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Whose Biodiversity is In Trouble? A Commentary on Morar et al.

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Though the term 'biodiversity' is a neologism, the many ideas behind it are timeless. Classifications of place, species, and landraces occur across cultures and have facilitated human survival. The concept of species has also been an enduring issue in the history of (natural) philosophy. So one may ask what the purpose of packing these distinct ideas under one novel term could be. The rationale was, and still is, fairly clear: to make the often neglected aspects of nature more manifest to the general public and decision-makers (cf. Mayr, 1998, pp. 120–21), as well as to permit more comprehensive policy making (including the issue of control of genetic resources) and to prevent the deterioration and loss of heterogeneity on Earth. As I see it, this has guided the environmental movement, the development of environmental legislation at national and international levels, and the study of the environment over the last three decades. Some of the problems with the new term, however, were recognized soon after it became 'a growth industry' (Haila & Kouki, 1994), and uncertainties and epistemic limits regarding biodiversity are widely understood (Haila & Henle, 2014; Sarkar, 2007).

Nicolae Morar, Ted Toadvine, and Brendan Bohannan's article 'Biodiversity at Twenty-Five Years: Revolution or Red Herring?' is, however, a fierce critique of biodiversity thinking. They claim that 'Biodiversity *per se* is a problematic concept and undermines genuine conservation efforts.' While the first part of their claim is widely shared, I am more skeptical about the latter claim that biodiversity undermines 'genuine conservation efforts.' It is partially an empirical statement that is only grounded theoretically and thus inadequately in the article at hand.

The authors pay a great deal of attention to the normative aspects of the notion of biodiversity. They request that the divide between normative and non-normative dimensions should be made clearer and kept as separate from each other, as there is a risk that 'the public and policy makers' mistakenly consider conservation decisions 'value-neutral and free from any ideological commitments.' What do the public and policy makers really believe? Do they not recognize the value dimensions of biodiversity policies? The landmark anthology *Biodiversity* (Wilson & Peter, 1988) is a multidisciplinary endeavor with articles on ethics and economics. And many other and more multidisciplinary works have followed it containing contributions from all fields of

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academic research, so much so that the boundaries between these fields have in some cases blurred. As Sarkar (2007, p. 408) has remarked, 'the normativity and the necessity of incorporating sociopolitical considerations in different cultural contexts are what distinguish biodiversity from earlier concepts of ecological diversity.' More succinctly, the field has not been immune to value debates (especially if one compares it with some other fields of policy-related research).

Environmental issues are difficult, complex and contested, and to understand them and the rivalries that surround them requires certain capabilities, i.e. ecological and political literacy, from the citizens. Again, it would have been interesting in this piece to have introduced a real-world case where people have been misled via the biodiversity discourse and conflated facts and values. Contrary to their claims, other authors have argued that the attempt of eliminating human dimensions and suppressing expression of values from environmental controversies does not help in finding solutions (Sarewitz, 2004).

The authors further argue that 'the apocalyptic tone of current environmental rhetoric' may have the effect of consolidating 'decision-making authority in the hands of select experts and casting conservation advocates in a paternalistic role'. Instead, what they want is conservation that starts from '*our experiences* of nature's value' and if 'we' do not value or recognize biodiversity in nature, then the concept of biodiversity should go away. Again, this is an empirical question to be studied empirically 'as free as possible from ideological bias' (to use the words of the authors). If it would be studied, it is obvious that the answers would differ: there might be societies the majority of which might never have heard about biodiversity (but who might recognize it when explained). There are also other (democratic and undemocratic) societies where the notion of biodiversity is well established and incorporated into legislation. Such changes have occurred very rapidly.

For instance, a few years after the Rio Summit in 1992, the revised Constitution of Finland included an environmental section expressed in terms of biodiversity. In the European Union, the cornerstone of nature conservation, the Habitats Directive, was produced in tandem with the Rio Convention on Biodiversity (CBD) and it aims 'to promote the maintenance of biodiversity.' There are many international agreements and worldwide collaboration based on CBD as well. In this light, the (global) polity really has a sort of experience of biodiversity and its value; and what is important these are *genuine conservation efforts* at national and international legislation. (The precise democratic nature of these efforts, of course, depends on many factors; even within the EU there are continual debates about the Brussels-led conservation and the weaknesses of the subsidiarity principle.) Instead, in the above article, it is far from clear who the 'we' is. It probably does not refer to 'fellow Americans,' although the USA is outside these international arrangements and established forms of collaboration. Looking forward, it would be interesting to find out how these developments might have materialized were some other buzzwords used.

At the beginning of their article, the authors doubt that biodiversity is the aspect of nature about which 'we care the most.' Again, this is an empirical claim, but no supporting references are offered. Such an oversight might not be a problem for philosophers, since the interest is in finding justification for normative claims for why people should care or, alternatively, not care about biodiversity, but the article is presumably not directed only at philosophers. More troubling: do the authors claim that environmental ethics should start from people's experiences taken as they exist and are expressed? If so, their view reminds me of neoclassical economics, according to which people's preferences are taken for

granted and not subjected to public criticism: whatever satisfies a preference has value. Bryan Norton (2005) and many others have strongly—and rightly—criticized this deceptively neutral and anti-paternalistic view as Economism. In the same vein, we should ask for justification here. Why adopt the layperson's unexamined experiences as a point of departure in environmental politics? Biodiversity has functioned as a critical notion that encourages people to reflect on their preferences and their experiences and to have a new outlook to the natural world. As a result, people may transform their views and strive for legal reforms, as indicated above. This process does not have to involve any malicious elitism or paternalism, but may simply be politics as usual.

Why, then, has 'biodiversity' been so successful? Linguistic communities produce new words all the time. Some terms survive, others disappear. 'Biodiversity' and its somewhat longer-standing counterpart 'biological diversity' have not been weeded out. Rather, they are dispersed across the world and have become global buzzwords (see the *Wikipedia* entry on Biodiversity). Major political terms with worldwide import must be translatable to many languages and to different uses of language (academic, political, legal, and vernacular). Because reality is full of different entities, categories and relations, it is impossible to imagine biological conservation that is not linked with this multiplicity. Of course, there are attempts to dismantle the notion of biodiversity, and sometimes for good reason, but the alternatives are no better. For example, another critic of 'biodiversity,' Donald Maier (2012) proposes replacing 'biodiversity' with 'appropriate fit' in conservation biology and environmental ethics, but his work has not resulted in a terminological transition. (I find it rather awkward in my mother tongue, Finnish.) The authors consider 'biocomplexity,' but notice that the dimensions that make 'biodiversity' a normative concept do not fade away. Even though biodiversity is a vague and fuzzy term, it might have become successful just for that reason. It effectively captures separate issues and forms a bundle of different sticks of conservation efforts. It can be made redundant, like the general concepts of ownership and property (in the bundle theory of property), but these wide-ranging concepts are useful.

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