

Partnerships between NGOs and companies can protect ecosystems

In joining forces to protect nature there must be a mutuality of interest and an ability to speak each other's language

Meindert Brouwer

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Companies depend on ecosystems but also play a part in their degradation. Partnerships with NGOs could help them navigate a more sustainable path. Photograph: Nic Bothma/EPA

Companies' share in the responsibility for the destruction and degradation of nature on our planet is considerable. At the same time, these firms – especially those that produce commodities – depend on nature to stay in business. Most of them do not know how to reduce their negative impact on nature, nor do they know how to benefit from nature in a sustainable way. NGOs can help them out.

Companies and NGO's have a mutual interest in nature conservation. Responsible use of nature, secures a continuous provision of important services to companies and is vital to maintain the level of biodiversity in the region in which they operate.

Services provided through nature are called ecosystem services. They include: provisioning services such as fish, game, crops and fruits for food; water for drinking, irrigation and cooling; raw materials such as timber and fertilisers; vegetable ingredients for many products including cosmetics and body care products; and genetic resources and medicinal plants.

There are also regulating services such as waste treatment through wetlands that purify water and detoxicate and decompose waste. Forests play an important role in erosion prevention, climate regulation, regulation of waterflows, maintenance of soil fertility and pollination of crops, fruit trees and flowers by insects.

NGOs as a source of advice and guidance

In many cases companies are only interested in advice when it is about compliance with

the law, reducing costs or making more money. NGO's in nature conservation can service companies exactly in these fields.

They can explain the ecological, economic and in some cases the financial value of ecosystems and ecosystem services. NGOs can advise on how to operate with the least impact on nature and the environment, about sustainable agriculture and responsible mining. They can facilitate the technical processes to realise change in production methods, including independent certification. New ways of production may result in cost-efficiency, regarding the use of water and energy for instance.

NGOs can also play an important role in co-creating new markets for distinctive, responsible products, which will create brand preference for the company among buyers. Markets are important incentives on the road to a new, sustainable economy.

NGOs can advise companies how to comply with the law in countries in which they operate. NGOs can also lobby within governments, for green taxes and other regulations that also serve as incentives for responsible production.

Exchange of knowledge and interests between NGOs and companies is important to get things going. It is wise to invite entrepreneurs to take part in roundtables and other standard-setting bodies. Partnerships between NGOs and companies that are market leaders in their sector may over time lead to sustainable change in the whole sector.

Mapping the pros and cons of partnership

If an NGO considers co-operating with a company it should map the pros and cons. Is there a match between the core values of both the NGO and the company? Stakeholders of both parties, including the public, should understand the reasons for a partnership. In what areas will NGOs and companies co-operate? Are there no-go areas? Will the NGO be able to maintain its integrity? These questions have to be weighed carefully.

NGOs have to be able to speak the language of the business world to be accepted as sparring partners. Communicating effectively requires knowledge of the perspectives of all the different stakeholders of a company. The information an NGO provides the company with should be clear, concise, inspiring and preferably science based.

Partnerships in practice

WWF, in the Netherlands, and Dutch energy company Essent, established a partnership in 1995. It was in WWF's interest that Essent maximised the availability of green, renewable energy. It was in Essent's interest that it be endorsed by WWF and perceived as a responsible firm in the consumer market.

When German energy company RWE bought Essent, the mutual interests started to diverge. At that time RWE was heavily investing in coal-fired power stations and nuclear energy. This led to the end of the partnership as the association between RWE and Essent was incompatible with WWF's approach to sustainable energy.

But engaging in a multi-stakeholder process can be very effective. NGOs (including Friends of the Earth and WWF), the timber industry and retailers joined forces to develop principles and criteria for sustainable forest management. In 1993 they established the Forest Stewardship Council. A certification system including a chain of custody culminated in the FSC trademark which has opened a new market for timber from well-managed forests.

We all depend on nature for welfare and wellbeing. That's the common ground of companies and NGOs. Joining forces to keep our planet healthy is the natural thing to do.

Meindert Brouwer is an independent communication consultant, conservationist and

writer, based in the Netherlands. He has published two books: *Amazon Your Business: Opportunities and Solutions in the Rainforest* and *The Ecosystem Promise*.

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