Why a sense of kinship is key to caring about the living world
29 October 2019, by Matthew Hall

Framing nature in terms of kinship can motivate people to care about the loss of biodiversity. Credit: www.shutterstock.com, CC BY-ND

Leading thinkers in environmental economics and conservation are asking a pressing question. Why are we ignoring the destruction of the living world?

Recently, the Intergovernmental Platform on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services (IPBES) published a global assessment of biodiversity that set out alarming statistics: a million species at threat of extinction, 75% of terrestrial environments severely altered by human activity, and a 30% reduction in global habitat integrity.

Despite all this, practical solutions to redress an ecological crisis—land use and economic reform, action on climate change and improvements to environmental governance—are not prioritised. One key reason for this is how we frame our relationship to the living world.

Instrumental nature

Our prevailing relationship with nature is instrumental—that is, we predominantly frame the living world as a set of natural resources, apart from humans, for our privileged use.
Environmental thinkers have warned for decades that such a view of nature is at the root of our ecological crisis. More recent research has argued against this instrumental view, criticising its value as a basis for conservation action.

Since the 1980s, discussions of the intrinsic value of nature—"valuing it for what it is, not only what it does"—have happened across a number of environmental disciplines. This led to the Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD), founded on the cornerstone of the intrinsic value of biological diversity.

In some countries, such as New Zealand, the concept of intrinsic value appears in major pieces of resource management and conservation legislation. It has been instrumental in recent legal battles over land use.

Recent work by environmental philosopher Michael Paul Nelson shows people acknowledge the intrinsic value of nature. He argues that the only reason we make decisions inconsistent with this value is because we don't believe the general populace shares this belief.

But the concept of intrinsic value does not demand a move away from a dominant use-based frame. In the preamble of the CBD itself, intrinsic values sit alongside a raft of use-based values, including economic, scientific, educational, cultural and aesthetic values. The power of the use-based frame dominates the concept of intrinsic value.

**Intrinsic value**
A highly resolved tree of life demonstrates the kinship of all life on Earth. Credit: Ivica Letunic/Wikimedia Commons

Framing nature in terms of kinship can motivate people to care and make the loss of the living world real for people. Ever since Darwin's book, *On the Origin of Species*, science has known of our fundamental kinship with nature. Yet we don't frame (or live with) nature in a way that honours this.

A recent example gives me hope. At the school climate strike, a young Brazilian Indigenous woman addressed a crowd in New York, *speaking in terms of kinship* about the human children of a mother Earth, fighting to save their mother from destruction. Framing nature in terms of kinship noticeably energised the crowd of young people.

The challenge to reframe the living world in terms of kinship is massive. A good step would be to convene a human-nature kinship platform as a way of influencing the UN Biodiversity Conference in China next year. Another step could be to enshrine our fundamental kinship with other species in all major environmental governance frameworks, including the CBD and national environmental legislation.

Both could provide the springboard for us to undergo the hard work of talking about, and living with, other species in ways that acknowledge them as our earthly relations.

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