

Earthlog: Prince Charles talks trees

By Charles Clover, Environment Editor

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It came as a bit of a surprise to find the Prince of Wales on BBC Radio 4's Today programme, banging on about the need to protect the tropical forests like a professional politician.

advertisement Strangely, when he takes a brief and sticks to it Prince Charles has a persuasiveness that few professional politicians can muster. (Lone dissidents, such as Frank Field, are probably the exception that proves the rule.)

This was someone surprisingly well informed, taking risks with his reputation – not just an amiable eccentric who happens to like trees.

It makes evident sense, as the Prince says, to find a way of placing a higher value on the rainforests for the ecosystem services they provide standing (such as rain and exotic species) than they do fallen as timber, soya fields or cattle pasture.

It is evidently true that halting deforestation is the cheapest way of beginning to tackle climate change, as Lord Stern suggests.

Yet, as the world drifts towards recession, the economic pressures are going the other way.

Only this week came the resignation of Brazil's outspoken environment minister, Marina Silva, a native of the Amazon seen as a champion in the fight against the destruction of the rainforest.

Her resignation letter to President Lula spoke of "growing resistance" from important sectors of government and society.

Two top environment officials, including the head of the environmental agency, Ibama, resigned too, apparently because of pressure from within government to relax laws outlawing bank loans to those who destroyed the rainforest.

This context the Prince knows very well. His rainforest initiative, which involves such voraciously successful companies as Barclays and McDonalds, will have its work cut out.

It must devise private-sector ways to save forests and their inhabitants, financed by carbon trading.

Those mechanisms will need to satisfy different commercial and political interests from Indonesia to the Congo and be in time to give impetus to the new climate treaty to be concluded (we hope) in Copenhagen next year.

A global rainforest convention has eluded elected politicians for 20 years. Yet some kind of partnership between North and South remains desperately needed or the spiral of deforestation will go on, to no one's long term advantage.

In a downturn, it may be beyond the capability of anyone, including the Prince, to keep minds focused on the task.

The paradox is that while the Prince cannot sign the eventual deal, he can stick his neck out in ways no democratically elected politician can. And that is why his initiative still stands some chance of success.

Languages die out too

The United States has declared the polar bear an endangered species. It remains to be seen whether this energises the Bush Administration's efforts to do anything about climate change.

It coincides with a reminder that it is not just species that are endangered. Many human languages, and the knowledge and strategies for survival contained in them, are too.

David Harrison, an assistant professor of linguistics at Swarthmore College in the United States, has mapped some of the world's "language hotspots" – like the biodiversity hotspots we are now familiar with.

Europe has none. Oklahoma has one with 37. Why Oklahoma? Because that is where a concentration of east coast Native American tribes were exiled.

Harrison's journey to record the last speakers of languages in Siberia, India and Bolivia is set out in a fascinating film, *The Linguists*, shown at the Sundance festival and at a private screening in London last week.

His view is that threatened languages contain knowledge unknown to science which is on the verge of being lost.

Solomon Islanders have many terms for schooling fish, the Musqueam people of British Columbia knew that cutthroat trout and steelhead (known as trout in English) should be grouped genetically with chum and pink salmon.

And the Inuit have 99 different words for sea ice formations (not snow, as we were brought up to believe), which indicate whether you can walk on them, whether they are any good for hunting seals and so on – words all in danger of disappearing with the ice.

Smoking saves part 2

Another example of a man whose life was saved by smoking, sent by a reader.

It was after midnight in Hong Kong in the early 1970s and our hero flipped open his cigarette pack and found it empty, so padded off in shirt and shorts to buy some more.

He returned to find his hotel had collapsed. A colleague from the same firm survived because he was having a bath which protected him on his rapid descent to the ground floor.

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