

Wellsboro Gazette, December 05, 2001

Why we should care about biodiversity

By Gayle Morrow

Don't feel bad if you don't know what "biodiversity" means. A recent Pennsylvania Center for Environmental Education showed that just 38 percent of adult Pennsylvanians who responded recognized the term; fewer understood it.

According to the Pennsylvania Biodiversity Partnership "biodiversity is the variety of species, their genetic make-up, and the natural communities in which they occur."

"It includes all of the native plants and animals in Pennsylvania and the processes that sustain life on Earth."

Of the over 21,000 different species of organisms identified in the state, over 1,600 are considered to be rare, threatened or endangered.

Or, as Ben Franklin said, "When the well's dry, we know the worth of water."

"We know the world is in a spate of extinctions," said Shane Mahoney, executive director of science for the Newfoundland and Labrador Department of Tourism, Culture, and Recreation. "It is unprecedented. (But) man is as integrally woven into the tapestry of life as any other organism."

Mahoney was a keynote speaker at the state's first biodiversity conference, organized by the Pennsylvania Biodiversity Partnership and held Nov. 30 in State College.

The partnership was created in response to recommendations from the Pennsylvania 21st Century Commission citing a need for a broad-based public-private partnership to promote the conservation and protection of native species and their communities.

The state currently lacks a comprehensive strategy for biodiversity conservation. Yet it has 2,800 miles of stream impaired from acid mine drainage, numerous streams and lakes impaired due to sedimentation, and is losing an acre an hour to development.

"The need to understand the state's natural resources have never been more critical," said Randy Gray, PBP board chair and president of The Nature Conservancy of Pennsylvania.

Because of what Mahoney described as the "entwined nature of biological existence," that effort to understand can be daunting, to say the least.

"We are infantile in our understanding of how the world works," said Mahoney.

What are certainties, however, he said, are that future conflicts will be over resources and that there will be shortages "we cannot manufacture our way out of."

"Everything extracts a price," said Mahoney. He related how the decimation of the cod population from the waters around Newfoundland and Labrador had brought economic, social and environmental havoc to residents here.

“It (cod fishing) was absolutely crucial to our way of life, but we lost it. The biodiversity of that ocean was impaired.

“So, you are in a fight for your lives,” he told the group of about 250. “That’s what this movement is about. We are losing components that we see as indicators of a healthy environment.”

What to do? Nicholas DiPasquale, secretary of the Delaware Department of Natural Resources and Environmental Control, reported that his state, recognizing its own declining biodiversity (it has lost a higher percentage of native plant species than any other state), established a biodiversity partnership to identify and prioritize areas of concern, and then take action.

DiPasquale stressed the importance of an integrated approach to solving problems, of acknowledging the differences in “language” and finding ways to relate the language of biodiversity to that of economics, of the critical need to involve local land-use decision makers and non-government organizations, and finding ways to help people “make connections back to nature.”

Nature is what it’s all about, of course; educating the various target audiences on the value of nature, of biodiversity, is a main focus area for the partnership.

“It’s not just about science, it’s about values,” said Caren Glotfelty, director for The Heinz Endowment’s environmental program. “It will be a long-term effort. We need to make biodiversity a broad-based cultural imperative.”

To that end, the PBP is developing a three-phase, multi-year process, beginning with a “state of the state of biodiversity” report to be published early in 2002. Partnership members agree that education, both in the schools and for adults, is paramount. Best management and best stewardship practices, for use on private and public lands, respectively, that are applicable to preservation of biodiversity should be developed and used. Law and policy may have to be reviewed, amended or created.

Particularly important is the broad-based public support and understanding that can only come through education.

But, as one attendee cautioned, education is not the entire answer.

“We used to think if we gave them (students) knowledge they would behave in a certain way. We were wrong. If you think students are going to come out with a good grasp of biodiversity, you’re wrong.”

For school-age children, state standards for environmental education address some points related to biodiversity. The partnership would like to at least provide additional resources to educators as biodiversity-specific information is not readily available. And clearly, as was evidenced in the survey results, there is a gap in adult education as well.

The question, as another attendee pointed out, is: What do you want people to do with the information?

“The health of our ecosystems will eventually determine the health of the human species,” said DiPasquale. “We have a health insurance plan for the future and we need to sign up very soon.”