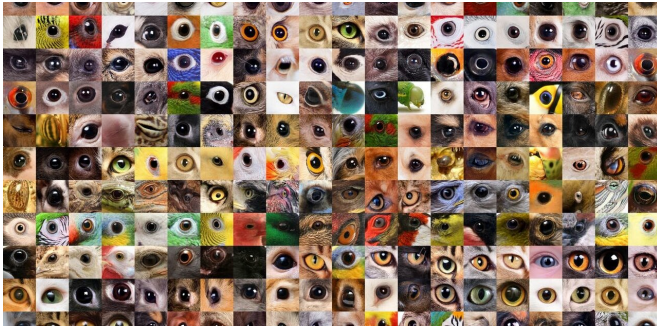


Biodiversity loss has finally got political — and this means new thinking on the left and the right

20 May 2019, by Victor Anderson



partnerships". And for most of its history and in most of the countries it works in, any idea that biodiversity loss is a political issue is unwelcome.

Biodiversity politics

But this story is becoming less and less plausible. Ecosystem deterioration, along with [climate change](#), is now becoming a controversial political question.

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The world recently discovered that disastrous deterioration in the health of most of the planet's ecosystems means that a million species are threatened with extinction. This is among [the findings](#) of the most thorough ever survey of the state of the biosphere, carried out by the Intergovernmental Platform on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services (IPBES).

These findings come at a time when concern about [environmental problems](#) is ramping up significantly, with school students' strikes, the nonviolent direct action of Extinction Rebellion, and official preparations taking place for a major global conference on biodiversity, to be held in China in October 2020.

All this is changing the nature of the debate about biodiversity. In the UK, and most other Western countries, the decline of the natural world has for many years generally been seen as "non-political". After all, we all love animals and plants, don't we? Their conservation has found champions and supporters across the political spectrum. WWF (World Wildlife Fund) has traded on cuddly pandas, royal patrons, and "corporate



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This is partly because the urgency and extent of the problem have become all too clear. The question of biodiversity loss can no longer be seen as about saving your favourite zoo animal species. It is increasingly obvious that the problem of decline is much more pervasive, throughout the whole biosphere. This turns the problem from being about the conservation of charismatic species such as the snow leopard to becoming a threat to [food supplies](#) and ultimately human survival.

Then add to this the rise of climate change as a factor in causing extinctions and biodiversity loss. As recently as the 1990s, its impacts were [not seen](#) as one of the main causes of biodiversity loss. But now climate catastrophe is recognised as one of the most important [causes of decline](#), and it is therefore now increasingly difficult to divide the issue of biodiversity loss from that of the climate. Since climate science denial has become a right-wing political cause, biodiversity joins it in the political arena.

In addition, IPBES investigated causation more than previous large-scale studies have done. Tracing that through takes us from natural science outcomes back into human behaviour, institutions, and economies, for example through the question of why land use changes, and how that is affected by international trade and what we eat. For example, [consumer demand](#) for palm oil in a wide variety of products directly results in deforestation in Indonesia.

Moving up the agenda

So biodiversity has certainly become politicised, in terms of debates about ideas. However, beyond green parties, the impact of this shift is not yet felt within Western political parties.



The economic case for biodiversity is going to have to be made – but there are problems with this. Credit: [Nomad Soul/Shutterstock.com](#)

In the UK, for example, although [global climate change](#) has registered with the political parties, efforts to find answers about global biodiversity issues have been led by those working in natural science, civil servants, and the voluntary sector, rather than by politicians. This might now change.

As biodiversity moves up the political agenda, a real-world focus in economics is likely to be part of the change. This means examining how the organisation of the food industry, the energy sector, international finance, and other key parts of the world economy, contribute to ecosystem decline.

The left should have a relatively easy time doing this, because it has always been critical of the way the capitalist economy is organised. But there are problems here. In my experience, many of the scientific defenders of biodiversity see any public perception of a connection of the issue with the left as a liability. The other is that the left has not historically given these issues a high priority, often being as wedded as most of the right is to a view of economic progress as being unproblematic – at least if it wasn't for inequality in the distribution of wealth and income.

On the right, there is a tendency to rely on market forces. But the market, in reality, is largely driven by firms minimising their costs. They do so by avoiding paying for all the resources they use and benefit from, for example, the capacities of the environment to absorb carbon.

There is a [strong case](#) for making companies pay for such environmental services, including requiring them to renew resources which are run down, like the natural productivity of the soil. Although this is consistent with economic ideas about markets, who is to make them pay? It will be hard to achieve that without a strong degree of state intervention, which will be anathema to many of those most keen on market forces.

The recent politicisation of [biodiversity](#) will therefore require some new thinking, rather than simply being used to confirm existing beliefs. Without that happening, those who love plants and animals, and who want to see human life sustained, will not get beyond the surface of the current crisis.

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Provided by The Conversation
APA citation: Biodiversity loss has finally got political — and this means new thinking on the left and the right (2019, May 20) retrieved 19 January 2021 from <https://phys.org/news/2019-05-biodiversity-loss-political-left.html>

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