WHAT'S AT STAKE?

Much of today's environmental degradation is a direct result of poor environmental governance.

- The depletion of many marine fish stocks, such as cod, blue fin tuna, or patagonian toothfish, stems from the failure of government fishing ministries to limit and allocate fishing rights among a growing number of fishers that use increasingly effective fishing gear. In many countries, no effective authority exists over fishing activities, resulting in open access and unrestricted exploitation. The fact that many fish stocks–such as salmon and tuna–move between the waters of two or more nations has led to conflicts and magnified the governance failure.

- The disruption of the world's river systems with dams and canals that alter the normal hydrological cycle is often the result of compartmentalized decision-making, in which plans to build dams, extend irrigated agriculture, and fill wetlands have been formulated without considering the impacts on downstream water users or the aquatic environment itself.

- Deforestation is often catalyzed by timber companies that gain access to forest resources through corruption, and is exacerbated by the failure of government agencies to enforce forest protection laws, or get beyond management approaches that emphasize commodity production rather than forest health.

- At the global level, the refusal of the United States and a few other nations to embrace the Kyoto Protocol or negotiate other measures to systematically cut greenhouse gas emissions is the result of disagreement over a fair way to distribute the costs of such emission reductions.

The inability of government institutions to manage ecosystems for their health rather than simply for maximum yield, to fairly apportion costs and benefits of natural resource use, to manage resources across departmental and political boundaries, or to confront the disease of corruption are hallmarks of poor environmental governance. Business decision-makers have compounded these problems by marginalizing environmental concerns in their business models.

As a result, ecosystems remain at great jeopardy, and with them the livelihoods and continued well-being of communities everywhere. Poor communities are particularly vulnerable to failed governance, since they rely more heavily on natural resources for subsistence and income, and are less likely to share in property rights that give them legal control over these resources.

Nonetheless, improved environmental governance holds promise for reversing ecosystem degradation by a more careful balancing of human needs and ecosystem processes.

- In the Indian states of West Bengal, Orissa, and several others, a change in the states' forest policies has led to a significant recovery of degraded forests and the biodiversity they harbor. Rather than treat local people as interlopers on state-owned forest lands, the state is allowing local communities to manage some of the forests themselves. Local people share the increased productivity of the recovering forests with the state, providing a strong incentive for long-term stewardship and self-policing.

- In the Philippines, cooperation among government officials, non-governmental organizations (NGOs), religious leaders, and the media has helped reduce illegal logging.

- In the United Kingdom, a law requiring industrial facilities to provide information to the public about toxic releases led to a 40 percent reduction in releases of cancer-causing substances to the air over the past three years.

- South Africa's recent water reforms take an unusually far-sighted, ecologically grounded approach to resource management. Laws enacted in 1997 and 1998 mandate that the country maintain an environmental "reserve"–the amount of water that freshwater systems require to remain robust–while also ensuring access to a basic provision of water as every citizen's "right," and vastly expanding the scope for local participation in water management.

- At the international level, the Montreal Protocol on Substances that Deplete the Ozone Layer–a treaty concluded in 1987–has been instrumental in nearly eliminating the manufacture and use of chemicals that harm the stratospheric ozone layer in developed countries. And through the treaty's innovative financing mechanism, developing countries have already cut their consumption of these chemicals by half, on the way to fully phasing them out by 2010.