



By Jon Christensen

## Why Good Governance Matters for Conservation

A year ago, when The Nature Conservancy was confronted with a blistering exposé in the *Washington Post*, it did what big companies often do. It went into damage control mode. Executives halted practices that were criticized while they reviewed policies. They took out ads. They got friends in high places to write letters of support. But it was what happened behind the scenes on the board of governors that was most telling.

There was a board shakeup. Hank Paulson took charge. A longtime Conservancy member and a director at Goldman Sachs, Paulson got the board to appoint an outside committee to review “governance”—the way the organization is run and the relationship between the board and staff.

As others have watched the crisis, “governance” has jumped to the top of the agenda for many big conservation organizations. Smaller nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) should pay attention, too. Organizations evolve.

The amazing growth in the reach, power, and sheer number of NGOs is one of the defining developments of our era. But organizations need to be careful when they take on new missions. If they are stuck in an old form of governance, they may be vulnerable to an accountability squeeze.

The relationship between how people govern their affairs and how they govern nature is without a doubt a complex one. But I’d like to venture a simple hypothesis: good governance is good for biodiversity. This goes for the governance of nations as well as of NGOs.

I know my hypothesis may be difficult to test. It’s conceivable that a corrupt, tyrannical government could be a boon to conservation by fiat. And an NGO able to work within the

corrupt system could grease the wheels for saving a slew of biodiversity.

In a study published in *Nature* last fall, however, researchers found that poorly governed countries tend to lose biodiversity faster as corruption rises. Higher corruption correlated with loss of forest cover and, in Africa, with declines in African elephant and black rhino populations.

Other researchers assert that governance should be a factor in deciding where to invest conservation dollars. Stable, well-governed countries are more likely to be good bets for solid, long-lasting conservation. My hunch is that well-governed conservation organizations are also better bets. But as far as I know, this has not been empirically tested.

The problem is that governance of conservation organizations and, in fact, of all kinds of NGOs can be even harder to get right than the governance of nations or corporations.

Why? Nations have citizens. And in democracies at least, they get to vote. Corporations have shareholders. They vote with their money.

But in NGOs there is no clear connection between constituencies and governance. Some organizations have members who vote. But usually, that void is filled by a board working with staff. Too many boards, however, have become cheerleading squads filled with goodwill ambassadors, big donors, and fundraisers.

Many NGOs now realize they need boards that can and will oversee strategy and decision-making and demand accountability to ensure that the organization stays on mission, makes progress toward goals, and evolves smartly.

The challenge for conservation organizations is to make the connection between good governance and good conservation clear—starting at home.

**The Uneasy Chair** is named in honor of Bernard DeVoto, who, from 1935 to 1955, wrote “The Editor’s Easy Chair” column for *Harper’s* magazine—a perch from which he often sallied forth in defense of conservation. Wallace Stegner’s biography of DeVoto was more aptly titled *The Uneasy Chair* (Doubleday, 1974), from which this column takes its name and its challenge.

**Thanks** to Paul Jepson and the University of Oxford Environmental Change Institute’s “Green Power: Green Responsibility” lecture series for raising many of these questions.