

Whose Planet Are We Saving?

Values, Vices, and Voices in the Search for Sustainability

Kathleen McAfee

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My message to you, as environmental professionals from developing countries – the global South – is one that I think you already understand but rarely have the opportunity to express and explore. It is, most simply, that the global North does not have all the answers.

We cannot create a sustainable planet by taking our latest scientific knowledge and tools, and the most profound insights of our social scientists and philosophers, from our centers of learning and simply transferring them to you and your countries. Brown and Yale, where I have been teaching, have many talented professors, with prestigious titles and deep interdisciplinary insights, but we do not always know how our knowledge applies to other places and peoples.

This seems obvious, but there are many to whom it is not obvious at all. Today, if you want to get funding for an environmental activity in the global South, your best bet is to describe your project as “capacity building”. Capacity building is usually interpreted to mean that all the teaching is to be done by the global North and all the learning is to be done by the South. Too often, funders and scholars assume that the transfer of knowledge is to be one-way only: from the North to South, and from professionals to the direct users and guardians of resources. Presumably, until we reach farmers, foresters, fishers, and developing-country professionals with our expertise, they are incapacitated.

“Global” environmentalism is a set of institutions and funds, concepts and consultancies, and a network of courses and curricula in schools like ours. It has taken shape over the past 30 years mainly in Europe, the U.S., Canada, and a few other wealthy countries. A guiding premise, under the surface if not stated aloud, has been that we in the global North have already learned how to take care of the

environment. It is as if we, having reached some higher stage of development as societies and peoples, can appreciate the true values of nature in a way that others, less fortunate, cannot.

When that milestone of global environmentalism, the Bruntland report on *Our Common Future*, was published 17 years ago, there was some recognition among enlightened elites in the global North that “saving the planet” was dependent at least as much on achieving sustainability in the already-industrialized nations as in the not-yet-industrialized countries. Despite its shortcomings, the Bruntland report speaks to the need to transform the unsustainable arrangements by which a quarter of the world’s population consumes about four-fifths of the planet’s natural and produced wealth.

This recognition is not as strong in the global North today as it was then. We have experienced two decades of neoliberalism, with its precept that privatization and market-based management of everything will (eventually) yield results that are optimal for everyone. This way of thinking has served as a rationale for a return to self-satisfied inattention to the consequences of our own policies and behavior for the rest of humanity and the natural world. Certainly, the complex of treaties, agendas, policies, and funding criteria that emerged from the Rio Earth summit have not focused directly on the deeply inequitable dimensions of the global environmental crisis.

Take, for example, the Framework Convention on Climate Change. To its credit, that treaty calls on all countries to reduce their greenhouse emissions. It places priority for GHG reduction on the countries that have already spewed the most carbon into our shared atmosphere. This is a priority accepted by common sense by almost every government on earth, except the one in Washington, DC. Yet the Climate Change Convention and its protocols are never formulated on a basis of truly global equity, in which every individual on earth can have equal (per capita) claim on the earth’s atmosphere or an equal right to fill up the earth’s carbon sinks.

It is very important that the other leading global environment treaty, the Convention on Biological Diversity, states that countries of the wealthier, technology-strong North should be “encouraged” to provide resources to cash

strapped, diversity rich Southern countries, so that they can carry out the Convention's requirements. But nowhere in the CBD is this provision of resources required.

Southern governments and NGOs have complained since the start of the global-treaty process about the criteria for what counts as a "global" environmental problem. These criteria do not include many of the most urgent environmental and related social problems of the South. The funding rules of the main source of international green aid, the Global Environment Facility, prioritize one set of environmental problems—marine pollution, ozone depletion, climate change, and loss of certain species and ecosystems that experts have deemed "valuable to humanity". By definition, only if an environmental problem reaches across national borders, where it affects citizens or their descendants in the North, is it a "global" problem and therefore eligible for GEF funding. Problems that stay within national borders, such as most particulate air pollution, or fresh-water poisoning, or land degradation, were not officially "global" priorities, no matter how many people may suffer or die from them.

Fortunately, pressure from the South has begun to change the way these priorities are interpreted. But we are still working with institutions and agendas that have been conceived and devised primarily from Northern points of view. In the South, we still deal with policies and practices influenced by the myth that caring about the natural world is a Northern idea or exclusively an agenda of an elite. In the North, we still encounter the assumption that the goal of sustainability must be forced upon an unwilling South.

