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# COP13 on biodiversity in Cancun: the shake-up is a long time coming

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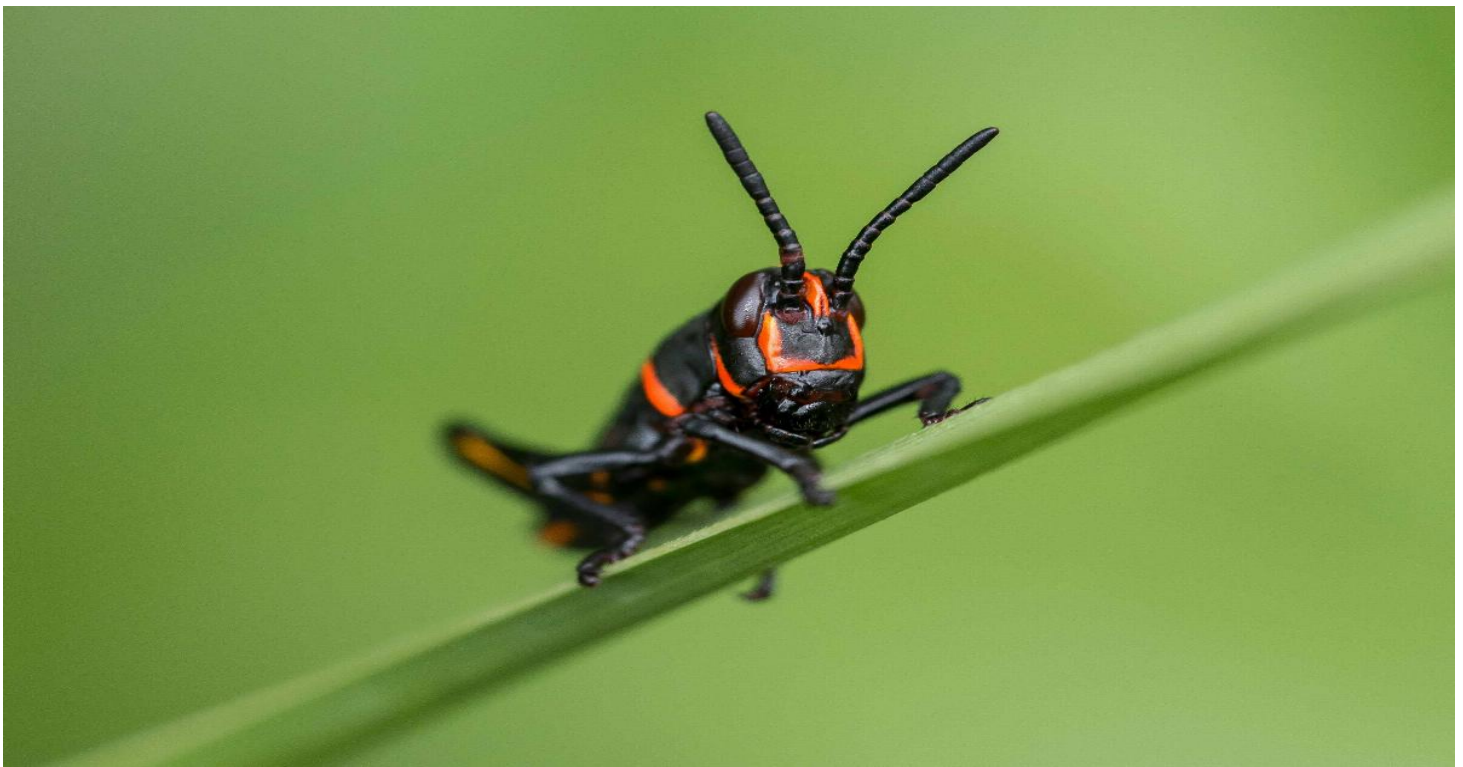
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## The political weakness of the biodiversity agenda

Many attended this thirteenth edition of the [Conference of the Parties \(COP\)](#) of the [UN Convention on Biological Diversity \(CBD\)](#) with little hope that major decisions would be made. The contrast with the recent COP21 on climate, which has [left its mark](#) due to the dynamics of individual commitments by governments and companies, is not favourable to the CBD, the decisions of which, by design, require

little commitment from signatories to the convention. In reality, [the texts adopted by delegates](#) represent many decisions or scattered and heterogeneous proposals on topics as diverse as [wildlife management](#), the [Aichi Target monitoring indicators](#), ecologically or biologically important marine areas, [the mobilization of financial resources](#), and the [integration of biodiversity in the sectoral policies](#) of agriculture, tourism, fisheries and forestry... This “toolbox” aspect can be seen as a sign of the persistent weakness of the political agenda of biodiversity, which is not sufficiently supported by public opinion and governments to enable binding political choices and significant trade-offs to be made.

