

BIO-DIPLOMACY: THE COLOMBIAN DIMENSION

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The struggle for the defense of nature and the establishment of a general consciousness in favor of bios are not easy commitments. Since they may appear as contemporary ideals, the indisputable convenience of technological development and especially economic profit, are very often simplistically identified as progress. However, a common effort by all nations is required to achieve progress for humankind and, at the same time, protect life on this planet from the threats of our own predatory anarchy.

The natural context of our life has changed dramatically in the last decades. We have witnessed enormous advances in extracting natural resources and achieved surprising progress in productivity and welfare. But the price of progress has, unfortunately, been an accelerated deterioration of our planet's health. We have reached the point where it is more and more difficult to describe, let alone explain, the complexity of the ecological crisis of our times. However, the whole world must understand the decaying condition of the natural system which sustains the basic element and synthesis of our existence, namely bios (life).

Many people only get shocked when acquainted with the phenomenon of the deterioration of the "scenery" of our life, and get involved themselves in the struggle to preserve it only after one of the frequent contemporary catastrophes touches them directly. But for millions the subject remains distant and theoretical, the exclusive concern of dreamers and alarmed moralists having nothing else to worry about.

From our privileged position as observers of international events and society, we can see with satisfaction that the idea of the protection of the environment and the wider concept of defense of bios in its multiple and un-suspected expressions, has already appeared and rooted itself in many places around the world although not at the same speed with which damage to life and misconceptions of progress are advancing. A new field of knowledge is fortunately emerging: the study of the protection of bios on earth against the threats imposed by the very activity of man, and the formulation of ideas and the setting up of ideals to find a balance which will allow our society to achieve progress in peace with nature as the only guarantee for the survival of life. This new and developing field is interdisciplinary and international by principle, as it could not be otherwise.

More and more people within the academic world and also within the realm of industrialists and even politicians, are getting acquainted with and interested in this subject. Voices from different corners of earth have risen to denounce all kinds of assaults which affect bios. In fact, as time advances, it will be more difficult to find contemporary leaders of our society who do not wish to recognize the critical trends of depredation of natural resources and of the quality of life.

This is good and encouraging news but we must be aware of the importance of assigning the concept of bios the right place among the basic principles of contemporary civilization. If we fail to develop widespread consciousness on the matter, the principle of preservation of bios may end up being a mere descriptive evocation. In fact, it is only positive action, upon the basis of a set of widely recognized parameters which will save bios, and achieve reconciliation with nature. And this action must be coherent, international, interdisciplinary.

There are indeed several dimensions and interpretations of the ecological problem. Geography, history and culture have conditioned distinct approaches to nature. There are also various degrees in the use of resources by different countries and a great variety of possibilities of damaging or saving them.

But there is only one nature for the moment, within the limits of our planet, and a permanent discussion in search of common ground for international understanding on the preservation of life becomes indispensable. Different views have to be exposed and confronted in an open and permanent dialogue which will not only enrich our knowledge, but lead us to wiser decisions. At the same time it requires the establishment of a more permanent link between all those who are concerned and responsible at different levels in the creation of the beliefs of society.

It is here that bio-diplomacy finds a field for development and accomplishment. And it is in this perspective that I understand the purposes of the Biopolitics International Organisation and of this International Conference on the International University for the Bio-Environment. This gathering provides an opportunity for the discussion of the ways in which the ideal of preservation of bios can be assimilated by our contemporary civilization.

Hopefully it will contribute to the establishing of the theoretical framework that such a huge task requires, under the auspices of knowledge and views of experts, and the good will of enthusiasts from different countries of the world. Scientists, anthropologists, decision makers, geographers, historians, economists and sociologists, among others, would have many things to say here.

My point of view, instead, is simply that of someone who comes from a country exceptionally rich in natural resources and concerned with environmental protection. Colombia is a land of enormous natural wealth and hosts a great variety of ecosystems and a biological diversity which allows one to say that, in certain areas of the country, it is possible to find more vegetable and animal species in one hectare than in many entire nations of other latitudes.

From time immemorial the inhabitants of the country enjoyed absolute access to natural resources and made uncontrolled use of our great wealth. The arrival of European colonizers and the complex process of formation of our contemporary country accelerated the pressure over the environment and generated a trend that resulted in making Colombia a contributor to environmental damage, mainly by way of destruction of natural forests and fauna.

Since 1943 however, the protection of the environment in its contemporary conception started being part of governmental policies. We then initiated a process of preservation of certain areas of special ecological interest, and went on adopting specialized legislation in a normative process that had a very important landmark when, in 1975, we adopted a National Code for Environmental Protection later recommended as a model by the United Nations.

Today, the System of National Parks consists of 42 areas classified as National Natural Parks, Flora and Fauna Sanctuaries, Special Reserves and Unique Natural Areas. In this way we are protecting submarine coral reefs in the Atlantic Ocean, islands with unique flora and fauna in the Pacific Ocean, volcanoes of the Andes, the exceptional Sierra Nevada de Santa Marta which contains every biotic zone, from arid sea-board to snow-covered peaks at almost 6,000 meters above the sea level within a distance of 36 kilometers, and the exceptional Serrania de la Macarena which, isolated from the Andes, preserves one of the most exotic ecosystems in the world. The special treatment of these areas has conservation, research, education and recreation purposes. They are not inaccessible, nor forbidden areas. The idea behind their organization is to teach Colombians to be aware of our wealth and of the importance of bios.

