

## Who Are The Biocultural Protectors?

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We have become witnesses to an age of ecological crisis, bringing forth the depletion of land and water, the mass extinction of species, the eradication of ancient forests, and an unseen deterioration of human sensibility. As wilderness is playing its final hiding games, making itself harder and harder to be found, diversity is disappearing in the dark shadows of our hegemony. With this, not only its diversity, but also our richness vanishes, as we shrivel to a skeletal wreck of mankind. What is left is but a herd of dangerous creatures who colonise space and steal time out of their children's hands. In spite of this, humanity is still able to leave something other than its remnants as a sign of hope for a healing soil. The aesthetic value of these spoils before our eyes may help us to rediscover the inward path towards a moral, and ecological, recovery.

The last polar bears are hiding in their grief, reef corals are dangerously under threat and sharks are being killed at the rate of 100 million per year. As scientists report five mass extinctions in geological history, it appears that we are approaching another. **Extinction is a natural process, following the course of geological change;** in fact, around 2-4% of species ever alive on this earth are believed to have survived to this day. Nonetheless, the rapid trends of the last centuries have been conditioned by human presence: **today, habitat destruction, pollution, over-exploitation and global climate change are the major threats to biological diversity.**

Biodiversity has been envisioned primarily in its **aesthetical** form, as the colourful range of feathers, skins and scales have enhanced external diversity. This idea of visual variety has persisted within the principles of racism or shallow environmentalism, for instance, where the colour or appearance of others have been taken into account before all else. However, biodiversity can and should be extended to a normative category, as a necessary taxonomy allowing for pluralism and democratic dialogue to survive. By recognising the physical, material diversity of other peoples, but also their societal, cultural and ethical distinctions we are able to add a further, enriching dimension to the concept. **This is done by accepting not just the different forms of life, but also the different beliefs around how this live ought to be lived.** This may come in the disparate forms that distinguish the Sami people in Sweden, the indigenous forest guardians of the Amazon or the traditional islanders in the Shetlands. However, this also comes in the very practices of daily life, in action and inaction, in the daunting void that separates opinions. **Diversity, both between and within species, should become a bridge that links aesthetic to ethical acceptance of otherness. Only through the inclusion of this biocultural diversity, we will be able to enrich our moral landscapes and establish a social ecology of mutual listening and respect.**

In this regard, the 15th meeting of the Conference of the Parties (COP15) of the **UN convention on Biological Diversity**, known also as CBD, was planned for October 2020 but has been rescheduled to **2021**, in Kunming, China. The convention was created in 1992 at the Earth Summit in Rio de Janeiro as an international treaty including 196 Parties, almost all nation-states. These have been further supplemented in 2003 by the Cartagena Protocol which seeks to protect biodiversity from genetically modified organisms due to modern biotechnology, and in 2014 by the Nagoya Protocol, on the fair access and benefit-sharing of genetic resources. The theme of the coming conference will be **'Ecological Civilization: Building a Shared Future for All Life on Earth'**, aiming to address issues such as gender as a contribution to biodiversity progress, sustainable food systems and greening the urban fabric. The politics of biodiversity have often employed **'offsetting'** as a strategy aimed to promote

biodiversity gains in order to compensate for development impacts. However, this may become meaningless if not supplemented by a choice on behalf of institutions to reduce damage altogether and take on the responsibility that comes with the adoption of specific discourses. Where these deeper changes fail to happen, a 'light green' idea of ecosystems is possible and compatible with voracious development, rather than advancing a transformative vision of human needs and economy that serve to bind different sorts of lives, experiences and species together.

At last, in the words of Antonio Gramsci, "culture is not merely a deposit of knowledge, but our mind's capacity to comprehend life, the place we have, our relations with others. **Culture belongs to those who are conscious of themselves and the whole, who feel their relation to all other beings.**" In this sense, it is within everybody's reach to be cultured and foster the seed of hope that lies at the heart of our humanity. It is a matter of choice, even to hold that belief.