

The Patriot-News, December 16, 2002

Editorial

We humans may be the dominant life form on planet Earth, but we don't live in a vacuum. Millions of species, many of them not yet known to science, collectively form the web of life that provides the air we breathe, the food we eat, many of the products and medicines we take for granted, and the broader natural world we only dimly understand.

While efforts to record plants and animals in Pennsylvania go back more than 250 years, the inventory is far from complete. What records do exist are scattered among both public and private sources.

Nor does the state have a coherent strategy either to collect the missing pieces of the puzzle or to ensure that we do not irrevocably destroy the richness of our natural inheritance.

To remedy these deficiencies in the state's store of knowledge and policy making, a public/private effort known as the Pennsylvania Biodiversity Partnership is seeking to raise public awareness of the bounty of life with which we share this commonwealth and to develop recommendations to better protect it.

Among the immediate concerns posed by budget shortfalls, a medical malpractice crisis and the like, the preservation of the natural realm does not raise a red flag. But it should, because while this isn't necessarily about today, it is very much about tomorrow and all the tomorrows to come.

With more than 150 species of plants and animals lost from Pennsylvania and some 130 species found here endangered globally, the time is ripe to make biodiversity part of the regular process of private decision-making and public policies.

The biodiversity partnership takes the typically Pennsylvania approach of seeking to build consensus among the various stakeholders in plotting a course of action. However, this important exercise should not serve as an excuse to delay or displace efforts to continue the basic work that needs to be done. Good policy decisions cannot be made without good science, so the state needs to double or triple its support and encouragement of identifying and locating the mix of vertebrates, insects and other invertebrates, vascular plants, mosses, lichens, mushrooms, molds, bacteria and other organisms that call the commonwealth home.

Efforts to preserve and protect natural areas of significance must not be given any less emphasis as this work goes forward, for while there is much to be learned, there is much that is known about the natural realm that can guide policy toward wise actions.

While one industry speaker at last week's partnership presentation suggested that the best approach is to encourage voluntary compliance, the fact is there is no evidence to suggest that the Ridge/Schweiker administration's similar approach with respect to land-use planning has delivered benefits of any significance.

Educating the public, including elected officials, can go a long way toward encouraging people to make wise decisions when biodiversity issues arise, but that doesn't always get the job done. One example: Only 33 of Pennsylvania's 67 counties have conducted natural areas inventories. While not comprehensive, those inventories help to identify habitats needing attention. State policy should be that all counties will conduct such inventories in timely fashion to provide the best statewide picture of biological significance, with enough funds provided to get the job done.

A number of existing laws -- such as the federal and state endangered species acts -- are intended to protect biodiversity. But the fact is that they are constantly under attack, with enforcement subject to the vagaries of funding and the beliefs of those calling the political shots.

The Pennsylvania Biodiversity Partnership, if done well over an extended period of time, could raise public awareness to where it was in the 1970s when some of the nation's most important environmental legislation was first passed. But recharging the public's awareness of its intimate connection to the larger world around it will be for naught if this initiative fails to produce real advances in ensuring the diversity of life that is Pennsylvania's natural endowment.

Garry Lenton

Email: glenton@patriot-news.com