

# Ethical perspectives on the preservation of biocultural diversity

U. Eser

## Ethische Grundlagen des Schutzes biologischer und kultureller Vielfalt

### ‘Man vs. Nature’ – a restriction of environmental ethics

In May 2008, the international conference “Preservation of Biocultural Diversity – a global issue” took place in Vienna. Speakers from many regions of the world showed how different cultures influence biological diversity in different ways and presented measures to increase positive effects of human activities on nature. The focus of the discussions was the question, how we can preserve the diversity of species, landscapes and land use systems with regard to both their natural and their cultural components.

In contrast to this empirical question, *how* biocultural diversity *can* be preserved, my paper is concerned with the normative question *why* it *should* be preserved. Hence, I’m arguing from an ethical perspective. For the preservation of

biocultural diversity is neither a self-evident truth nor a simple necessity. Rather, it is a moral decision that needs to be sustained by arguments.

Ethical debates about human interventions into nature are a relatively new field of applied ethics. Although predecessors date from the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, it was the so-called “environmental crisis” in the 1970ies that triggered a broader debate about an “environmental ethics” (Anthologies of relevant essays in German translations were edited by BIRNBACHER, 1980 and 1997 and KREBS, 1996). The cornerstone of this debate is laid by the question, if humans do have moral duties towards the natural world (as is, for example, argued by ROLSTON, 1989 or, differently, by NAESS, 1989) – or if they only have moral duties to other humans with regard to the natural world, as is argued in the tradition of Western Philosophy since Enlightenment. For more

### Zusammenfassung

In diesem Beitrag geht es um ethische Fragen des Schutzes biologischer und kultureller Vielfalt: Was müssen wir zukünftigen Generationen aus ethischer Perspektive hinterlassen? Der Aufsatz behandelt in drei Schritten jeweils unterschiedliche Teilaspekte: Was für ein Begriff ist „biokulturelle Vielfalt“? Welcher Art ist die Pflicht zur Bewahrung der biokulturellen Vielfalt? Was für eine Wissenschaft brauchen wir für den Schutz der biokulturellen Vielfalt? Abschließend wird die Bewahrung biologischer und kultureller Vielfalt mit dem Leitbild einer nachhaltigen Entwicklung verknüpft, als deren grundlegende Voraussetzungen Wissen, Kommunikation, Mitgefühl und Gerechtigkeit identifiziert werden.

**Schlagerworte:** Ethik, biokulturelle Diversität, Gerechtigkeit, nachhaltige Entwicklung.

### Summary

This paper addresses ethical questions concerning the preservation of biocultural diversity: What do we have to leave to future generations from an ethical perspective? The argument is divided into three steps each answering a distinct question: What kind of concept is biocultural diversity? What kind of duty is the preservation of biocultural diversity? What kind of science is needed for the preservation of biocultural diversity? The conclusion links the preservation of biocultural diversity to the general prerequisites of sustainable development: knowledge, communication, sympathy, and justice.

**Key words:** Ethics, biocultural diversity, preservation, justice, sustainable development.

applied questions, this theoretical controversy about the anthropocentric or non-anthropocentric foundations of environmental ethics, although of reasonable philosophical interest, is of little practical relevance (NORTON, 1991). With regard to the solution of concrete conflicts concerning competing use options, the alternative 'Man vs. Nature' obstructs the view on more relevant questions (ESER, 2003b). By using a unifying, pseudo-universal concept of humans, such a narrowed debate neglects ethically relevant differences between different social and cultural groups or individuals.

To break this impasse, I consider it helpful to set the fundamental theoretical debate aside and turn to concrete problems of global environmental politics. When we look at biocultural diversity it becomes obvious, that different humans with different social and cultural contexts have different influences on the diversity of nature. These important differences stay in concealment behind the facade of a supposedly universal concept of 'Man'. By asking why we should preserve biocultural diversity and what we have to leave to future generations, I want to make these differences more visible and to isolate the moral questions at stake.

In the first section of the paper, I will address the question what kind of concept biocultural diversity is and analyse its ambiguity between fact and value. In the second section, I will discuss several possible reasons for the preservation of biocultural diversity and discriminate merely reasonable from ethical ones. In the third section, I will touch the question what this means for scientists who engage in biocultural diversity research. Finally, I connect the preservation of biocultural diversity to the more general concept of sustainable development and nominate some candidates that I take for essential parts of the legacy we have to leave.

