The biodiversity chasm is opening – time to act

Like all other species, we exploit our local environment for our gain. We have been uniquely successful on a global scale. But unlike other species, our technological prowess has allowed us to quickly upset ecological balances that have existed for millennia. What in the past may have seemed like nibbling at an ‘endless’ resource has quickly escalated into exponential and potentially irreversible change in global biodiversity. This has been recognized by the UNEP driven Convention on Biological Diversity which, as part of its 2011 – 2020 strategic plan has set targets to address global biodiversity losses.

The media focuses on the threat to iconic species such as the rhinoceros and tiger. But an even greater concern for humanity is that we sleepwalk into losing our hugely diverse and valuable natural habitats. This happens at all scales from wide area felling of pristine forests for cattle ranching and palm oil plantation to the creeping loss of wetland, woodland and grassland to urban development. Coral reefs, seagrass and mangrove - the nurseries of marine diversity are under intense threat. However, as identified by the UN Millenium Ecosystem Assessment (2005) the most immediate and devastating effects on people will be from loss of the less productive dryland habitats where populations are growing fastest and poverty is rife.

But we can make a difference by recognizing the benefits that biodiversity brings in terms of resilience of our natural systems, economic value and the health and wellbeing of our own species.

We have to address this at local, national and international level and we have a responsibility to ensure that all of our developments involve no net loss of biodiversity but preferably net gain. I can’t see how this is negotiable. Can you?

The Economics of Ecosystems and Biodiversity (TEEB) initiative is underway in Bhutan, Ecuador, Liberia, Philippines and Tanzania from 2012 – 2015 to demonstrate the value of nature and encourage recognition of ecosystem services in policy making. Many other countries are following with their own TEEB ecosystem initiatives.

As a result of increased recognition of the value of ecosystems the concepts of net gain / no net loss for habitats is finding its way into the corporate agenda. Funding agencies such as International Finance Corporation - through their Performance Standard 6 (2012) require organisations seeking funding for development to achieve net gains for critical habitats and no net loss for natural habitat.

Companies such as Rio Tinto have already recognized the need to adopt such requirements in new development proposals and use ‘Net Positive Impact’ and ‘Corporate Ecosystem Valuation’ as planning tools.

So what can we do to make a difference on our projects? Top five things to think about are:

- Appreciate the value of habitats and ecosystems at a local level and as part of wider national and global network.
• Be brave – do something positive on your development to protect and enhance our ecosystems – it will benefit everyone and make your children proud.
• Get some specialist advice from biodiversity experts.
• Design in ‘no net loss’ and preferably ‘net gain’ in biodiversity – every little helps.
• Think about the future – like buildings, habitats need some care and attention.

Let's get on with it.

Paul Johnson, Director, Arup, March 2015.

(Paul Johnson is an Arup Fellow and a Director in Arup’s global environmental consulting practice which he founded in 1987 a year after joining Arup)