

Humans need to value nature as well as profits to survive, UN report finds

Market-based focus has led to climate and nature crises, with spiritual, cultural and emotional benefits of nature ignored



Aerial view of deforestation in the Western Amazon region of Brazil. Photograph: Carl de Souza/AFP/Getty Images

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Taking into account all the benefits nature provides to humans and redefining what it means to have a “good quality of life” is key to living sustainably on Earth, a four-year assessment by 82 leading scientists has found.

A market-based focus on short-term profits and economic growth means the wider benefits of nature have been ignored, which has led to bad decisions that have reduced people’s wellbeing and contributed to climate and nature crises, according to a new UN report. To achieve sustainable development, qualitative approaches need to be incorporated into decision making.

This means properly valuing the spiritual, cultural and emotional values that nature brings to humans, according to the report by the Intergovernmental Science-Policy Platform on **Biodiversity** and Ecosystem Services (Ipbes). The assessment includes more than 13,000 references, including scientific papers, and indigenous and local sources of information. It was done in collaboration with experts in social science, economics and humanities.

The report builds on the Dasgupta review which found the planet is being put at “**extreme risk**” by the failure of economics to take account of the true value of nature. Incorporating diverse worldviews and knowledge systems will be key to leading to a more sustainable future, the report says.

Prof Unai Pascual, from the Basque Centre for Climate Change, who co-chaired the assessment on the diverse values and valuation of nature said: “There has been a dominant way of taking decisions based on things that look more simple, super-quantitative, and more scientific, and we’re saying: ‘No, that’s not good science.’ There are a lot of social sciences and humanities, and other knowledge systems, that can also tell us how to do things.”

The review highlights four general perspectives that should be taken into account; “living from nature” which refers to its ability to provide us with our needs like food and material goods; “living with nature”, which is the right of non-human life to thrive; “living in nature” which refers to people’s right to a sense of place and identity, and finally, “living as nature”, which treats the world as a spiritual part of being human.

We’ve overexploited the planet, now we need to change if we’re to survive

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“The type and quality of information that valuation studies can produce largely depends on how, why and by whom valuation is designed and applied,” says Prof Mike Christie from Aberystwyth Business School. “This influences whose and which values of nature would be recognised in decisions, and how fairly the benefits and burdens of these decisions would be distributed.”

There are 50 different methods and approaches of making the value of nature visible in decisions, yet researchers found that the way stakeholders valued nature was only taken into account on 2% of studies. Moving forward there are many tools available to make the values of nature visible and these need to be implemented, authors say. One way of working is using citizen assemblies, which reflect the sociology of a given people and gives them a chance to discuss their values, interests and understandings. These are happening at a national level in a number of countries.

One successful example is how the **Canadian Nuclear Waste Management Organisation** has integrated indigenous perspectives in planning, which involved decision-makers participating in ceremonies and “experiencing” the land together. Another was the Indian government’s decision not to mine near **the Niyamgiri mountain** which is sacred for Dongaria Kondh peoples. The intrinsic value of the site for rare species and its cultural and spiritual value to indigenous people was seen as more valuable than the financial gains from mining it.

There are consequences of not taking other values into account, such as environmental leaders being killed because they had claims to land that have been ignored, says Prof Patricia Balvanera from the National Autonomous University of Mexico, who co-chaired the assessment. “The evidence shows that if, from the onset, local values are taken into consideration, people will feel part of the project and will be more on board with whatever was agreed ... This entails redefining ‘development’ and ‘good quality of life’ and recognising the multiple ways people relate to each other and to the natural world,” she says.

The assessment was approved by representatives of 139 countries in German city of Bonn. “The delegates who endorsed this report say this is a game-changer,” says Pascual. “They realise we’ve been going through a way of understanding nature in a too-narrow sense, and that has brought us to this situation where we live in a planet with interconnected crises ... this [report] is one ingredient out of many which will be needed to convince very powerful stakeholders and decision makers to start changing the way they treat nature.”

Ipbes, which is the equivalent of the IPCC for biodiversity, was set up to provide governments across the world with scientific advice on how to protect nature.

Last week it released another **report** which found wild species support half the world's population but their future use is threatened by overexploitation.

It comes ahead of the Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD) Cop15 in Montreal in December which will set the next decade of nature targets, and authors say the findings should provide a valuable contribution to the process. Elizabeth Maruma Mrema, executive secretary of CBD said: "I applaud the work of all Ipbes experts for this and look forward to its active use by all parties and stakeholders to the convention."