Our share of Amazon rainforests has rightly deserved particular attention. Colombia is not only a signatory and strong supporter of the Amazon Cooperation Treaty, one of the most valid and important contemporary examples of bio-diplomacy, but has taken special measures concerning the defense of that ecosystem. The Colombian Amazon Basin covers more than 400,000 square kilometers, an area three times that of Greece, and at the same time represents 35% of our territory. It has been established that the northwest region of the Amazon, which corresponds to Colombia, is one of the richest areas of the world in terms of flora and fauna. This explains the reputation of the country among botanists and other researchers of the science of bios.

To preserve this valuable patrimony, the government has in the past decade vigorously implemented a strategy for the protection of the environment as well as of the rights of the indigenous peoples. As part of this policy, Colombia has created the largest Indian reserve in the world, an area of 18 million hectares. The basic idea behind this determination is the belief that the knowledge, social organization and way of life of Indian communities, which have inhabited the area for more than 8,000 years, are the best guarantee for the preservation of our Amazon patrimony.

The expansion of the agriculture frontier through colonization has been discarded. The Indians will now have in their hands a great share, almost 50%, of our Amazon basin. We are aware of the fact that the pressures from the part of the colonizers and entrepreneurs will continue and the danger of senseless exploitation is still alive. We know that legal measures may not suffice, and we are looking for appropriate technologies and a system of management of the resources of the region which allows rational exploitation of the ecosystem.

Apart from the system of national parks and the adoption of an Amazon policy, we have divided the whole country, which also includes the Andean, Carribean and Pacific regions, into bio-geographical areas. This division will be at the basis of decision-making in different fields and will help a more rational exploitation of resources. This distribution has been the result of an inter-disciplinary analysis which took into account morphology, hydrology, geology, climate, vegetation, flora, fauna, archaeology, ethnography, history and cultural diversity. These are, in a few lines, the main achievements of one of the so-called underdeveloped countries in the field of environmental protection. We do not pretend to assert that we have everything under control. The inventory of difficulties we face is still very long, and if we see the environmental problem in its international dimensions there are many reflections to make.

It seems that there are many misconceptions associated with the contributing factors to the degradation of bios around the world. The character and proportion of threats to life changes from region to region and in accordance to the prevailing conditions of development of different societies. It is not only the need of the poor but the greed of the rich that one can find at the roots of the assault on natural resources.

Several countries of the North have exhausted their natural forests through a millenary process of development and today very strictly preserve their own natural wealth. These countries are being supplied with hardwood and other materials from tropical areas at prices which are insignificant if one takes into account the real value of the wealth being destroyed to attend their demand. This inevitably makes us think about the international economic order of our times with its contradiction, in the field of natural resources, between countries which are very rich in natural wealth and house poor societies, and countries with lesser natural resources which are able to enjoy high levels of welfare and benefit from resources found on foreign areas not yet exhausted.

Our tropical forests are rich not only in wood but also have an abundance of biological wealth. The forests of other latitudes are much poorer by comparison. Developed countries of the north get wood from us at very low prices and the destruction of bios that follows does not enter into the bill. Let us ask ourselves how much we, the people from the biologically rich tropic, would have to pay for wood coming from the biologically poor North. I have no doubt that, in such a case, the price would be substantially higher and that the bill would include all possible elements.

We are convinced that saving bios on earth requires the extraordinary effort of all nations. Without such a commitment, individual undertakings may be of little relevance. It is very urgent that the international community take decisions on the matter. Colombia supports proposals such as the one by Prince Charles of Great Britain who, by the way, is familiar with our policies and achievements, for the calling of an International Tropical Forest Convention. But apart from that, my country has expressed at different forums the idea that industrial countries have to pay an ecological debt to humankind.

Speaking before the General Assembly of the United Nations, former Colombian President Virgilio Barco said:

"The cost of 500 years of conquest and colonization of overseas territories, of 200 years of rapid industrial development and of intensive exploitation of the planet's resources.... today weighs heavily on the human race. The present flow of capital between North and South obviously does not permit countries of the Third World to respond adequately to the duties implied by the privilege of processing most of the world's tropical forests. The world community and the various multilateral and international organizations are confronted today with one of the greatest challenges in history: to halt ecological destruction and at the same time to defeat poverty and underdevelopment.

I am convinced that any serious analysis of the problem of destruction of life has to take into account concrete historical developments and contemporary realities. This is necessary if we are to move from the common place of proclaiming our belief in the cause of life, and get into action.

At the same time, it is imperative to develop, through formal and informal education, an international ecological culture. I would say it is indispensable to give impulse to the international strengthening of bio-culture.

It will be necessary to realize, with open mind and sincerity, the breadth and depth of sources of depredation against nature, including those disguised under the flags of development. The international community has the impression that a new world order is emerging. The definition of that order must give a privileged place to the protection of the environment. We should talk, as far as bios is concerned, of a Common House of Humankind. I am sure that the media, which have contributed up until now to construct so many beliefs about our world and our life, would help in a very substantial way to introduce among the catalogue of generally recognized principles of our society the importance of life in all its marvelous manifestations.

Exercises like this of the International University for the Bio-Environment, which is basically inter-disciplinary and international, must provide a framework for the discussion of the subject. I hope that a new bio-mythology, born again in Greece, will once more give us one of those marvellous creative revolutions which the world has already inherited from this privileged civilization.

Ambassador **Eduardo Barajas** graduated with a doctorate in jurisprudence from Rosario University of Bogota, Colombia, and obtained degrees in political science from England and in public administration from France. His career in the public service of Colombia has included tenures as secretary-general of the Ministry of Government, adviser to the Secretary of Public Administration, deputy director and interim manager of the regional planning corporation of the area of Bogota, and directing the Office for the Organisation of Public Administration at the Presidency of the Republic. He was secretary to the commission in charge of the reform of the code of commerce, rector of the Pedagogic and Technologic University of Colombia, and has served as adviser and board-member on many different public enterprises, governmental commissions on administrative policy and reform, and private companies.