Biodiversity's special year – a flagship or a flop?

Are UN labels worth the effort for conservation groups? Do they offer more bland marketing or can they galvanize people's commitment? This article looks at the mixed picture of how conservation groups harnessed the International Year of Biodiversity, and asks if any of us noticed it.

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2010 was designated the International Year of Biodiversity (IYB), as declared by the United Nations in an effort to raise awareness and generate public pressure for action on environmental issues. Around 450 organisations in Britain, from a range of backgrounds and agendas, joined the IYB-UK partnership in 2010, co-ordinated by the Natural History Museum. On an international scale, the logo and core message were adopted in 146 countries and has been seen by a million people around the world. What effect, if any, did this have on the actions on conservation organisations? Did it influence and inspire a greater effort and concern for wildlife? Do more people now understand what biodiversity means?

Promoting and appreciating biodiversity - what happened?

As an example of some of the activities undertaken by organisations for IYB, the Norfolk Biodiversity Partnership, which brings together local authorities, statutory agencies and voluntary groups, organised events bringing together the specialities of its members. These included an event to celebrate the International Day of Biological Diversity, featuring a display called Grains of Truth: Conservation Counts. Using locally-sourced grains of barley, the display depicted global biodiversity facts and figures in an appealing and accessible way. Many people found the display informative and very moving. The event also featured the work of the Norfolk Biodiversity Information Service and the Partnership's Non-native Species Initiative. The latter included the novel and eye-catching use of a "life-size" alien spaceship and live displays of invasive plants and animals, which garnered a large amount of attention and interest in an important topic for biodiversity.

The Norfolk Biodiversity Partnership also demonstrated a greater collaborative outlook fostered through IYB. A further event organised by the Castle Museum in Norwich collaborated with the Biodiversity Partnership, the University of East Anglia, the Norfolk Wildlife Trust, the Non-native Species Initiative and the Biodiversity Information Service. Entitled "Biodiversity and Extinction in Norfolk and Beyond", the day attracted around 100 students from Norfolk schools and featured a live debate as well as a series of interactive workshops. Topics such as ecological networks, invasive alien species and biological recording were covered. Through the IYB, this helped the Partnership to engage with students of this age for the

first time. Because of the positive feedback received, the Partnership plans to run a similar event in 2011.

Other organisations also ran activities to commemorate the IYB, including Froglife, who ran a family event called 'Under the Surface', also as part of National Science and Engineering week. Interacting with school groups, a giant pond installation was created in an art gallery and made open to the public. As part of the process, school visits included a talk about the biodiversity value of ponds, information about the creatures that lived there, and discussions about biodiversity loss and how people could help.

A number of organisations point towards increased awareness and understanding as a result of the activities. Some also suggested seeing a significant improvement in their ability to develop new links with a range of other bodies and signatories from academic to retail and industrial interests, and thus improve funding prospects. Sam Taylor of Froglife commented: "I think IYB was helpful in raising the profile of biodiversity nationally, and I think HLF and other funders were really keen to give to more projects that included biodiversity in order to do their bit, so it probably helped us to get some more funding."

Improving public understanding of biodiversity

Perhaps the most important area of improvement appears to be an increase in engagement with the public and improved dissemination of the biodiversity message to new audiences. This was perhaps always the most likely area of impact for the campaign, rather than through more physical actions, though this is obviously still an area with huge potential to improve biodiversity gains. Whether this will be maintained beyond 2010 or how responsible IYB is for this is open to debate.

Though IYB seemingly increased the public profile of biodiversity as a phrase and concept, whether it improved true understanding of biodiversity issues amongst laymen is questionable. Several organisations have expressed a belief in an improved understanding of biodiversity through increased media presence, but is such a thing truly quantifiable and to what extent are positives being sought for the sake of the reputation of the organisations involved and the status of the IYB? A response from

Victoria Picknell, Press Officer from ZSL, elaborated on this: "I think it's a complicated term that will always be misunderstood. I am not convinced that we managed to explain biodiversity to the masses, but instead just preached to the converted." Victoria also pointed to the more pressing personal issues of 2010, such as unemployment, cuts in public services and the like, which may have lessened the impact of the message. However, as part of Froglife's 'Under the Surface' event, 52 young people completed questionnaires, of which 27 were able to give correct explanations of biodiversity.

Other organisations that responded positively about the role of IYB include Flora and Fauna Internaitonal (FFI) who pointed towards an increase in web-based activities in response to the campaign. These included the creation of several webpages highlighting the year and showcasing a different animal, plant or habitat every month that FFI are involved with, giving website readers a sampling of the planet's biodiversity. FFI also boosted the social network profile of the campaign through frequent mentions on their Twitter and Facebook pages, increasing the time spent on each one of their IYB pages, thus raising awareness of the campaign further. FFI also suggested that the aims and targets of IYB helped to address the overly climate change-centric view of much environmental coverage in the media: "Over the past few years, climate change has been so dominant in terms of media coverage, and of course it is a huge challenge. However, biodiversity had been ignored and I felt the IYB was a great opportunity to really shout about what we're doing to the planet's wildlife and why it matters for everyone."

Looking to the future

Responses about 2010's International Year of Biodiversity were largely positive, though as these were from listed partners this probably not surprising. The low rate of response may also suggest a degree of apathy towards the IYB, although it would be ungenerous to read too much in to this. On a less official footing, some saw it as nothing more than a PR exercise that did very little to actually directly benefit conservation issues and halt biodiversity loss. Many organisations took up the IYB kitemark but the lack of articles or reviews of the scheme in the months since the end of 2010 would indicate that the scheme has had limited impact in one of it's aims to raise awareness sufficiently to influence global leaders. Indeed, the view of the IYB as a kitemarking exercise is strengthened by the campaign's official Facebook page, a large proportion of which is given over to showing the logo displayed in various locations around the world.

With a lack of policy or criteria associated with the International Year of Biodiversity, or 2011's International Year of Forests, to be found on the UN website, these campaigns seem lightweight and without any real drive or specific objectives. The 'International Year of' promotions seem destined to always disappoint environmentalists while giving the impression of progress to the laymen. Without any apparent formalised evaluation of IYB, it may not be overly cynical to suggest that this impression of action being taken was an aim of the scheme. There can be positives to be gained for the future however, as long as IYB is seen as a springboard for further, more all-encompassing campaigns than a culmination of the effort to bring biodiversity to the mainstream media.

On a more challenging note, one focus group moderator that *ECOS* spoke to had held 10 focus groups during 2010 which were all about biodiversity. None of the participants, who numbered over 150, had heard of the IYB and none of them used or referred to the term in their own comments and dialogue at any stage. The same moderator remarked that IYB may have encouraged conservation groups to persist with a clumsy term, which is used inconsistently by conservation groups, and may be an unhelpful label to use for the conservation sector if it has no resonance with the public.

To continue the theme, the UN has designated 2011 the International Year of Forests. Like the IYB, the project is a platform to raise awareness on sustainable management and conservation issues affecting all kinds of forests. So far, this campaign seems a great deal less noticeable without the level of presence achieved by the IYB. During the recent woodland sell-off debate in the UK, a perfect issue for the campaign to get it's teeth in to, the media visibility of the campaign was low. Hopefully the scheme will begin to show some actual benefits for the world's forests by acting as a spur to stronger management and improved legislation.

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Learning about invasive alien species at a 2010 Norfolk Biodiversity Partnership event to celebrate the International Year of Biodiversity.

Photo: Norfolk Biodiversity Partnership