I am not trying let the countries and leaders of the global South off the hook. It is true that the greater part of the damage to our shared planet has been carried out by conquerors, colonizers, and companies from the North. It is true that the results have benefited mainly the global North. It is true that we in the North can conserve our forests and other favored ecosystems more easily because we import timber and minerals from endangered ecosystems in other parts of the world.

It would be wrong to conclude that because of this, only the North should be held accountable. In fact, I believe that the greatest responsibility now lies in the hands of governments and peoples of the global South. But it is harder to make

Southern governments accountable when they can point to the statement by the first President George Bush at the 1992 Earth Summit that the “American lifestyle is not up for negotiation”, or George Bush II’s refusal to consider even the minimal requirements of the Kyoto Protocol because, he says, it is “bad for the U.S. economy.” Such attitudes make it easier for governments elsewhere to evade their own responsibilities to future generations by claiming that to conserve the environment, they would have to sacrifice their people’s development.

The false notion that there is a choice between environment and development has allowed governments around the world to get away with anti-environmental policies, from mere avoidance, looking the other way, to outright, state-supported ecocide. Revenues and patronage from devastating mining and logging activities, from the world’s tropical belt to Siberia and to the U.S and Canadian west, have enriched those who are well-connected locally. I am sure that all of you from the global South could give examples of this.

The condoning of environmental destruction in the name of “development” has also suited perfectly the interests of transnational corporations involved in the global agribusiness and the extraction of primary commodities. For them, the best bottom line still results from using up soil fertility or grabbing up resources fast and cheaply, letting nature and future generations pay the real price. Witness the latest, cynical manipulation of science and government standards by the global gold mining giant, Newmont, which has poisoned the food sources of Indonesian villagers by dumping toxic quantities of arsenic and mercury into coastal bays.

Such predatory alliances between profit-hungry corporations and corrupt or weak governments are made easier when we accept the idea that the environment must be sacrificed for “development”. Whenever we hear this, we must demand answers to the questions: Development of what? Development for whom? Over the past two decades, the idea of development of national resources for national well-being, for the majority of people, has disappeared from international policy and most development scholarship. It has been replaced by a working definition of development that reduces development to trade. Neoliberal policies promote engagement in the international marketplace, whatever it takes,

Economic growth is equated with development, but we know that GNP and GDP growth is not development. Some countries have managed to sell off enough logs, or cocoa, or bananas, or products of low-wage labor in export zones to achieve temporary growth rates of five or six percent. But this “success” has not enabled them to repay their debts, much less allowed them to invest in broad-based urban and rural sustainable development.

The problem with “development equals growth and growth equals trade” is that every would-be developing country is competing with others to produce the same commodities—whatever they can sell in the global market that will earn internationally negotiable hard currency—so that they can import the manufacture goods, food, technology on which they have come to depend. Recently, environmental expert knowledge, marketed through the World Bank, has been added to the list of needed imports, while genetic resources and environmental services have been added to the log of recommended exports.

The result is that the best land, the richest forests, the purest water, the most energy, the keenest minds, and the longest labors are dedicated not to producing what people of the nation most need. They are not directed, either to producing what neighboring nations need and thus what could be exchanged or bartered among peer countries on favorable terms. Rather, these precious domestic resources are devoted to whatever can earn international hard currency. In other words, you have no choice but to produce and sell that which people and companies who possess dollars and euros and yen are willing to buy.

This export race is not even leading to short-term development, let alone sustainable development. In Latin America, where I do most of my field work, it has led to a kind of resource re-colonization, a renewal of old patterns in which human and natural wealth and financial capital flows out of the South into the North. And yet, for the past two decades, this export-led, global-driven market strategy has been the absolute requirement for all forms of development assistance and trade access. It is still rationalized in terms of the theory that if a country competes hard enough, it can become a winner at the global trade game and export its way out of debt and dependency. But no country, ever—not England, not the United States, not Korea—has ever developed on the basis of exports alone,

without policies to support domestic markets, protect domestic economies, and strengthen domestic agriculture-industry links.

Free-market fundamentalism has also made the environment subordinate to transnational trade and growth-at-all-costs. International funding for sustainable development remains miniscule. The World Bank's environment program has adopted a strategy increasingly focused environmental-services exports. Even then, Bank environmentalists have little power in comparison to the departments that sell traditional, unsustainable energy and infrastructure loans. The Convention on Biological Diversity begs to no avail for a mere observer seat at the World Trade Organization, WTO rules, in effect, make it illegal under international law for countries or communities to adopt better environmental standards than the world's least-common-denominator standards. No wonder the Rio Earth Summit + Ten at Johannesburg was such a somber affair!

