

SOCIETY IN NATURE, NATURE IN SOCIETY

Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

First of all, I would like to thank the organizers of this roundtable for inviting me to participate in the discussion on behalf of Western European environment NGOs. I would also like to use this opportunity to thank the Portuguese Ministry for the Environment for having integrated a representative from Portuguese NGOs in their governmental delegation. It is a good example of cooperation and transparency that has also been adopted by some other delegations and that we hope to see even further expanded in the future.

As the time for interventions is limited, I would just like to make some central points.

Firstly, I would like to point out that the very title of this roundtable reflects one of the biggest problems we, NGOs, have to face: this idea that somehow “society” is not “nature”, that the human is not the same as the natural. This, of course, is a fallacy. Humans belong to the natural world and depend on the natural world; they cannot be dissociated from the ecosystems in which they live and on which they depend for food, water, clean air, raw materials, and so on. This is the notion of ecosystem services, about which we have already heard today.

Secondly, this fallacious view of the human and the natural as separate entities leads to the idea that one can separate these two spheres of reality, and therefore whatever humans do to an ecosystem will remain in a water-tight compartment and not have any effects on human life.

Now, this idea of inter-relatedness brings me to the concept of Environmental Policy Integration. This is a concept that we hear about quite often in the political framework of the European Union as far as environmental policy is concerned. But what do we see in practice?

Our decision-makers repeatedly reaffirm the need to protect biodiversity; the EU has even committed itself to completely halting the loss of biodiversity in its territory by 2010. These, of course, are very laudable intentions, that NGOs have received with great enthusiasm. However, what we see in reality is that decision-makers are still not prepared to adapt their actions to these intentions. We see declining marine biodiversity, with around 80% of commercial fish stocks being over-exploited, and yet at the same time we see catch quotas being increased and subsidies being given out to amazingly destructive fishing practices. We commit to halting the loss of biodiversity, but we decide to build hydroelectrical dams in order to feed our insatiable appetite for energy, consequently destroying unique habitats and eliminating any chance of survival for some endemic species. The EU has created Natura 2000 as an instrument to protect biodiversity, but the fact is that Member States continue not to give enough priority to it in their structural funds programmes, which means that implementation is lacking due to insufficient financing.

So my third and final point would be that there is still very much to be done in the European Union as far as the protection of biodiversity is concerned. Therefore, in a conference such as this one, it would be useful that every single one of the participating countries took advantage of this opportunity to exchange best-practice and ideas, and not try to pretend the problem does not exist or that one can “compensate” the loss of biodiversity in one part of the region by implementing conservation projects in another part of the region.

Thank you.