

# A 'values crisis' underpins the coupled biodiversity and climate emergency

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Around the world, people value nature in diverse and profound ways that extend far beyond economic usage. But this diversity in how people value nature is not properly reflected in key political and economic

decisions. A new study published in *Nature* shows how undervaluation of nature is foundational to the environmental crisis we face.

The 'values crisis' describes the continued dominance of a narrow set of values that are proven to be unfit for the purpose of resolving the dual biodiversity and climate emergencies.

The study also identifies four 'values-centered approaches' that can foster the necessary conditions for transformative change to achieve more just and sustainable futures: recognizing the diversity of values with regards to nature, embedding these diverse values in [decision-making](#), reforming policies and stimulating institutional change, and shifting society-level norms and goals to support sustainability-aligned values across sectors.

Currently, market-based values of nature, such as those associated with intensively-produced food and other commodities, are often privileged at the expense of the non-market values associated with nature's many other contributions to people, such as adapting to climate change or nourishing cultural identities, that are equally essential for achieving just and sustainable societies.

At the same time, biodiversity conservation policies, such as the expansion of protected area networks, have often also prioritized narrow sets of values regarding nature, frequently marginalizing those held by Indigenous peoples and local communities, who in many cases have been shown to protect biodiversity on the territories.

According to the study's authors, to attain more just and sustainable futures, it is imperative to depart from the predominant focus on short-term profits and economic growth, which has come at the expense of considering the multiple values of nature in economic and political decisions.

"A better understanding of how and why nature is (under)valued by private and public decision-makers is more urgent than ever, and while it is positive that global agreements like the Kunming-Montreal Global Biodiversity Framework (GBF) and the UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) call for inclusive and participatory process of incorporating nature's values into actions, predominant environmental and development policies still prioritize a narrow subset of market-values of nature," says Prof. Unai Pascual (Basque Centre for Climate Change [BC3] and the Basque Science Foundation, Ikerbasque), who led the study.

The article follows upon the publication in July 2022 of the Values Assessment report, approved by the 139 member states of IPBES. It synthesizes and highlights the assessment's main results, which were based on a review of more than 50,000 scientific publications, policy documents, and Indigenous and local knowledge sources.

Applying this evidence, the authors of the newly published study propose combinations of 'values-centered approaches' to ultimately leverage the necessary changes to transform the current decisions that negatively impact both sustainability and [social justice](#) (i.e., fair treatment of people and nature, including inter- and intra-generational equity).

Within any society, there are broad, deeply held values that are embedded in social norms and even legal rules (e.g., care and justice), as well as specific value justifications of why nature matters to people, including instrumental (e.g., nature viewed as an economic asset), intrinsic (e.g., nature is worth protecting for its own sake) and relational values (e.g., values that arise from a relationship with nature such as a sense of place or collective identities), which people express in their daily lives.

All these types of nature's values can be measured using a large suite of

valuation methods that are based on a range of economic, ecological and socio-cultural value indicators or metrics. As such, the study published in *Nature* points out that there is no shortage of valuation methods to understand and account for the diversity of nature's values.

"Scientists have developed a large suite of valuation methods. What is in short supply is the willingness or ability of governments and other key stakeholders to apply these methods and embed them into their decision-making systems in ways that representation, equity and power relationships among the different parties involved in valuation processes are carefully taken into account," says Pascual.

Based on these findings, the study's authors call for rebalancing the values that underpin social structures, such as its legal institutions, by promoting values like unity, care, solidarity, responsibility, reciprocity and justice, both towards other people and towards nature.

The study further argues that shifting decision-making towards the multiple values of nature is a really important part of the system-wide transformative change needed to address the current global biodiversity crisis and climate emergency, which have intimate relationships to other socio-environmental ills, including increased contamination, emergent pandemics and environmental injustices.

This requires a new definition of what is meant by 'development' and 'well-being,' recognizing the multiple ways people relate to each other and to the natural world. Co-author Prof. Mike Christie and co-Chair of the Values Assessment (Aberystwyth University) argues that "if we wish to achieve a more just and sustainable society in the future, we need to rebalance how we consider nature in the decisions we make through recognizing and accounting for the multiple ways people relate to and value the natural world." Decision making process that consider the values of all affected parties are more likely to mitigate human and

environmental conflicts.

One particularly timely aspect of the study published in *Nature* is the support it provides to recent efforts, such as those expressed in the Kunming-Montreal Global Biodiversity Framework, to create more respectful and participatory approaches to environmental and development decision-making.

In this context, the study emphasizes that recognizing and incorporating the worldviews and values of Indigenous peoples and local communities and the institutions that support their rights and territories also allow policies to be more inclusive, and crucially this also translates into better outcomes for both people and nature.

According to Prof. Patricia Balvanera, co-author and co-Chair of the Values Assessment, (National Autonomous University of Mexico), "many Indigenous and [local communities](#) of the Global South have been the stewards of the biodiversity of which they feel part of, responsible for, and essential to their identities; yet, these diverse values of nature have been marginalized mostly by governments and powerful agribusinesses that view nature only as a factory of cheap commodities."

In the words of Unai Pascual, "our analysis shows that the best options for meeting global targets like those of the GBF and the SDGs are to weave together nature's diverse values across all sectors of society and our economies."

**More information:** Unai Pascual, Diverse values of nature for sustainability, *Nature* (2023). [DOI: 10.1038/s41586-023-06406-9](https://doi.org/10.1038/s41586-023-06406-9).  
[www.nature.com/articles/s41586-023-06406-9](https://www.nature.com/articles/s41586-023-06406-9)

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