

2015, IPBES meeting, Bonn, Jan 12-17

IPBES - A Rosetta Stone for Nature's Benefits to People 947

The UN is like the city on a hill with its ideals gleaming in the sunlight. But up close, you can see that the city's silhouette is defined by acres of canvas draped over the whole thing. If you lift the edge of the canvas to peer underneath you find that the structure is cobbled together of unfinished lumber with wobbly joints and debris strewn all over. The city *is* real, but shaky and full of discord.

This shaky and discordant but real city *does* accomplish useful work. The *International Panel on Climate Change (IPCC)* has produced a comprehensive report that tells us what is happening climate-wise and, at least theoretically, helps policy decisions be based on sound information.

The UN has spawned another such organization, this one to gather information on bio-diversity and the ecosystem services that support human life. It's called *the Intergovernmental Platform for Science/Policy on Biodiversity and Eco-system Services (IPBES, pronounced "Ip-Bes")*

In January I attended the third plenary session of IPBES in Bonn. The meeting was purely organizational; no science was discussed. The countries that have signed on to fund and manage the work of IPBES are sorting out who will do what, and who will watch over what gets done, in a mixed atmosphere of high hopes and low trust.

Nations have agreed that policy decisions should be science- and knowledge-based, and that the relevant science and knowledge must be assembled into a coherent platform that can be understood and freely shared by all. IPBES is attempting to do that. The challenge is enormous.

The need for an integrated science-policy platform is a no-brainer. Scientists, on the whole, want both to grasp more about this fascinating world than they find within their disciplinary silos, and to do everything they can to have their own fields of study understood and respected, both by other scientists and by policy makers. At this point, decisions that affect bio-diversity and ecosystems are made by whoever can get funding together for a project, with little understanding of how that project impacts everything else. It's really chaos, contributing to the bio- and ecological degradation we see all around. Establishing a solid, shared knowledge platform does not guarantee that decisions will be based on it, but without it we cannot assess what is happening.

THE STRUCTURE

The structure of the IPBES is complex. The 123 nations that have signed on comprise the Plenary, and their delegates, who are not themselves scientists; are there to look out for the interests of their countries. The plenary appoints a Multidisciplinary Expert Panel (MEP, pronounced "Mep") who are then in charge of orchestrating the assemblage of knowledge and assuring that it is sound. The MEP has regional and gender balance and represents all relevant disciplines. The Plenary and the MEP run the show with the help of a small Secretariat. A Bureau oversees administrative functions when the Plenary is not in session.

The science itself will come from everywhere: government agencies, universities, industry and private research institutions, research museums, NGOs, and even from four branches of the UN itself which have never before collaborated with each other. In IPBES all these science organizations are referred to as Stakeholders. It is worth noting that the Indigenous Peoples do not

want to be called Stakeholders, a term from the corporate and colonial systems that have undercut their existence. They are “Rights-holders.” Indigenous and local knowledge (ILK) is specifically included in the IPBES package.

There is also a special category of Stakeholder organizations called Observers who monitor the functioning of the various aspects of IPBES, especially between sessions. Various factions want control over who fills this important role, and after three years of discussion the nations have not agreed on criteria for granting Observer status. They did adopt a less-than-perfect procedure about conflicts of interest, in the MEP as well as among the Observers.

The work to be done is expensive, and the budget is very tight. There was even question about whether the five-person Secretariat could add three more staff. The US wants no project to go forward unless funding for the specific project has been secured, which would give the funder great influence over what is included, and possibly over the findings.

THE WORK

“Scoping” is underway for both thematic and regional assessments, but it will be some years before findings are published. In 2014 experts were gathered to work on: 1) Pollination; 2) Land degradation and restoration; 3) Invasive alien species; 4) Scenario analysis and modeling; 5) Value, valuation and accounting; 6) Sustainable use; 7) Agriculture and food security; and 8) Migratory and transboundary species.

This year the call is for experts to fill Task Forces on: 1) capacity-building; 2) indigenous and local knowledge systems and 3) knowledge and data, and to form two Expert Groups to develop guides on 1) production and integration of assessments from and across all scales and 2) a catalogue of Policy support tools and methodologies

The actual compilation of research findings has begun on only the Pollination and Pollinators Assessment. Work on the Open Oceans is on hold because of an ongoing World Ocean Assessment.

Many Stakeholders are very concerned about the impact of commercial interests on the integrity of IPBES. “It’s not about honey, it’s about the number of species of bees.” Experts from Syngenta and Bayer, who make products believed to negatively affect pollinators, are on the MEP.

CONCLUSION

Us? We get to applaud the noble intentions of IPBES, worry about the effects of jousting for power, watch for the publication of findings and, as with the IPCC, work here at home for the reports to be taken seriously. Our challenge too is enormous.