

Foreword

The rapid degradation of ecosystems is leading to an unprecedented loss of biodiversity and services on which human life and wellbeing depend. The situation is most serious in the poorest regions of the world where people are most vulnerable because of their direct dependence on agriculture, forests, fisheries, and clean water. Often these are also the richest regions in terms of the number and variety of species, and the regions where population pressures are most intense. Despite the links between healthy ecosystems and human wellbeing, the natural political tendency to give priority to immediate development problems risks bringing about a reduced emphasis on biodiversity protection.

Biodiversity is much like climate change - the subject is poorly understood, the impacts are not seen directly, and the broad population does not feel personal accountability for solutions. A broader knowledge of the issues and policy options, in particular the linkage between biodiversity, ecosystem services, and human wellbeing, is critical to effecting systemic change.

In response to this need, the Aspen Institute in April 2004 convened a distinguished group of scientists, economists, business and environmental leaders, and government officials to learn from each other, to explore the sometimes competing values underlying policy disagreements, and to consider appropriate responses to the challenges identified. This was the third in a series of Environmental Policy Forums initiated in 2000 by the Institute's Program on Energy, the Environment and the Economy.

We were honored to have as the Forum co-chairs Bruce Babbitt, former U.S. Secretary of Interior and Governor of Arizona, and José Sarukhán, Professor of Ecology and former Rector of the National Autonomous University of Mexico. Their extensive experience, their knowledge of a broad range of environmental topics, and their ability to frame the issues in a wide-ranging dialogue allowed them to focus the discussion, explore interconnections, and find many areas of agreement. Their overview and conclusions are included as the introductory essay in this volume. While the richness of the dialogue cannot be recreated, their essay summarizes their sense of the group's principal conclusions and some of their insights. Members of the group were not asked to agree with its final wording, and no person's participation should be assumed to imply his or her organization's endorsement of any specific conclusion or recommendation..

The series of discussion papers that follow the co-chairs' essay are excellent summaries of complex scientific and policy issues, and they will be valuable to interested citizens as well as to scientists and policy makers. Prepared and circulated in advance, they served as the springboard for a wide-ranging and rewarding discussion from the varied perspectives of the participants.

The co-chairs' skill and the excellence of the papers were essential to the success of the Forum, but an equally important element was the expert contributions from all of the participants around the table. Using the rigorous discipline of informed dialogue and inquiry, the Institute's method enhances participants' ability to think clearly about complex issues, mindful of the value of differing viewpoints. The sharing of views in a spirit of candor and collegiality leads to the expansion of each individual's understanding and the creation of new thinking and insights. In particular, several of the scientists, environmentalists, and government officials commented on the value of having the perspectives of corporate representatives in the dialogue.

I gratefully acknowledge the grace and efficiency with which Katrin Thomas handled advance arrangements, managed the details of the Forum, and assisted in the editing and publication of this report. Her assistance was indispensable, and the good nature with which she provided it was invaluable.

The papers by Jenkins et al and Soberon were published by Environment magazine in their July/August 2004 and September 2004 issues respectively, and Environment's editorial assistance is appreciated.

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