## 1 What kind of concept is biocultural diversity?

First of all, biocultural diversity is a *fact*. We can observe it, explain it, we can lose it, preserve it or even enrich it. Biocultural diversity, thus, has an obviously descriptive dimension. But at the same time, *we value* biocultural diversity: we consider diversity to be good, more diversity to be better than less. This value of biocultural diversity has normative consequences: Loss of diversity calls us for action. In 1992, the preservation of biological diversity and its sustainable use have been set onto the global political agenda with the Convention on Biological diversity (CBD, 1992).

Since then, biocultural diversity not only "is", it also "shall be". 'Biocultural diversity', like biological diversity as such, thus has descriptive, evaluative and normative components. It is an object not only of natural and cultural sciences, but also of ethics and politics. (I have analysed implications of this precarious arrangement between science, politics and ethics for the term 'biodiversity' in ESER, 2003a).

But how exactly is the fact of biocultural diversity linked to its value and to the norm of preservation? Logically, the latter do not follow from the first. There's a fundamental difference between 'Is' and 'Ought', that has first been addressed by the Scottish philosopher David HUME (1739). In a similar manner, George E. MOORE (1903) has argued that a conclusion from any natural quality to the value-statement "good" is a "naturalistic fallacy". Hence, from the mere fact that there is diversity, it does neither follow that diversity is good, nor that there ought to be diversity in future.

Nevertheless, for most of us it goes without saying that biocultural diversity is valuable and that we should preserve it. The abundant literature on evaluation and assessment of biological diversity generally addresses all aspects: the empirical, the evaluative and the normative (e.g. HEYWOOD, 1995; NRC, 1999). Scientists measure, map and explain diversity – as a matter of fact. But a lot of them engage in this research, because they are concerned about the loss of diversity and because they are convinced that something should be done to halt it. This normative dimension, which is neither a logical consequence of scientific results nor a merely subjective and partial value, generally receives too little attention. Scientists consider it to be too personal, too subjective, and maybe even too emotional to talk about it.

These normative aspects are explored in more detail in this paper. It seeks answers to the question "*What do we have to leave to future generations?*" To find them, I will first address the more basic question: "*Why do we have to leave anything to future generations at all? What kind of duty is the preservation of biocultural diversity?*"

## 2 What kind of duty is the preservation of biocultural diversity?

Even if someone agreed that biocultural diversity is *valuable*, he or she does not necessarily have to support the claim that we (all and each of us) have a duty to preserve it. How can we reasonably argue that preserving biocultural diversity is not just an individual preference, but a *moral duty* for

everyone? What kinds of reasons can we give if someone doubted this obligation? Let me briefly sketch three types of possible arguments, which I will discuss in more detail in the following sub-sections.

- 1) A possible first answer is rather simple: Biocultural diversity is useful. We need it for our survival and for our well-being. Therefore, *prudence* tells us to save it. The preservation of biocultural diversity would then be a matter of utility, not of morality.
- 2) A second option is to regard biocultural diversity as part of a good life. Contributing to the preservation of biocultural diversity would, then, be a *virtue*. It is laudable, if people set themselves this personal goal – but there's nothing to object, if they don't.
- 3) Finally – and this is the option I prefer – it can be argued that the preservation of biocultural diversity is a matter of *justice*: a moral obligation towards future generations as well as towards the people already living today.

## 2.1 Prudence

One argument, that dominates the debate about nature conservation in general or preservation of biocultural diversity in particular, is, that “we” (meaning all humans alike) need diversity as a resource for our living: “*You don't cut off the branch on which you're sitting*” this German saying may illustrate such an argument of prudence.

The argument of prudence is probably a very convincing one in the public discourse because it appeals to self-interests. However, exactly for this reason, it is not a good ethical argument: A person, who's sitting on a branch and is cutting it off at the same time, is a fool, not a sinner. To save the branch on which you sit does not require any morals. It is only reasonable.

