

Culling gray squirrels not necessary for overall biodiversity, expert suggests

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Life on Earth is facing the greatest rate of extinction in history—and humans are the disruptive force, according to a leading ecologist.

Protecting biodiversity, according to consultant ecologist Nigel Dudley

who has worked with [international organizations](#) including WWF International and UNESCO, does not mean prioritizing animal lives at all costs or focusing narrowly on nature's economic values.

The author defines biodiversity rights here as "the right of all species to continue their natural span of existence within a functioning ecosystem."

Dudley says the failure of some governments to respect biodiversity rights is threatening the survival of many species and the future of the planet.

His new book, "[Why Biodiversity Matters](#)", is a call for action to defend all forms of life that together provide food, water and other vital resources, and mitigate against climate change.

This manifesto for policymakers and other influencers outlines the complex challenges faced from balancing economic development with ecosystem survival, and human rights and the rights of individual animals with biodiversity rights.

Rethinking conservation

A year on from the COP15 summit of the Convention on Biological Diversity, the book argues for a careful rethink on conservation. It calls for a shift away from policies that focus narrowly on how nature can benefit humans economically to a greater focus on the ethical arguments for conservation.

Nigel Dudley says, "It's not that the ecosystem services are unimportant, far from it. But there has been a tendency for the utilitarian and economic values of wild plants and animals to dominate discussion to the exclusion of the basic rights that species have to live their natural evolutionary span."

Based on current evidence including academic research, the book provides new insights into many other topical issues around biodiversity and the ethical challenges around species conservation.

These include the [hunting](#) of 'trophy' animals, policies towards non-native or 'invasive' species, the existence of zoos, and the rights of indigenous people in determining what happens on their territories.

Invasive species

As a [case study](#), Dudley analyzes the threat to red squirrels from gray ones in the UK and whether routine culling of gray squirrels is justified.

He highlights that [red squirrels](#) are not in danger of extinction on a global basis and still have healthy populations in parts of Britain, therefore the routine culling of gray squirrels is not necessary for biodiversity reasons. This is in contrast with places such as long-isolated islands where [invasive species](#) have a 'devastating' effect on those that are native.

The author says that control of non-native species like the gray squirrel is only justified if they pose a 'credible threat' for example to the existence of other species.

The book discusses how three important ethical issues—human rights, animal rights and biodiversity rights—interact and sometimes clash.

Nigel Dudley says, "As an example, culling a population of non-native rabbits on an island to protect a unique species of plant doesn't make sense from the perspective of animal rights but it does in terms of biodiversity rights. Conservationists haven't always got the right balance, particularly when it comes to [human rights](#)."

The hunting dilemma

Dudley examines the emotive issue of hunting, suggesting it is complex and the ethics should be considered case-by-case. He explains that while hunting has clear implications for animal rights, it only really impacts biodiversity rights if other [species](#) are threatened with extinction. A decline in hunting in Germany for example has led to damaging wild boar levels. In contrast, deer populations maintained for hunting have laid bare woodland in Scotland.

Trophy hunting is a particularly complex and emotive issue, Dudley explains, "Personally I find the concept of shooting an animal just to take a photograph posing next to its corpse abhorrent. But hunting reserves protect big area in the tropics. From the long-term perspective of biodiversity, they probably play a positive role."

The book finishes with a draft manifesto for [biodiversity](#) rights that attempts to balance the various complicated questions.

More information: Nigel Dudley, Why Biodiversity Matters, (2023). [DOI: 10.4324/9780429346675](https://doi.org/10.4324/9780429346675)

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