



SIGHTINGS

A DIFFERENT DIVERSITY

EVERY MULTINATIONAL THAT ISSUES AN ANNUAL “WE’RE GOING GREEN” REPORT OFFERS LIP SERVICE TO PROTECTING GLOBAL BIODIVERSITY. But the pharmaceutical industry is genuinely worried about the future. Labs may be ever more sophisticated, but half of pharmaceutical compounds rely on ingredients derived from nature, and population, climate change, agricultural and industrial efforts, and a range of other intrusions are accelerating biodiversity loss around the world. As an increasing number of species go extinct, so does the potential for new medicines.

Drug manufacturers, research centers, and governments are responding by pushing for greater conservation of natural resources. Vietnamese lawmakers in particular, recognizing that their country is one of the world’s most biodiverse areas—and therefore potentially one of the most profitable—have taken numerous steps in recent years to preserve vast swaths of land, at least partly so that scientists, such as the one pictured above at Hanoi’s National Centre for Natural Sciences and Technology, can examine local flora and fauna for potential pharmaceutical use. The government aims to increase local drug production to meet almost three-quarters of the nation’s drug needs by 2015, up from about half today—even though experts expect that Vietnamese drug consumption will increase by 70 percent by 2014.

Big Pharma’s push for greater conservation doesn’t get drug firms off the hook for past—or ongoing—environmental degradation. Pharmaceutical operations close to areas of high biodiversity can overexploit resources by polluting air, water, and land. Meanwhile, the millions of pills we pop each day, not to mention all the expired medicines that we flush, eventually make their way back to the environment, threatening water supplies and species on every link of the food chain. Stakeholders continue the struggle to balance competing concerns between the health of people, businesses, and the planet. —VADIM LIBERMAN