

How to include human connection with nature in biodiversity goals

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Sanna Stålhammar. Credit: Lund University

We need new ways of understanding how people depend on nature in our efforts to protect biodiversity. A new thesis from Lund University in Sweden suggests that we rarely take into account people's place-based, varied and often emotional relationships with nature.

"Up to now, a common approach has been based on [cost-benefit analysis](#), where, for example, a company can compensate for a factory built on biodiversity or recreational land by planting new trees somewhere else. This purely economic approach fails to take into account people's deep connection to a place, the myriad ways they might use this space, and the emotional cost of the loss," says Sanna Stålhammar, researcher at Lund University Centre for Sustainability Studies.

The thesis is based on analysis of people's expressions of values of nature in three settings: Cape Town, South Africa, favela dwellers in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, and citizens in Skåne, Sweden.

The findings show that people's perception of, and relationship with, nature often differs from established assumptions. For example, many participants in the Swedish focus groups described their relationship with nature in spiritual and emotional terms. Nature was seen as healing, as authentic, and magical. Participants had difficulty describing nature in terms of a service or a benefit, or even as preferences, which is often how it is described and quantified.

The thesis also demonstrates certain tensions that can arise between stakeholders and sustainability and biodiversity goals.

In Cape Town, civil servants are caught between the localized use of

green space, where invasive species are often preferred, and traditional conservation, which would normally clear invasives. This highlights the challenges when trying to use more people-centered approaches when working to protect biodiversity.

"Biodiversity preservation is often in conflict with how lay people use and perceive nature, especially in densely populated areas, such as Rio de Janeiro and Cape Town," says Sanna Stålhammar.

In Rio de Janeiro, residents in the favela expressed both positive and negative views of nature, for example: informal green spaces were often linked to problems with waste and sewage, bad health, and crime. This viewpoint is in contrast to the implicit assumption in ecosystems services that nature and green spaces are inherently good, a benefit, and that the inclusion of many values of nature will result in a preference for conservation and protection of biodiversity.

"Decision makers on different levels need to diversify ways of understanding and conceptualising human—nature relationships. That includes a move away from a world-view based on a quantification logic and an economic perspective on nature," concludes Sanna Stålhammar.

About the thesis:

The thesis examines different ways of understanding values of nature in frameworks and assessment methods for ecosystem services. Ecosystem services are the benefits humans obtain from nature and healthy [ecosystems](#). The concept of ecosystem services gained attention after the United Nations launched its Millennium Ecosystem Assessment in 2005. Since then, a number of assessment frameworks and methods have been developed—in order to support urban and rural planning and implementation efforts, and to preserve biodiversity.

During the thesis work there has been a move to broaden the ecosystem service concept. The Intergovernmental Science-Policy Platform on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services (IPBES), in its recent report on biodiversity, recognized that indigenous people and local communities possess detailed and place specific knowledge on biodiversity and ecosystem trends.

"It is good that more ways of understanding nature are becoming recognized through IPBES but we need to go further in terms of how we capture what nature means to us. The focus should not be on nature's economic value to us, but on the relationship and interlinkages between nature and humans," comments Sanna Stålhammar.

2020 UN Biodiversity Conference:

Sanna Stålhammar's research is timely since it is anticipated that the final decision on the post-2020 global biodiversity framework will be taken at the 2020 UN Biodiversity Conference in October. The delivery and achievements of the UN Strategic Plan for Diversity 2011—2020 will also be discussed and highlighted.

"Frameworks and standards are a double-edged sword. We need ways to measure and capture what nature gives us so we can protect and preserve biodiversity. Yet current frameworks and measurement-logic often oversimplify human-nature relationships to the extent that human dependence on nature becomes compromised. Now, with the UN [biodiversity](#) conference coming up, we have a possibility to really rethink how we understand values of nature and the assumptions behind our current accounting frameworks and consider more representative and just ways forward," says Sanna Stålhammar.

More information: Reconnecting with nature through concepts: On the construction of values in the ecosystem services paradigm:

www.lucsus.lu.se/sanna-stalham...43-8c05-233923306b92

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