## **A statement consisting solely of indicative messages and recommendations**

A “[Cancun Declaration](#)”, proposed for discussion by “high-level” policymakers, was adopted without negotiation or discussion. In fact, it mainly contains simple incentives to better integrate biodiversity into sectors of the economy. A number of directives and guidelines have been annexed, which is a good start: the Parties recommend that biodiversity is no longer solely considered in protected areas, and recognize that economic sectors have an impact on biodiversity which must be controlled. In particular, the CBD’s final decision calls for the use (“where appropriate”) of voluntary certifications, particularly in forestry, or “encourages” states to reform incentives harmful to biodiversity, for example in agriculture or fisheries. In total, two readings of the text are possible. By taking it seriously and imagining its effective application everywhere, one is struck by its balance, its wide scope, its competence and its ability to emphasize the difficult issues and questions: in essence, through the expression of a form of collective wisdom derived from a global community that translates its deep knowledge of issues into substantial texts, the declaration was obtained through the passionate collaboration of representatives of parties as dissimilar as Russia and Timor-Leste, Namibia and China, Colombia and Micronesia, delegates who form reciprocally and gradually make a common culture. This is the charm of the UN system. COP after COP, the CBD process strengthens the technical capacity of many members of public administrations, NGOs and research institutions. It is hoped that these skills will then spread within their countries and organizations. However, by reading the text in terms of actual commitments, which would effectively bind governments, one is also struck by its weakness and its nature which is sometimes more symbolic than effective. It is therefore significant that the subjects that triggered the most tensions up until the last moment were the budget of the Secretariat of the Convention and whether or not the recognition of indigenous peoples and local communities should be subject to national laws. At issue, with few exceptions, is not the text in itself, but its limited scope. A less optimistic reading would even suggest that it is precisely because it is not very binding that it is relatively ambitious and complete.

## ***Everyone is no one***

COP13 has updated a set of indicators to measure the path taken towards the [20 Aichi targets](#) adopted in 2010 for the 2020 deadline, which represent the global objective to conserve biodiversity. Unfortunately, the State Parties have not committed, through this decision or previous ones, to individually report on their progress according to these various indicators, which remain suggested and indicative and will not necessarily be included in the [national reports due to be regularly submitted to the Secretariat of the Convention](#). On the contrary, the diagnosis will remain at the global level, encompassing, and therefore diluting the actions and responsibilities of each State, such as the “[global perspectives on biodiversity](#)”, issued by the Secretariat, which are regularly updated and that

take stock of progress, each time revealing their weaknesses, but without provoking the shake-up that would mobilize opinions and leaders. Since a global diagnosis does not generate the same pressure as an assessment at the national level, governments are unlikely to be motivated in future to truly assume their responsibilities: everyone is no one. In comparison, the Paris Agreement on Climate marked a turning point in establishing a [system of commitments and accountabilities](#) that are both quantifiable and individual (at the State level). However, these [indicators](#) adopted to estimate changes in biodiversity appear to be pragmatic and easy to use for the measurement of progress and the effectiveness of action at the national level. They are based on proposals and data produced by recognized organizations (OECD, WWF, IUCN), and do not appear to raise major technical or scientific difficulties, even if it means that first attempts will later be criticized and improved. Since governments do not wish to undertake individualized evaluations, they are left to civil society, NGOs, independent institutes and think tanks. Of course, financial supporters for such an enterprise are not beating the door down; this is one of the explanations given by associations for the absence of this type of evaluation.

## The temptation of the sorcerer's apprentice: synthetic biology

Among the subjects on which the COP was less “wise” than indicated above, we can include the negotiations on “[synthetic biology](#)”, which for the first time was the subject of debates and specific proposals. This refers to the opportunity to use genetic engineering to intervene with biological processes, to create new organisms, such as a [fluorescent rabbit](#) through the integration of its genetic material with that of a jellyfish. Or the [genetic modification of an entire population by inserting characteristics that parents pass on to their descendants](#). The introduction of a gene that causes infertility in certain mosquitoes has also been suggested to enable their eradication, thus hoping to [prevent the Zika virus from spreading](#). Many biologists have warned about the [risks associated with these initiatives](#), which can cause ecosystem upheavals and cascading uncontrollable feedback effects. For example, a collapse in the population of birds and organisms that feed on mosquito larvae could be caused, while allowing the virus to change its means of transmission: if a particular species of mosquito is currently a preferential disease vector, there is nothing to say that it is the only one, and that this situation will not change if prompted by the disappearance of the species. History has repeatedly taught us the unfortunate consequences of attempts to manipulate ecosystems to correct their inconveniences. For example, the [Biodiversity Research Foundation](#) and many environmental NGOs and coalitions such as the [CBD Alliance](#) have drawn attention to these risks and promoted the precautionary principle. Some participants have even attempted to adopt a moratorium, and have faced opposition from many countries wishing to promote their industrial and scientific champions. Ultimately, the text leaves open this door to the unknown, while raising concerns about uncertainties and recommending precaution. Is this a missed opportunity for governments at COP13 to show collective wisdom?