**Is biodiversity as intact as we think it is?**

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Robust indicators of the state of biodiversity provide essential guidance for tackling the extinction crisis. One increasingly prominent metric, the Biodiversity Intactness Index (BII), is intended to indicate the average abundance of wild species in a given geographical area, relative to that in pre-modern times [1] or in primary vegetation under current climatic conditions [2]. In principle the BII has several advantages over other biodiversity indicators – for example by reducing the risk of shifting baselines [3] leading to insufficiently ambitious conservation goals because the current state of biodiversity is simply compared with that in the recent past. The BII has now been endorsed by the Group on Earth Observations of the Biodiversity Observation Network and adopted by the Intergovernmental Platform on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services (IPBES) as a "core" indicator of trends and biodiversity and ecosystem services for assessing progress towards the Convention on Biodiversity’s Aichi targets 12 and 14 (extinction risk and ecosystem resilience). It has also been adopted by the Biodiversity Indicators Partnership as an indicator to track progress towards Aichi target 5 (halving the rate of habitat loss by 2020).

Newbold et al [2] mapped the BII globally by modelling thousands of field-derived estimates of the abundance of a broad range of species as a function of human-induced pressures, and then extrapolating their model using remote-sensed data. The resulting surface represents an estimate of the current average abundance of species occurring in primary vegetation as a proportion of that expected in the absence of human activities. However, quite a lot of the BII values presented on this map seem surprising. For example, the BII exceeds 90% (and often 95%) in much of SE Asia, Indonesia, central America and eastern Madagascar – areas usually considered to be exposed to widespread habitat loss and high rates of species threat. On a finer-scale map [4] the BII within the UK exceeds 50% even within Birmingham and Manchester and peaks (at over 95%) in Kielder Forest, a large plantation dominated by exotic conifers. In light of these unusual patterns and given the growing policy significance of the BII, it seems prudent to test its robustness more systematically.

The recent publication of a synthesis of estimates of current biomass stock relative to that without human activities, which we call biomass intactness (BMI) [5], provides an opportunity for a global quantitative check on the performance of the BII. Broadly speaking we might expect the two indices to be positively correlated across space. We would also anticipate that BII values should mostly be lower than BMI values (sometimes substantially so): where some biomass is made up of non-native species, or where biodiversity faces other threats besides habitat loss, one would expect BII to be less than BMI; in contrast it is hard to conceive how it could be higher.

But when the BII and BMI surfaces are intersected it is clear that there is only a very weak correlation between the two indices (Fig. 1a). In a relatively small but still substantial set of largely arid or semi-arid areas, the BII is considerably lower than the BMI (blue on Fig. 1a). However, in many areas where the BMI has been reduced dramatically – including much of Europe, China, India, and eastern Brazil - the BII is nevertheless estimated as being relatively high (red in Fig 1a). In these cases a substantial fraction of primary vegetation has been removed, as indicated by low BMI, yet BII values suggest only a small proportion of biodiversity has been lost. Hence, the BII and BMI concur (grey on Figure 1b) on much less than half of the Earth’s land surface, mostly in areas of boreal taiga and tundra and larger remnants of tropical rain forest. Comparison of the BII with the Human Footprint (HF [6]), a composite measure of the pressure on natural ecosystems from humans, confirms the impression of BII values being unusual: while BMI values correlate reasonably with HF scores, BII and HF values show no obvious association [SOM].

The mismatch between BII and BMI values is most striking in global biodiversity hotspots (defined as areas of exceptional endemism which have lost at least 70% of their primary vegetation [7]; red symbols in Fig. 1a). As expected, the BMI in these high priority areas for conservation is on average much lower than in other regions; however as measured by the BII, biodiversity intactness is apparently higher in hotspots than elsewhere. For example, across large parts of Sundaland, southern China and Southeast Asia where the BMI confirms that a substantial fraction of primary vegetation has been removed, the BII suggests native species populations have on average declined by <5%. Indeed for the 32 (of 34) biodiversity hotspots for which we have data on both indices, the mean BII of hotspots was very significantly negatively correlated with mean BMI (Spearman correlation: *rS* = -0.595, *P*= 0.0003): hotspots with less remaining biomass have higher BII scores.

We do not understand these patterns, and are concerned that uncritical acceptance of the BII as a biodiversity metric will lead to unjustified complacency about the security of wild nature. According to the Newbold et al. analysis, on average the terrestrial BII stands at almost 85% [2] – in striking contrast to the suggestion that the land surface supports only half the biomass that it would in the absence of human land use [5]. We are sceptical that biodiversity is really as intact and secure as the BII suggests. We recommend rigorous further testing and, if necessary, the development of alternative methods.

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