

A small price to pay high-income nations must transfer some of their wealth to low-income ones to make amends for the damage they have done to the environment, writes Graham Lawton

The country I live in is one of the richest on the planet, but also one of the poorest. By GDP, the UK is a superpower with the fifth largest economy in the world. But in terms of intact biodiversity, it is in the bottom 10 per cent globally and the worst in the G7. These two facts aren't unrelated. The UK got rich – and has stayed rich – in no small part by **overexploiting** its natural resources. The agricultural and industrial revolutions turned great **swathes** of what was once green and pleasant into a polluted and overgrazed wasteland. Even today, more than two-thirds of the UK's land area is farmed and 8 per cent is built on, leaving little room for wildlife. The nation's Biodiversity Intactness Index (BII) – a measure of how much wild nature remains – is 53 per cent. The global average is 75 per cent. The ideal is 90 per cent plus.



That pathway to riches is one that many less-wealthy countries **aspire** to. But it is also a **pathway** to mutually assured destruction. A global BII comparable with the UK's would be catastrophic. Preventing nature-rich countries from **trashing** their biodiversity is, of course, one of the goals of the UN Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD), over which the latest round of negotiations took place in Geneva



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last month. Such talks naturally **feature** conservation targets, habitat restoration and so on. But they actually revolve around something else: money.

Before the meeting began, I spoke to conservation biologists about what to look out for. One of them, Stephen Woodley at the International Union for Conservation of Nature, told me bluntly: “It’s all about the money.” Biodiverse countries are often GDP-poor, and many don’t see why they should be forced to remain so in order to rescue wealthy nations from catastrophe. And even where there is the will to preserve, countries often lack the necessary resources and need financial help. “The big issue is about wealth transfer,” Woodley told me. “I suspect that the negotiations will **hinge on** that.” He was right. There were many **sticking points**, but by far the stickiest was finance. Reports from the meeting say that the spirit of the talks was mean, with negotiators generally putting national interests first. For rich countries, that meant digging their heels in over the payments. If anything, the negotiations **went backwards**.

The draft text at the start of the meeting included concrete figures, such as that **low-income nations** should be given an extra \$10 billion every year for conservation. By the end of the talks, all of those numbers had disappeared, replaced by a dog’s breakfast of watered-down and disputed suggestions. This isn’t just greedy and immoral in the here and now. There is also a historical obligation for richer countries to transfer some of their vast and ill-gotten wealth to poorer ones, to compensate them for the damage they have done to the environment.

A recent analysis published in The Lancet Planetary Health found that the US and Europe are responsible for more than half of global ecological destruction over the past 50 years. Other wealthy countries, including Australia, Canada, Japan and Saudi Arabia, are collectively responsible for another quarter, while the low and middle-income countries of Latin America, Africa and Asia are responsible for just 8 per cent. Alongside greed, immorality and injustice, we can add **shortsightedness**. “We will pay this amount of money, either today, or we will pay substantially more later on in lost ecosystem services, clean water, clean air, pollination, all these things that we **take for granted**,” says Brian O’Donnell at the Campaign for Nature, an alliance of more than 100 conservation organizations. “If we destroy the ecosystems we rely on, the cost will be astronomical.”

This is depressingly familiar from climate talks. In 2015, wealthy nations promised to donate billions to lower-income ones to help them mitigate climate change and adapt, but have yet to **cough up**. They cynically stamp out attempts to extract compensation for “loss and damage”, apparently **frit** that this would be seen as an admission of guilt and open the floodgates to reparation claims. There is hope. The clean text that the talks opened with was an ideal one drawn up by the CBD; the mess that emerged is a work in progress by the people who **wield** actual power.



There is a history of **brinkmanship** at such talks and the CBD itself said that progress had been made. And while countries like the UK will never accept that much of their wealth is an ecological **overdraft** that is now overdue, they are starting to understand that they have no option but to pay. “I think governments are starting to recognize that this is an investment rather than just a cost,” says O’Donnell.

Essential words for writing and speaking

1. **Overexploit** - to use (something such as a natural resource) to an excessive degree.

More than half of the fish stocks in the region are being overexploited.

2. **Swathe** - a large piece or area of something.

The front door was open and a swathe of sunlight lay across the floor.

3. **Aspire to** - to have a strong desire to achieve or to become something.

He aspired to be their next leader.

4. **Pathway** - a plan of action or way of achieving something.

Consulting firms claim that they help students define and develop a clear career pathway.

5. **Trash** - to damage or destroy something.

The band was famous for trashing hotel rooms.

6. **Feature (v)** - to include a particular person or thing as a special feature.

The latest model features alloy wheels and an electronic alarm.

7. **Hinge on** - (of an action, a result, etc.) to depend on something completely.

Everything hinges on the outcome of these talks.

8. **Sticking point** - something that people do not agree on and that prevents progress in a discussion.

This was one of the major sticking points in the negotiations.

9. **Backwards** - towards the direction that is opposite to the one in which you are facing or opposite to the usual direction.

I walked backwards towards the door.

10. **Low-income nations** - low-income countries are nations that have a per capita gross national income of less than \$1,026 annually.

Most African countries are considered low-income nations according to the World Bank classification.

11. **Shortsightedness** - a lack of careful thought about the possible effects of something or what might happen in the future.

Many people accused the government of shortsightedness.

12. **Take sth for granted** - to never think about something because you believe it will always be available or stay exactly the same.



It's easy to take your parents for granted.

13. **Cough up** - to give something, especially money, unwillingly.

Steve finally coughed up the money he owed us.

14. **Frit** - not brave enough to do something; frightened.

"Go on," she urged. "Don't be frit."

15. **Wield** - to have and use power, authority, etc.

She wields enormous power within the party.

16. **Brinkmanship** - the activity, especially in politics, of trying to get what you want by saying that if you do not get it, you will do something dangerous.

The talks have collapsed and both sides have resorted to brinkmanship.

17. **Overdraft** - an amount of money that a customer with a bank account is temporarily allowed to owe to the bank, or the agreement that allows this.

Majority of Uzbek banks are now offering overdraft facilities.



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