

Why conserve biodiversity?

By Martin Sharmann,

DG Research, personal reflections - March 2005

Why conserve biodiversity? Whatever our beliefs about the intrinsic value of life, or the morality of shouldering aside other species, we should conserve biodiversity above all because it concerns humans.

We share a planet with some extraordinary life-forms, some of which enrich (and a few of which bedevil) our own lives. But you and I will never encounter, never see on TV, and never know anything about most of the 20 or 30 million life-forms on Earth. Many, and perhaps even most, of these unknown organisms will go extinct before any human ever gets around to noticing them. And many of the 1.8 million species known to science will not survive this century.

Through poverty, greed, thoughtlessness and the sheer vastness of the needs of our population, we humans are bringing about a mass extinction comparable with any of the 5 great disasters that have overtaken life on Earth in the past 530 million years.

The United Nations Convention on Biological Diversity begins with the words: “conscious of the intrinsic value of biological diversity...”. The next paragraph continues: “Conscious also of the importance of biological diversity for evolution and for maintaining life sustaining systems of the biosphere...”. In signing up to this document, almost every State on earth has agreed that biodiversity has value that has nothing to do with human perceptions. From this viewpoint, humans are only relevant as the agents of premature extinction of species.

The introductory paragraph of the Convention starts with a comment on the intrinsic value of biological diversity, but goes on: “...and of the genetic, social, economic, scientific, educational, cultural, recreational and aesthetic values of biological diversity and its components”. According to the Convention, then, we should want to conserve all those millions of unknown species that are at our mercy because they enrich our lives and help to preserve human economies, societies and cultures.

I would add two other reasons.

We have the capacity to arrogate for ourselves the resources of the planet. Does this give us the right? I do not think so. And I do not believe that humans have an axiomatic right to extinguish species. I also believe that we should include other species in our consideration of what constitutes principled behaviour. For this reason I regret that nowhere does the Convention use the words “moral” or “ethical” or hint that humans have a responsibility to respect other species. Part of what makes me want to conserve biodiversity is what I believe to be morally right and wrong.

My second additional reason for cherishing biodiversity has to do with stewardship and inheritance. I would like to pass on to my child and to your grand-children a living world that is not too shamefully disfigured.

Why conserve biodiversity? Not just because of its patient, 3500-million-year intrinsic value, but because it matters – to humans. We must do what we can to protect life on our world because humans are concerned, humans are part of biodiversity, humans are deleting untold numbers of species, humans can do something about it, humans affect and are affected by the living world around them. Humans are the engineers of climate change, habitat fragmentation, pollution, over-harvesting, over-exploitation, invasive species, and all the other woes that we inflict on our living planet. And yet we can only survive on this planet because of the other species that share it with us. Biodiversity certainly doesn't need humans, but humans – all of us, up to and including 21st century humans – need biodiversity.

The natural sciences can help us to understand genetic loss, or the functioning of ecosystems, or whether fragmented populations can survive. This work is necessary, but it is not sufficient. With few or no exceptions, a plan to conserve biodiversity will only work if we deal first and mainly with humans. Not only must we deal with humans, but we must understand how we and our neighbours and people with entirely different cultures and world views perceive and value biodiversity. If our grand-children are to enjoy some of the biodiversity that surrounds us today, we must understand how to reframe our economic and social needs and goals so that we no longer damage our biological environment.

Economic growth is a fundamental characteristic of industrialised countries. But in a closed system you can not sustain economic growth for ever. Is it possible to protect biodiversity while realising the well-being of an increasing human population?

It is not easy, that much is obvious. “Sustainable development” is a comforting phrase. It seems so tidy, so morally obvious. But is it realistic? The last decade has shown that economic development and the conservation of nature almost never go hand in hand. Hunger and need operate on scales that are potent and immediate. The rewards for preserving and cherishing nature are often long-delayed and all too typically accrue to the wrong people.

The problem of the loss of biodiversity is a problem of human behaviour and aspirations. What will it take before men and women of all ages, in all the cultures of the world, want to conserve nature and protect biological diversity? What will it take for our governments to allocate sufficient financial and human resources to tackle this problem with the engagement and effort that it deserves? If we cannot learn how to bring people into the solution, we will go on losing biodiversity. Our world will become a less interesting place, our children will not thank us, and we will have the rest of our short lives to grieve the ineluctable passing of much of what makes life beautiful.