



## Does Conservation Matter to the Poor?

By Jeffrey Sachs, director of [The Earth Institute](#) at Columbia University and author of *The End of Poverty*

The poorest of the world's poor tend to live in rural areas, and often depend directly on natural resources for their livelihoods and very lives. Most are farmers, and most collect their own drinking water, fuel wood and building materials for sustenance and survival. If their environment fails—through drought, land degradation, over-exploitation of forests and fisheries, poisoning of streams and water supplies, destruction of biodiversity, or the spread of diseases like malaria—hunger and illness are direct consequences. Sustainable environmental practices, therefore, are vital for sustainable livelihoods, physical well-being and even survival.

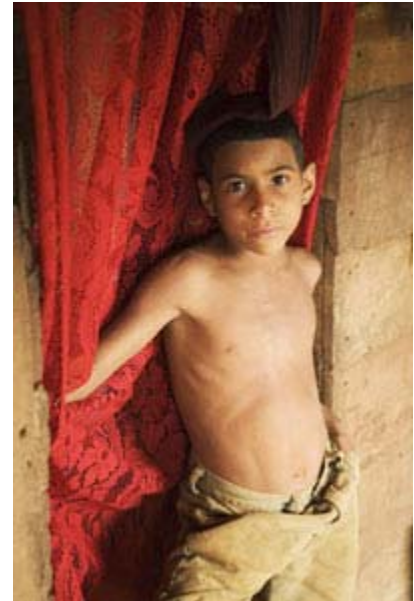
This does not mean the poor are necessarily effective conservationists. Alas, such a simple conclusion is misleading and too often false. The realities of everyday life for the poor limit their capacity to protect the environment. The struggle of survival precludes investments in the future, including investments in natural capital. For example, the poor routinely “mine” soil nutrients because impoverished farming households lack the resources to restore them through chemical and organic fertilizers. The poor are often agents of deforestation, as they overharvest the forests for fuel wood and construction materials. The poor often push large mammal populations toward extinction by overharvesting bush meat.

In these cases, poverty is a risk factor for environmental degradation, just as environmental degradation is a risk factor for poverty. The causation runs in both directions. There is the ever-present risk of a downward spiral in which environmental degradation worsens poverty and in which deepening poverty accelerates environmental degradation.

Poverty threatens the environment in other ways besides the direct over-exploitation of local resources by the poor themselves. The poor are vulnerable to manipulation from rich countries and powerful corporations, which often irresponsibly mine minerals, cut down forests and overexploit biodiversity to service rich-country markets, all without effective policing and control by the poorest countries. With desperate people fighting to stay alive, it's hard to set and enforce long-term “rules of the game” that stop exploitative interlopers from adding to the environmental damage.

For all of these reasons, poverty alleviation is a necessary condition for environmental sustainability. But we should also be clear that even dramatic reductions in poverty levels will not automatically bring about environmental sustainability. The world's richest countries are leaders in the emission of greenhouse gases and the over-exploitation of critical terrestrial and marine resources, and are thus responsible for the most serious man-made threat to the Earth's environment at a global scale.

Fast-growing developing countries such as China and India will have to adopt best practices to minimize the adverse environmental impact of economic development, without compromising the sustained growth that has lifted millions out of poverty. As the world's population grows to 9 billion people by 2050, and as global incomes continue to rise, the stresses on the environment will surely intensify. Unbridled economic growth, undertaken without increased regard for the environment, will lead to catastrophic consequences for natural resources and ecosystems. An



Environmental degradation can worsen poverty, just as deepening poverty can accelerate environmental degradation.  
Photo © Carolyn Drake

### Framing the Debate

- [Is Poverty Relevant to Conservation?](#)  
by M.A. Sanjayan
- [Can We Conserve Ecosystems by Fighting Poverty?](#)  
by Gregory Mock

integrated approach linking poverty alleviation with responsible management of ecosystems and biodiversity is vital to a sustainable future of shared global prosperity.

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