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Forgive Us Our Debts

Why aren't conservationists fighting poverty?

BY JON CHRISTENSEN

11 Aug 2005

It's a shame. Conservationists are sitting on the sidelines while the Big Game unfolds before our eyes. A major campaign is under way to change the terms of development, alleviate crushing debt, and help poor people around the world live better lives. Successes are being racked up. And conservation and environmental groups are nowhere to be seen.

**Down in the dumps.***Photo: AP/Bullit Marquez.*

There are 39 groups listed as partners in the [Campaign to Make Poverty History](#). Not one of them is a conservation or environmental organization.

It's a shame, not just for the leaders of the conservation and environmental movements, but also for conservation and the environment. The changes happening now will shape the future of the poorest regions of the world, many of which are home to the earth's greatest biodiversity -- as well as its most desperate people.

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People used to talk about conservation *and* development. For a while, it seemed development advocates would do anything to hitch their projects to conservation. Not anymore. Now conservationists fret that they've dropped off the A-list.

I recently attended a conference on "Conservation Incentives That Work for People on the Land." When I heard Walter Reid, the director of the [Millennium Ecosystem Assessment](#), and Carter Roberts, the new president and CEO of the World Wildlife Fund U.S., complain that conservation was not getting adequate attention -- even from such sympathetic types as Jeffrey Sachs, author of [The End of Poverty: Economic Possibilities for Our Time](#) -- I wondered whether there might be a new way back into the heart of the development dialogue. Not through conservation, but through something the development community has put at the center of its own agenda: governance.

These days, governance is the key word in international development, from multilateral agencies to governments and NGOs. When the finance ministers of the Group of Eight (G8), a coalition of the world's leading industrialized nations, agreed to cancel \$40 billion of debt owed by 18 of the world's poorest countries, they tied the debt relief to good government practices, improvements in health and education, and elimination of poverty.

Once again, the environment was not on the agenda, despite the fact that maintenance of ecosystem services such as clean water is a critical concern in poor countries and despite the fact that good governance is essential for conservation. In a [study](#) published in *Nature*, researchers found that poorly governed countries tend to lose biodiversity faster as corruption rises. Higher corruption correlated with loss of forest cover and, in Africa, with declines in elephant and black rhino populations.

Good governance -- which starts with free and fair elections, an independent judiciary, a free press, and property rights -- needs to be pushed further to embrace conservation of ecosystem services and biodiversity through good laws, adequate administration, and practical incentives that work for people on the land.

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I am sure there are many conservationists and environmentalists among the more than 3 million people wearing white "Make Poverty History" [wristbands](#) worldwide, and the more than 2 million people who sent text messages on their mobile phones trying to get tickets to the Live8 global series of concerts this summer. It's not too late for them to get the message to leaders of conservation and environmental organizations, too.

Conservationists can sit on the sidelines while history is made. Or get back in the game.

Jon Christensen is a research fellow in the Center for Environmental Science and Policy at Stanford University. This article originally appeared in Conservation in Practice.

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