There are two ways I can think of to respond to this discouraging situation. One way is to try to bring the natural environment into the trade game, by devising new ways to sell natural resources internationally. The other option, which I will describe shortly, is to play a different game all together.

Playing the global trade game requires us to put monetary prices on everything in the biosphere. The theory behind this is that nature should be able to earn its own right to survive in the global marketplace. This has become the leading strategy for conservation finance among mainstream, private environmental organizations, government aid agencies, and multilateral institutions such as the World Bank and the GEF. The idea is that if Southern countries cannot afford conservation costs and Northern sources will not step in, then conservation will have to be paid for through international trade.

I call this "selling nature to save it". This approach calls for international markets in ecosystem services, especially carbon emission credits, or permits to pollute, as I prefer to call them. It includes the sale of access to tourism havens and research sites. It includes continued exports of timbers and minerals, which are now to be removed "sustainably". It includes the marketing of genetic resources under the terms of biodiversity prospecting contracts and the sale of knowledge in

the form of intellectual property rights to traditional crop varieties and shaman's medicinal recipes.

Putting a monetary price on nature can be a very useful exercise. Environmental economists try to calculate what it would cost in dollars, or less often but more usefully, in rupees or pesos or bhat, to replace all the benefits and services that would be lost if a mountain is leveled by mining or a rain forest clear cut, or farm land replaced by a golf course, or a wet land drained for a tourist hotel. This can be a real eye-opener.

Good green accounting estimates the values of natural goods and services to the development of the nation and the welfare of its people and their descendants. If we really count all those values, this can be a great aid to decision making and negotiating over environmental and development policies. Imagine a policy guideline that says: the rights to develop that forest or wetlands or farmlands can be sold at a price no less than the full social and environmental cost. Conservation and development planning might become an honest process. It is regrettable that the staff of the World Bank Environment Department cannot take their own sustainability rhetoric seriously and actually do this.

The core question I pose is: Can making nature a tradable commodity by pricing and selling biodiversity and ecosystem services be an effective strategy for conservation? There is a major problem with this very popular idea. It is the same problem which has held back equitable development. It is the problem that, when world-market prices determine values, people with the greatest purchasing power in the global marketplace have the greatest claim on the world's assets, natural and otherwise.

In environmental trade, just as in development, if you depend on international exports, you can make money only by selling that which people with dollars, euros or yen are willing to buy. When the World Bank looks at, for example, a swath of pasture land in Southern Africa, it asks: What is the most efficient use of this asset in the global marketplace? Through its research, the Bank finds that Europeans coming for a picture safari can spend more in a day than the money price of what the herders there produce in a year. Therefore, according to

Bank environmental economists, the most efficient use would be to turn the pasture into an eco-safari park. By the same token, an area of rainforest cultivated periodically by forest dwellers would be “worth” more as a scientific study site or as a biosphere preserve from which local people are excluded. This is still the reigning conservationist belief, even though research has shown that forest peoples are responsible for much of the rainforest diversity that conservationists treasure.

Such methods value the needs and desires of wealthier people more highly than those of people who are cash-poor, and overlook entirely the cultural significance, needs, and values of people who live in direct interdependence with natural resources. But they cannot deliver their promises.

When the Earth Summit treaties were negotiated, the promise of biodiversity prospecting appeared bright. Sales of medicinal plants, crop varieties, and organic material samples by diversity-rich countries to the burgeoning biotech industry were expected to yield a stream of income for conservation. But of course, genetic-resource sellers could only sell what pharmaceutical firms and other bio-buyers—those with dollars, euros or yen—wanted to purchase. It turned out that there were a lot more would-be sellers than buyers. There are only so many ways to make profitable products from biodiversity samples, and the big biotech firms and Northern research institutions are in a position to set (low) prices. Consequently, no substantial or sustainable profit transfers have taken place as a result of royalty provisions in biodiversity prospecting contracts.

Yet the expectation for this strategy were so great that the it was built into the Convention on Biological Diversity. The Northern sponsors of the CBD enticed Southern states to sign the treaty by promising to “share the benefits of biodiversity” with the global South. But the CBD provisions for doing this reduced that promise to guidelines for sharing the profits from “the commercial utilization of genetic resources”.

Consider the meaning hidden in this concept. The notion is that the value of plants, insects, and microorganisms lies mainly in the scientifically scrutable and potentially profitable genetic information they contain. But this (marketable) value appears only after the samples have been removed from a local setting and their

genomes analyzed in a lab. Until then, the (marketable) benefits of biodiversity do not exist! These living things and their genes are worthless until they are purified, renamed, patented, and transformed into commodities which can be sold to people with dollars, euros or yen.