But does it really suffice to say that preservation is a matter of prudence? Is it convincing that “we” should spare biocultural diversity because it contributes to “our” personal needs? Obviously not. The snag in the suggestive image of the tree is easy to name: While the person in the cited saying is culprit and victim at the same time, the reality more often than not is different. Those, who are using the saws, are others than the endangered persons on the branches. The first mainly live in the well-to-do countries of today, the latter live far away from them – in space or time. We're not digging our own graves – we're digging someone else's graves. As long as we focus the ethical debate on conflicts between “Man” and “Nature”, this difference doesn't come into our field of vision. It

is the difference between doers and victims that makes preservation a matter of morals, and not only of prudence.

## 2.2 Virtue

If we consider it right, that preserving biocultural diversity is morally good, we still have two options with regard to its binding character: Is it just “nice to have” – or is it a “must”? In the tradition of Aristotelian ethics, one could argue, that cherishing and supporting diversity is a matter of individual virtue. In this view, it can be considered a part of my personal idea of a “good life” to contribute to the preservation of biocultural diversity. In contrast to such a virtue-centred approach, representatives of deontological ethics would regard preservation as an obligation for everyone, independent from his or her personal beliefs and preferences.

The difference between virtue and justice has important political consequences. Already 150 years ago, the Scottish philosopher Adam SMITH, “father” of the liberal market theory, has discriminated justice from all other virtues with regard to its mandatory character. In his 1759 *Theory of moral sentiments* he explained: Charity (and other virtues) is always voluntary, we can not and may not enforce it. It is laudable if a person displays it, but we do not punish her, if not. In contrast to this voluntary engagement, justice means an obligation. We expect people to act according to the rules of justice: Who follows the rules of justice won't raise a cheer. Only the violation of justice demands for action: revenge and punishment are asked for.

If we want to find arguments for an obligatory preservation of biocultural diversity we therefore have to decide, if we consider a careful handling of the biocultural resources to be a virtue or an obligation. With regard to this decision, I think, we recently have witnessed a crucial change. In civilisations of the western type, love and respect for nature were long regarded as merely individual virtues. A turn of this perspective became more widespread in the late 1960ies, when environmentalism was increasingly been regarded as a matter of justice towards future generations.

## 2.3 Justice

In the 1970ies, environmentalists propagated a saying that was contributed to the Native Americans: “*We do not inherit the earth from our parents – we borrow it from our children*”.

This motto demonstrates the turn from virtue to obligation that took place with regard to nature conservation. Obviously, as a matter of fact, we do inherit biocultural diversity from the people before us. But the claim of the slogan is not a factual but a moral one: It demands preservation as a matter of intergenerational justice. To regard the earth as a debt rather than a heritage is a turnabout of perspectives, which is crucial from an ethical perspective: To leave something of your inheritance to your children or grand children is only a matter of virtue, not of duty. A person who wastes her fortune might not receive our greatest respect – but we cannot force her and we will not ask for her punishment. But: If we regard the earth and its ecosystems and functions as our debt to future generations, our legacy becomes a matter of justice. We have a *moral obligation* to return what we have borrowed, in fact, to return it in good order.

In accordance with this turn from virtue to obligation, the so called “Earth Summit” in Rio de Janeiro in 1992 (UNCED, 1992) could be interpreted as the acceptance of this moral obligation by the global community and as an attempt to transform it into legally binding instruments. With the Convention on Biological Diversity the preservation of biological diversity and the related cultural practices has been turned into a moral duty.

However, justice to future generations is not the only fundament of the CBD. The convention has introduced an additional perspective into preservation: while the slogan discussed above propagated duties of today’s generation towards future generations, the CBD addresses justice within generations, too. In fact, the “Earth Summit” was not only concerned with the conservation of nature but equally with the development of perspectives for the world’s poor. The UNCED – United Nations conference on environment and development – explicitly aimed at integrating both responsibilities.

In the negotiations preceding the CBD, a wording of the Brundtland report, where biological diversity was addressed as “a common heritage”, had provoked resistance among the G77 states (McCONNELL, 1996). This expression, the developing countries argued, obscured an unequal distribution of the biocultural inheritance: Genetic resources and the technical means for their utilisation are not distributed equally on the globe. The first are mainly to be found in the countries of the South, whereas the latter are mainly held by the well-to-do countries of the North. To ensure that the Convention would not be turned into just another instrument for the exploitation of the South through the North, the developing countries insisted that the fair sharing of the

profits gained through the use of natural resources is an equally important goal of the Convention.

