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A TEEB COORDINATOR'S VISION

Patrick ten Brink is head of the Brussels office of the Institute for European Environmental Policy, a not-for-profit organization dedicated to advancing environmental sustainability in Europe. Ten Brink coordinated the TEEB end-user report for policy makers. “Momentum is growing when it comes to understanding the value of nature.” We put five questions to him.

MICHEL VERSCHOOR

What is the key message of The Economics of Ecosystems and Biodiversity?

“The interaction between climate change and biodiversity is fundamentally synergistic. For example, if we don't deal with climate change, we will lose our coral reefs. They are very sensitive to temperature. Five hundred million people around the world depend on coral reefs. Their disappearance means that communities are losing their fish stocks and tourism value, but most of all they will lose their natural climate hazard defence systems. By accepting a two-degree rise in temperature, we have already given up our coral reefs. We shouldn't do that; it's unacceptable. Another example: green carbon stores 18 to 25 percent of our global CO₂ emissions. This is a major carbon sink, but we are running it down, causing it to emit carbon as well. So, if we really want to address climate change, we've got to stop deforestation.”

And other new insights?

“The need for 'natural accounts' and the importance of ecosystem-based adaptation. We need to keep accounts of natural capital stocks, to know the value of the assets base of nature. This kind of accounting can help

us to understand what we have, and keep track of what we're losing or gaining.”

Is placing an economic value on nature the way out of misery?

“Some people would argue that there is a risk in placing an economic value on nature, because we will then forget the intrinsic value of nature. But some nature can be saved without valuing it: “natural crown jewels” are appreciated by everyone. There are cases, however, where an economic angle can help you communicate effectively. Some politicians only understand the language of economics. If we can communicate the benefits of ecosystems to them, they will appreciate them and open their eyes to biodiversity.”

What are decision makers learning from the end-user reports?

“They seem to be showing real interest and willingness to look at the value of nature. A growing number of countries have taken up the concept since the launch of the TEEB process in 2007 at the G8+5 in Germany. Momentum is growing when it comes to understanding the value of nature. Now we need policy makers to take sound decisions in response to the evidence on the value of

nature. One of many concrete responses is the call to reform subsidies nationally and internationally. Our subsidies need to be climate and biodiversity proof. We suggest publishing an annual inventory report on subsidies so that all parties can decide which subsidies are still valid.”

What can delta cities do?

“Delta countries should do their bit to reduce carbon emissions. They can make sure that wetlands are not drained, as these store large amounts of carbon and are important for flood control. We also need to avoid conversion of peat lands, otherwise carbon emissions will soar. Go for the right bio fuels and invest in positive measures: the restoration of mangrove coastlines or wetlands, and natural corridors, such as river networks, buffer zones, lakes, swamps and other transport networks for wildlife. A well-preserved natural infrastructure helps with flood control and preserves biodiversity.

“It's not just a matter of quick gains, though. We need twenty solid years of motivated progress. If delta cities take the lead in ecosystem restoration and spatial planning, other stakeholders will learn from them.”