

Breaking the Boundaries on Business and Biodiversity

A commentary by

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Contents

| | |
|---|-----------|
| Introduction | 3 |
| Background | 4 |
| Some basics on Biodiversity | 5 |
| Thinking ‘Beyond the hedgerow‘ | 6 |
| The IEMA role in Biodiversity issues | 8 |
| Promoting the cause | 9 |
| Conclusion | 10 |

Introduction

It comes as no surprise to Environmental Managers that Biodiversity issues have an impact on business. This means that they are in a great position to communicate that message to their employers or clients. They are able to understand the business itself and how it operates, make connections between how they source their resources and advise on better choices. This all sounds ideal especially if the business is engaged with the idea and wants to make a better future. For these organisations the setting of policies for biodiversity offsets is a technicality which they will buy into as soon as our profession can set them.

But what about the businesses that aren't involved with Environmental Managers in any way? They are reliant on picking up information from news articles, magazines and whatever networking circles they choose to move in. If they aren't already switched on to environmental issues in some way then choosing between 'Biodiversity' and 'Ecology' as descriptors makes no difference.

A large part of the problem is that many do not understand how choices made locally can have global impacts. For the people that do have that knowledge, often they aren't in a role within an organisation where they feel they can make a difference. In addition to that, many people get so bogged down with all the 'doom and gloom' stories that it is hard for them to understand how they can make a difference.

Many of these issues can be addressed with knowledge and resources.

My main point is that we must find ways to tap in to the vast base of knowledge and skill that is out there but not signed up to the profession of Environmental Management. Bear with me, this isn't going to be a short term solution.

Background

I originally trained as an accountant. I reached a point where I realised it wasn't what I wanted to do and started a degree in Environmental Studies. This set me on a path that has taken a slightly different course to the one I expected. Originally I wanted to be an ecologist so, alongside the degree and my full time job, I started volunteering with any organisation that I could get to. This has included the RSPB, The Wildlife Trust, Stevenage Council (as a Tree Warden), The Badger Trust and The Bat Conservation Trust to name a few. I met hundreds of different people, many with dreams of working in ecology, many much younger than me. I began to realise that maybe I wouldn't be able to achieve that goal and refocused.

I was still working as an accountant and made a proposal to the Board to allow me to start analysing our carbon footprint. Less than two years later I graduated, the company achieved 14001 and I joined the IEMA. A new role was created for me and I am now solely responsible for the system I created.

My point? There are many people out there working for organisations on which they can have an impact. What they need is empowerment and encouragement. There is scope to reach them through articles in their professional magazines. This could include Facilities Management, Accountancy, Operations Management, Supply Chain Management etc.

The world is changing and the way communications work is changing. It is possible for individuals to make a difference now more than ever and the IEMA is in the perfect position to enable them to do it.

Some basics on Biodiversity

There are hundreds of different ways to view Biodiversity, ranging from the global scale of entire oceans and rainforests, through national scales such as counting national populations of species, to local scales where building houses on a piece of farmland could destroy a local population of skylarks.

There is also a somewhat hidden scale where making a choice of the brand of biscuits you will provide at a conference will affect a rainforest according to whether the palm oil within them was sustainable or not.

But what do most people understand? It is very easy for us as Environmental Managers to forget that this is not common knowledge. In the circles we move in and on the forums we visit, even in the magazines we read these are daily topics. For most their choice of biscuits is led by the price they will pay, often even above the way they taste. We must not lose sight of the fact that 'business' as a whole knows this very well.

People don't always respond to shock images of burning trees in the Amazon, or polar bears swimming to their deaths because they can't reach the next piece of ice. In a recession we can't rely on individuals driving the market alone, although this does help.

Business, then, is driven by the bottom line. Not news. The key driving factor for them isn't whether they have wiped out the last of a species of tree frog. It is the price that they will pay for that resource. The Economics of Ecology and Biodiversity goes a long way in setting that out but it's profile needs to be raised drastically. The Stern report was all over international news but somehow TEEB has sunk very quickly in the press and this must be addressed.

