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an overview of biodiversity and agribusiness

Citizen participation

The auctions help to showcase the value of our landscape and to break a barrier between those who can take care of it and those who value this service. Companies can show their commitment to the landscape in a tangible way and communicate that CSR can be turned into something real (conservation of landscape elements). A funeral home, for example, bought an area with an ancient funeral mound in a protected area as they saw it as their responsibility to take care of a heritage which is intimately linked to its business.

Donations though the auctions are also tax deductible, as the payments are done to an NGO, making it even more attractive to participate. Auctions have now been carried out at three different locations in The Netherlands: the Ooijpolder, the Heuvel-landschap and the Gooij. The Gooij area is located in the most populous area of the country, showing that landscape conservation is possible not only in areas where relatively few people live.

Citizens can and do participate – by buying the tree under which they had their first kiss, the area they walk their dog, the hedge next to their house. A school adopted a hedge and its pupils helped maintain it as well, as an educational tool. A group of people who did not know each other joined hands and placed a bid to secure a landscape element they all felt connected to but could not afford alone. This clearly shows the power of this new tool: the direct link between what you pay and what you get.

We are looking into how to roll this concept internationally – not only by means of live auctions (as undertaken so far in The Netherlands) but also through the internet. Landscape elements from all over The Netherlands can already be bought online and, in a few weeks, elements from all over the world will be listed as well. Not only trees but also rhinos, the salary of a guard, a fire fighting squad, educational tours for schools,... One can buy the elements for oneself or as a gift to someone else. We will keep on developing the concept of landscape auctions – e.g. organizing auctions for business clubs – and are convinced that it will provide an attractive tool for the conservation of our landscape, here in The Netherlands and globally.

Daan Wensing is Coordinator, International Department, Triple E. Knowledge Centre Triple E (Economy, Ecology and Experience) is a knowledge centre specialised in the relation between nature, economy and the experience people gain through and from nature.

www.tripleee.nl/English
daan@tripleee.nl

Tracking the ethical reputation of companies



ANTOINE MACH co-developed a tool to assess the ethical performance of companies based on online information. He explains the first results of an analysis focusing specifically on biodiversity.

Political science teaches that modern society is heterogeneous, pluralistic and diverse. We experienced this complexity when founding, in 2001, Covalence to assess the ethical performance of multinational companies. This proved an extremely challenging task, as diversity can be found legitimately at two levels: that of setting criteria and that of evaluating practices.

Biodiversity in the news

Social diversity is found when analyzing the treatment of biodiversity by specialized agencies, as I had the opportunity of stating during the High-Level Conference on Business & Biodiversity in Lisbon [1]. How do Socially Responsible Investing (SRI) indices and rating agencies deal with biodiversity? It is clearly an important matter, as out of the 10 indices or agencies I analyzed in preparing for this conference [2], 8 include biodiversity in their indicators. Moreover, there are many differences in the way biodiversity is treated. The concept may appear as a single criterion, be embedded within a larger sustainability criterion, or cited in company profiles or stories about leaders. Biodiversity criteria can also be general or sector specific".

At Covalence, we track the ethical reputation of multinationals by gathering, coding and quantifying online information. We have extracted data which include

the word "biodiversity" and found over 730 news items, two thirds of which had a positive orientation regarding named companies. Biodiversity is a 'CSR-friendly' topic. Criteria registering the most positive biodiversity data were: environmental impact of production, sponsorship, social stability (community affairs) and information to consumers. Major negative criteria included: intellectual property rights (and biopiracy); environmental impacts of production; cultural issues; and product environmental risk (for instance GMOs). Sectors showing the most negative data are Chemicals and Pharmaceuticals, while Mining & Metals, Oil & Gas and Food & Beverages register the most positive results.

Reporting

How should governments encourage further action on biodiversity from companies? The Global Reporting Initiative [3] offers a good framework for reporting. In our view, the topic of biodiversity is so complex that it would not fit into a one-size-fits-all policy carrying content-related obligations: it seems very difficult to set standard quantitative targets to be reached by various companies among different sectors. A more realistic approach would be to increase biodiversity reporting obligations. We suggest that companies be obliged to publish a progress report every year, while remaining free to define its content, in line with the UN Global Compact example (promoting business action on human rights, the environment, labour and anti-corruption). This flexible approach would reward the most active companies and stimulate others to move on.

[1] www.countdown2010.net/business

[2] Asset4, Calvert, Dow Jones Sustainability Indexes, Eiris, FTSE4Good Index Series, Innovest, Jantzi Social Index, KLD Indexes, SiRI Company, Vigeo

[3] www.globalreporting.org/

Antoine Mach is Director, Covalence.

www.covalence.ch
antoine.mach@covalence.ch

Biodiversity: positive and negative news by sector, 2002-2007

■ Positive news (ethical offers)
■ Negative news (ethical demands)