This definition of value leaves out a lot! It leaves out the greater part, by far, of the values and benefits of biodiversity that do already exist. It leaves out all the benefits that local people obtain from the use forest products for their own shelter and sustenance. It leaves out the value of sales of farm and forest products in local and regional markets to people who only have pesos, rupees, or bhat. The “benefits from commercialization” also exclude the pleasures to local people of a pleasing landscape or a river to wash and play in. The CBD definition certainly does not take into consideration the values of ancestor’s graves or the dwelling places of forest gods.

Unless the values of nature for local communities and national development are taken fully into account, most schemes for conservation are bound to fail. Local people will not support them; they will continue to be seen as other people’s projects. In many places, local people’s lack of livelihood options will leave them no choice but to use the resources unsustainably.

So, just as in the case of development, in the case of the environment it is crucial to ask: environment for whom? We need to ask not just how much is nature worth in monetary terms, but whose values count? Values are never absolute in the abstract. They are always values to somebody, for some human purpose, even if that purpose is contemplation or scientific categorization. We need to ask, not just what is nature worth, but what is nature good for, and – especially – for whom is nature good? We need to take seriously these values and functions, whether or not they can be measured in hard-currency terms.

Unless we do this, global environmentalism will be open to the charge of being merely the latest phase of colonialism. All the new, great green hopes for selling ecotourism adventures, genetic resources, and carbon-sequestration services will amount to little more than the latest in a long series of purported tropical miracle crops. Each of those tropical exports, from gold to groundnuts,

from coffee to cotton to colban, and now biodiversity, has been hyped as the key to riches and development. Then, each has gone through, or will soon go through, a cycle of speculation, boom, and then bust, leaving the land and the people from whom it was extracted poorer than before.

The challenge for us at Brown and Yale and the institutions to which we are returning is: What can we do to ensure that the already existing values of biodiversity can continue to exist and can increase? Given half a chance, nature will yield increasing benefits. Given genuinely equitable and democratic planning, those benefits will flow to the people who need them most, and who have a long-term stake in their continued flow, and not only to the people with the dollars, zeros or yen.

The more hopeful alternative to the global resource trading game is to put our science and our skills and our sensibilities to work alongside those people who live with and depend most directly upon natural resources, to make sustainability work for them. That is the reason I feel optimistic. Once we look at things from this ground-up perspective, that nagging problem of “environment versus development disappears” It becomes clear that there is no way we can have one without the other.

The other reason I am hopeful is that we have so many allies. We have a growing movement for international environmental justice that is thinking in these terms. Everywhere there are NGOs, farmers, fishers and forest dwellers, and many good people in governments and universities, who understand that there can be no ecology without equity, and no equity without ecology.

This principle of sustainable, equitable, socially just development is only that: a principle. Making it happen is a process. People North and South who share this principle must work together and learn together. There are no blueprints, because there is no one formula for every place. But, working as equals, we can build more sustainable alternatives to environmental colonialism. Just as the road is made by walking, the garden of sustainability is made by plowing and tilling and planting, by sharing seeds and harvests and ideas, by watching and listening, and by teaching and learning from the experience of working with people at the grassroots level.

This brings me back to Brown and Yale, and that thing I think you know already: capacity building is a two-way street. We scientists and policy experts of the global North need to have our own capacities built every bit as much as do you and the people in your countries. It is you and other people in your countries who can help make our knowledge relevant and workable in the world beyond our labs and campuses. We need you every bit as much as you need us. We need you to come back and keep calling on us, and also to keep teaching us, building upon the bonds of shared learning that have been forged by your brief stay here in the global North.

Kathleen McAfee is a Visiting Scholar in Geography at the University of California at Berkeley and a former faculty member at the Yale School of Forestry and Environmental Studies. Her interests center on economic globalization, social justice, and the equitable sharing and sustainable use of natural resources. In her work on environmental services, genetic resources, and "Selling Nature to Save It?" Dr. McAfee analyzes the challenge of valuing and conserving biodiversity and distributing environmental benefits and burdens in a world-market economy. As a policy analyst for Oxfam, she authored *Storm Signals: Structural Adjustment and Development Alternatives* (1991). She has also published on agro-biotechnology, intellectual property, farm policy, food trade, and development.

Dr. McAfee can be reached via kmcafee@berkeley.edu or (510) 482 1024. Her web site is <http://www.kmcafee.com>