? What is its relationship to tackling climate change?

Given the intimate relationship between the climate crisis and that of biodiversity, hence the double priority of the Earth Summit in 1992, it is alarming that the second is so marginalised when more than 50% of the CO₂ of human origin is annually absorbed by nature.

"Humans emit about 37bn tonnes of carbon dioxide each year, as well as other greenhouse gases [GHG]. By absorbing carbon, plants sequester 11bn tonnes annually, while releasing oxygen. Another 10bn tonnes of carbon dissolves into the oceans (The Economist)."

Science does not guarantee that this absorption can go on as deforestation, more forest fires, acidification and warming of oceans proceed.

On the emissions side, "the food system is currently responsible for about a third of total GHG emissions [...] The largest contribution stems from agricultural production (7.1 GtCO₂e [gigatonnes

of CO₂ equivalent], 39%) including the production of inputs such as fertilizers, followed by changes in land use (5.7 GtCO₂e, 32%),” according to the UN Emissions Gap Report, 2022.

As the Guardian points out: “One of the biggest issues surrounding the 30x30 target is what it means for the rights of Indigenous peoples, who are the stewards of about 80% of the world’s biodiversity – but just 20% of its land. Historically, conservation has forced Indigenous peoples from their lands and caused countless human-rights violations. The current text of the framework recognises the rights of Indigenous peoples and the critical role that they play in conservation, but questions remain over how that part of the target will be implemented.”

At COP15, Indigenous presence was everywhere, except in decision-making bodies. The word “Indigenous” is mentioned 20 times in the GBF. Their knowledge of nature and its “services” combined with their material and political deprivation make them — in the eyes of the banks — easy and useful prey for the enhancement and protection of “natural capital” which, according to a former vice-president of Friends of the Earth, is supposed to provide “benefits worth an estimated \$125 trillion to \$140 trillion per year, equivalent to more than 1.5 times global GDP,” according to Le Devoir, Montréal.

Were there any positive outcomes from the summit? I read that there was no reference to stopping deep sea mining in the final agreement, for example. Did fossil fuel and mining interests dominate?

Deep sea mining — like a target for plastics reduction — is nowhere to be seen in the GBF, though some 30 deep sea mining exploration permits, covering several hundred thousand square kilometres, have already been granted worldwide by the International Seabed Authority, a UN organisation.

The overall risk from pesticides, not pesticides directly, is to be reduced by half, not three-quarters. The same with food waste. But the meat diet remains unmentioned, even though it is a key cause in the destruction of habitats which, after climate change, mainly explain biodiversity loss.

All the same, the issue of 30x30 remains central but it is far from having satisfied everybody. According to the Guardian, considering that the IPCC said that safeguarding biodiversity requires 30–50% of Earth’s land and sea, some environmentalists think that countries should be aiming for the top-range figure of 50%, which would be equivalent to the Paris agreement’s highest ambition of limiting global warming to 1.5°C, compared to 30% which feels like 2°C.

For other environmentalists, the objective should be to protect nature everywhere: “We need 100%, we have already lost too much nature.”

It is not the stingy neoliberal states that will support the management of “protected areas” by Indigenous peoples except for an initial payment. Already, the carbon offset market is expected to grow to upwards of \$50 billion by 2030, according to consultancy firm McKinsey & Co, reports the Toronto Star.

Recently, the World Bank lent Brazil \$500m to meet its climate goals by “strengthen[ing] the private sector’s capacity to access carbon credit markets,” reports Carbon Brief – Reuters. We can be sure that this “protection” will tolerate exceptions for at least open-cut mining and hydropower, benefiting the all-electric new economy of “green capitalism”.

Of course, we cannot forget the resilience and the combativeness of Indigenous peoples, but they can win only if the “white” peoples overcome their racism to ally with them in the street and support

them at the ballot box. The small demonstrations at COP15 do not bode well. Are we waiting to be up against the wall to mobilise?

P.S.

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