

## **Valuation of ecosystems**

IT is a certain type of person, usually of liberal bent, who cares wholeheartedly for the environment. There are more people who downplay the significance of environmental issues. They say that in a country with so much human misery, the welfare of animals and plants is a secondary concern. Such thinking is completely flawed. It has now been established beyond doubt that human welfare is inextricably linked to the state of the environment. Livelihoods are at stake, the health of the nation is at risk. Here it is encouraging to note that organisations involved in conservation are increasingly addressing a broader audience, not just the converted. Even an industrialist is likely to listen if the economic cost of environmental degradation enters the equation. In this age of rampant consumerism, putting a price tag on the destruction of ecosystems is perhaps a practical way of getting the message across.

Take mangroves, for example. As a speaker at a seminar hosted by IUCN Pakistan and the South Asian Network for Development and Environmental Economics pointed out on Thursday, our mangrove cover had shrunk to 86,000 hectares by 2005. In 1932 it stood at a robust 600,000 hectares. The price of mangroves is not limited to the value of their wood or the land in which they are rooted. Mangroves serve as natural hatcheries and the seafood business will suffer immensely if their destruction is not halted. The impoverished lives of fisherfolk will become even more dire and population displacement could accelerate. Besides being a crucial link in the marine food chain, mangroves also provide a barrier against tidal surges and lessen the havoc — in both human and monetary terms — that cyclones can wreak in coastal areas. According to a recent report by the World Wide Fund for Nature, the Indus delta mangrove ecosystem is 'close to death' due to reduced water flows downstream of Kotri. As a result, the sea is also intruding at a rapid pace in parts of Sindh, submerging arable land and displacing people. All this comes at a terrible cost. Valuation of natural resources is not an easy task but a beginning must be made. Environmental fiscal reform is clearly the way ahead, for economic growth is not sustainable without healthy ecosystems.