

Unilever and biodiversity

Jan Kees Vis

Director Sustainable Agriculture, Unilever

Unilever is an Anglo-Dutch Fast Moving Consumer Goods company. With sales of about 40 billion Euros in 2007, realised in over 150 countries, it is one of the largest FMCG companies in the world. Unilever produces Foods and Home and Personal Care products. Brands include Knorr, Lipton, Bertolli, Hellmann's, Becel/Flora, Dove, Axe, Domestos, Surf, Signal and Sunsilk. Unilever's aim is to help people feel good, look good and get more out of life. This is called Unilever's Vitality strategy.

Since the mid 1990's, Unilever has run three sustainability programmes and an environmental care programme. The sustainability programmes look at water, fish and agriculture. Roughly two-thirds of Unilever's raw materials come from agriculture and forestry. Making agriculture (and forestry) more sustainable, is therefore of direct business interest to Unilever. In the sustainable agriculture programme, Unilever works with 11 indicators: soil health and fertility, soil loss, nutrients, pest management, biodiversity, energy, water, social and human capital, local economy and animal welfare.

On the basis of these 11 indicators, Unilever runs a number of Agriculture Programmes around the world. In these programmes, we have developed hands on experience in dealing with biodiversity issues on the ground, i.e. on farms and in plantations.

As Unilever is dependent on renewable raw materials, the company depends on the regenerative power of the natural resources on the planet. As a food company, we depend on plant variability (for plant breeding), on on-farm biodiversity as a necessary element in Integrated Crop Management, and on a variety of general ecosystem services, such as pollination, nutrient cycling, carbon and water cycling, water purification, flood protection, atmospheric control, weather control etc.

On the other hand, we need land on which to grow our raw materials, water for irrigation and processing, renewable and non-renewable inputs, and our site operations might have adverse environmental effects.

Unilever operates a variety of systems and programmes to prevent and mitigate adverse impacts on biodiversity.

- 1 In our sustainable agriculture programmes (which we are expanding to include more and more of our suppliers) we operate Biodiversity Action Plans, which stipulate what practices need to be put in place to prevent negatives impacts on biodiversity, and to make improvements where possible (e.g. we run tree planting programmes in Kenya, Tanzania and India).
- 2 In our sustainable agriculture programme we aim to optimise yields, so the land base required for our business is not larger than necessary (increasing yields with 10 %, means 10 % less land needs to be cultivated).
- 3 We participate in several seed banks and germ plasm collections.
- 4 All Unilever sites operate environmental management systems, based on ISO 14001 (and many sites are certified against this standard).
- 5 We participate in several sustainability initiatives, such as the SAI Platform, in which we cooperate with other food companies in order to mainstream sustainability principles in the food sector.
- 6 We actively participate in the Roundtable on Sustainable Palm Oil and the Roundtable on Responsible Soy, because we believe that the aggregate indirect impacts of the use of palm oil and soy beans on biodiversity are best managed through sector wide initiatives.

We do recognise there are limitations to what business can do. Very important elements in biodiversity management are land use planning, including establishment of nature reserves and conservation areas, and appropriate land use planning policies. Most of the general ecosystem services are the result of natural processes, not controlled by humans. Protecting these general ecosystem services is a role for government. After all, as is clearly stated in the Convention on Biological Diversity: countries have the sovereign right to manage their natural resources, as they see fit.