Meanwhile, what about the terminology? The question was raised whether 'Ecology' should be used instead of 'Biodiversity'. They are not really the same thing. Ecology is the science behind how nature works, from how species interact with their own kind and others, with their environment, with their food, even how the energy and nutrients pass around the ecosystems. Biodiversity is about the diversity of life, from the variety of species to the genetic make up of individuals within those species. These differences are very important and we should be careful to avoid the situation we currently have with confusion between 'Global Warming' and 'Climate Change'.

Finally for this section, my experience has shown that people find it much easier to identify with local issues than global ones. To that end, I tend to discuss local examples before expanding to comparisons on a larger scale. We need to capture the attention, garner the understanding then expand on it. This is much more easily done with interested individuals rather than trying to inspire interest where there is none. If this is done correctly the interest spreads. Inspiration grows like mushrooms, in rings around the source. Eventually cultures then change until the majority of individuals are interested, and writers on organisations such as Charles Handy knew that it is individuals that are the organisation. (Personally I like to think of organisations as ecosystems within themselves, driven by the actions and interactions of the individuals, the teams or departments as the equivalent of species!)

Thinking 'Beyond the hedgerow'

This isn't anything radical in its basis, just my equivalent of thinking outside the box, but it does slightly buck the trend of government policy and large scale planning.

We do have obvious solutions which are, and must be, on the agenda for addressing. These include the largest organisations such as Unilever, BP, Tesco; these are the businesses that currently drive the way our economies work globally. In ecological terms, you could consider these to be 'keystone' species. But this isn't necessarily the case.

There are many smaller organisations that break the mould, companies such as Innocent, New Covent Garden Food Co., Lush, Hotel Chocolat, companies that have built their business models around social responsibility and include Biodiversity in their business planning. They are successful businesses that use simple ideas to make the way they work different to the corporations.

Yes, the corporations are massive but the smaller businesses out there are still a significant resource and also, potentially much more readily influenced. Case studies of smaller organisations would be useful, especially to other smaller organisations.

There is also some disparity in the language that is used. I currently work for an organisation that would be deemed 'Large' according to the accounting definition. When signing up for the Carbon Reduction Commitment (CRC) we had to register because we have a half-hourly meter, yet our consumption is way under the level required for reporting. Because we are considered large we aren't eligible for any assistance for investment projects yet we can't get a suitable rate of return on our investment to justify the spend as a business. Further reductions in our electricity consumption are, therefore, less attractive to the Board. The same issue applies in the field of Biodiversity. The Biodiversity Pawprint of an organisation may be disproportionate to its size in the economic sense. And that could work either way. How, for example would the Pawprint of Barclays Bank compare globally to Shell?

So I would like to suggest that we begin to shift our ways of thinking. The Pawprint is just the beginning.

We should be considering a 'pincer movement' on this issue in order to give it some sustainability of its own. We need to be developing the future Environmental Managers and at the moment there is a situation which is not dissimilar to the 'Equity Card' situation encountered by actors.

On the IEMA forums there are posts from graduates desperately trying to find ways to improve their experience to develop their careers. Whilst volunteering I met people of all ages and backgrounds struggling to get their foot on the first rung in their career choice for many reasons. If we have a profession built with only highly experienced individuals right now, what will happen in ten or fifteen years time when all the current graduates have retrained? There is a solution which if developed carefully could provide long term benefits but needs a different way of thinking.

We have a wealth of different charitable and public sector organisations, between them there is an army of volunteers. We also have hundreds of businesses looking for practical

and affordable solutions to offsetting carbon. Defra is leading a partnership called The Big Tree Plant.

So we have a workforce in the charities, potential funding in the businesses (plus the possibility of additional workers!) and also further scope for funding from The Big Tree Plant. Combine the three and lots of trees get planted.