Thus, justice is at the heart of the CBD, and it has two directions: justice between generations and justice within generations. Article 1 names ‘conservation’, ‘sustainable use’ and ‘fair and equitable sharing’ as its three equally entitled objectives. The same is true for the preservation of biocultural diversity – it comprises aspects of conservation as well as the possibility for people to make a living from sustainable use and the right of the poorer to participate from the wealth of the richer by means of sharing benefits.

The CBD and the idea of sustainable development acknowledge both: the rights of future generations and the rights of the ones already living. However, they leave open the difficult question, how to integrate justice within and between generations: How much of the earth’s treasures do we have a right to use – and how much do we have to leave for future users? How can we mediate the claims of future generations with the needs of the present?

The answer to these questions, I’ll argue in the following, cannot be given by scientist experts. Rather, it is a recurring challenge of the whole process of sustainable development to find adequate solutions – case by case, step by step and in co-operation of all people concerned. Before I deal with the prerequisites of such a development in more detail, let me briefly sketch the role of science in this process.

### 3 What kind of science is needed for the preservation of biocultural diversity?

Today, people tend to rely on science and technology in many aspects of their lives. Scientific experts tell us how to live longer and healthier, how to raise our children, how to cope with illness and disease and how to avoid the risks and uncertainties of life. Many people prefer to delegate their decisions to experts, who – they think – not only know the facts, but are also rational, impartial and objective.

In contrast to this traditional view of scientific expertise, the preservation of biocultural diversity requires rather different qualities. In addition to general expert knowledge it demands the inclusion of local and lay knowledge. More than value-neutral facts it needs value orientation. With regard to the limited predictive power of science it requires collective coping with uncertainty (NOWOTNY et. al., 2001). To accomplish this task, participatory decision processes are called for, which demand more autonomy

from individual persons or groups on one side and more modesty from scientists on the other.

What does that mean for the science of biocultural diversity? A science that contributes to the preservation of biocultural diversity is explicitly *value and policy oriented*. That means, it has to address empirical and normative aspects. How can it do so if the norm of value-neutrality of science requires their strict separation (WEBER, 1917)? To this, my tentative answer would be: scientists have to know the difference between facts and values, yet be able to acknowledge their mutual influence: What we value depends on what we know – and what we (seek to) know depends on what we value. Therefore, instead of pretending value-neutrality, a context-sensitive science discloses its own value foundations – and communicates them *as such*. This means, not as scientific objective truth but as a personal preference, that can – and should – be sustained with arguments.

Having a political agenda, a science of biocultural diversity engages in public discourses about how we want to live – but without claiming expertise for that question. Because all humans are equally entitled to decide what they consider to be a good life! Thus, scientists engaged in such a science accept the particular responsibility of scientists, yet, at the same time, accept the limits of their scientific expertise.

And last – but not least – a science that is dedicated to the preservation of biocultural diversity poses justice right at its centre – knowing that not science nor ethics but people decide what they consider to be a fair and equitable sharing.

After this excursion, let me get back to our initial question: What do we have to leave to future generations?

#### 4 What do we have to leave to future generations?

Having argued, that the preservation of biocultural diversity is a duty rather than a mere virtue, I now have to shed some light on the question what exactly it is that this duty demands from us. First of all we have to ask, what we really need. What are legitimate and justifiable needs – of present as well as of future generations? Do we consider basic needs, only? Or is life more than mere survival? What are the necessary constituents of a good life (NUSSBAUM and SEN, 1993)?

If it is true that neither scientific nor philosophical experts can tell us the answer to these questions, it is people, who have to find an answer themselves. On one hand, they have to find answers individually, for their own lives. On the other hand – and this is probably the more challenging task

– they have to find answers collectively, for the lives of all, now and in future. Conceptions of a good life are manifold and diverse. In order to set and justify norms, it is necessary to mediate these individual, social and cultural differences by means of communication. The regulative idea of such a process is Habermas' concept of a discourse (HABERMAS, 1983), in which we exchange arguments in order to reach a consensus concerning our mutual obligations. Obviously, such a collective endeavour is an idealisation rather than a description of real political processes. However, the ideal of a consensus is an appropriate criterion to assess real-life decisions.

The material answer to the question, what we have to leave to future generations, has thus been left to discourse. Formally, however, we can name at least four elements of this legacy that are prerequisites for the success of a moral discourse: knowledge, communication, sympathy and justice.

We have to leave to future generations as much knowledge as possible – including all kinds of knowledge: theoretical as well as practical, philosophical as well as technical, explicit as well as implicit. Unlike all other resources, knowledge is the only one that doubles when we share it (GORZ, 2004).

We have to leave to future generations the ability to communicate. Because communication is the only way to understand others and to find fair solutions for tough distributive problems.

We have to leave to future generations the feeling of sympathy. *Sym pathein* – to share someone else's feelings – is the most human and the most morally relevant way to relate to others.

And finally, we have to leave to future generations the meaning of justice. It is the fundament for a functioning society, a sustainable economy and the realisation of human dignity.

#### References

- BIRNBACHER, D. (1980): Ökologie und Ethik. 1–254.  
 BIRNBACHER, D. (1997): Ökophilosophie. 1–295.  
 CBD (1992): Convention on Biological Diversity.  
<http://www.biodiv.org>  
 ESER, U. (2003a): Der Wert der Vielfalt: »Biodiversität« zwischen Wissenschaft, Politik und Ethik. In: BOBBERT, M., M. DÜWELL and K. JAX: Umwelt, Ethik und Recht. 160–181.

- ESER, U. (2003b): Einschluss statt Ausgrenzung – Menschen und Natur in der Umweltethik. In: DÜWELL, M. and K. STEIGLEDER: *Bioethik – eine Einführung*. 344–353.
- GORZ, A. (2004): *Wissen, Wert und Kapital. Zur Kritik der Wissensökonomie*. 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. Aus dem Französischen übersetzt von Jajja Wolf. 1–159.
- HABERMAS, J. (1983): *Moralbewußtsein und kommunikatives Handeln*.
- HEYWOOD, V. H. (1995): *Global biodiversity assessment*.
- HUME, D. (1978): *Ein Traktat über die menschliche Vernunft*. 3. Buch: Über die Moral. (Orig.: *A Treatise of Human Nature*, 1739).
- KREBS, A. (1996): *Naturethik*. 1–404.
- MCCONNELL, E. (1996): *The biodiversity convention. A negotiating history*. 1–223.
- MOORE, G.E. (1993): *Principia ethica*, ed. and with an introduction by T. Baldwin. 2<sup>nd</sup> rev. ed. (orig. 1903).
- NAESS, A. (1989): *Ecology, community and lifestyle. Outline of an ecosophy*. 1–223.
- NORTON, B.G. (1991): *Toward unity among environmentalists*. i–287.
- NOWOTNY, H., P. SCOTT and M. GIBBONS (2001): *Rethinking science: knowledge and the public in an age of uncertainty*. 1–278.
- NRC (1999): *Perspectives on biodiversity: valuing its role in an everchanging world*. 1–129.
- NUSSBAUM, M. and A. SEN (1993): *The quality of life*. 1–453.
- ROLSTON, H. (1989): *Philosophy Gone Wild*.
- SMITH, A. (1976): *Theory of moral sentiments* (1759). 1–412.
- UNCED (1992): <http://www.un.org/geninfo/bp/enviro.html>
- WEBER, M. (1917): *Der Sinn der 'Wertfreiheit' der soziologischen und ökonomischen Wissenschaften*. In: WINKELMANN, J: *Max Weber: Gesammelte Aufsätze zur Wissenschaftslehre*. 6<sup>th</sup> edition 1985. 489–540.

### Adress of author

Dr. Uta Eser, Office of Environmental Affairs, Nürtingen-Geislingen University, Schelmenwasen 4–8, 72622 Nürtingen, Germany. URL: [www.ku.hfwu.de](http://www.ku.hfwu.de)  
E-Mail: [uta.eser@hfwu.de](mailto:uta.eser@hfwu.de)

Eingelangt am 8. August 2008

Angenommen am 7. November 2008