What has that got to do with Biodiversity? Plant a tree to offset carbon and you also improve habitat, maybe even create new habitats, in turn improving the landscape for biodiversity. Plant them in an area that was deemed ecologically poor, where no endangered species exist, everyone wins. Plant them in an area that is at risk of floods and you help to slow the passage of rainwater, reducing that risk, everyone wins.

There are two points here.

If we continue to segregate Biodiversity, Carbon emissions, Climate Change, we are fighting a bit of a losing battle.

Partnerships, collaborations, joined-up thinking are the way forward. No business smaller than our global giants can afford to administer entire projects, nor do they have the expertise. But if they work together, possibly even with their competitors, they can address their responsibilities and still protect their futures by ensuring the future of the resources they depend on, locally or globally.

The IEMA role in Biodiversity issues

The Institute has an opportunity to help to develop future Environmental Managers with true Biodiversity expertise. Provision of:

- Basic modules at a low cost to develop understanding could easily be made available on the website, maybe even on a microsite.
- A second level of more detailed modules could also be developed and designed to tie in with business and environmental management. These would then be stepping stones for those that might be interested in a career in our profession.
- A network to connect organisations could be set up, providing toolkits to assist with development of such schemes and connecting consultants in the field with them.
- A library to include links to wildlife sites, organisations and a suggested reading list.
- A Special Interest Group on Biodiversity

Ultimately the Environmental Management profession will continue to grow and, I believe will divide into different fields in the way that accountancy has done. At the moment, Biodiversity is under represented within the IEMA, at least as far as it's public face is concerned. We should be championing the links between Business and it's resources, not just helping business to meet any offset requirements. In the future we will be serious business partners not just an embellishment to be displayed as a badge of honour by forward thinking companies only.

Promoting the cause

There are now more opportunities for promotion than ever before and full use should be made of them all.

Websites are now standard but the news on the IEMA website is not updated very often, which is a missed opportunity. In a time when businesses are being impacted by numerous large scale environmental events the news thread is strangely quiet. It should be a source of business information for members to help them in their roles.

Use of social networking sites has also become much more mainstream and is an opportunity to connect with members and other organisations to increase knowledge flow, awareness and connectivity.

Getting involved with partnerships with charities and other organisations in development of business schemes, helping them to ensure professional standards and environmental responsibility are maintained would help to raise the IEMA profile and enable our professionals to build new connections.

Engaging the press, particularly where they have specific environmental sections, such as the Guardian with it's Environment and also Sustainable Business forums, must be key in raising the profile of Biodiversity. Leo Hickman, one of the key players, regularly comments and has been keeping a close eye on developments in biodiversity issues. He has even commented that it's profile remains low so would certainly be interested in any initiatives in this area.

Finally, the role of celebrity cannot be ignored in generating interest. The 10:10 campaign was very high profile and made extensive use of all these methods, Hugh's Fish Fight has now generated over 400,000 supporters and presenters such as David Attenborough, Kate Humble and Stephen Fry have brought wildlife knowledge to the masses. Use of already friendly faces softens the message and if they comment on twitter it reaches a vast audience very quickly.

In the modern world we cannot rely on outdated methods to get our message across. Business has changed, our profession must be ahead of the game.

Conclusion

I am not suggesting that these are all completely new ideas, but perhaps new applications for them. The IEMA is a well respected organisation that has the potential to add serious weight to the issue of Business and Biodiversity.

My initial efforts in presenting to the Board were received with a great deal of scepticism and even laughter. But I pressed on. Now, biodiversity awareness is part of our engineer training, affording protection to bats and other wildlife that might be encountered. One engineer recently commented that he had previously encountered a bat and no-one knew what to do about it. A small change? Possibly. However, if that was a lone male bat, it could have been crucial to local biodiversity. Even the smallest change has the potential for massive impact.

What if there are other individuals out there who could make a difference?