

BIODIVERSITY IS US AND WE ARE BIODIVERSITY

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'Mitigation of climate change is but one of the several benefits we derive from biodiversity' |
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The observance of [International Biodiversity Day](#) (May 22) was yet another reminder of the pivotal role our natural world plays in resolving the climate change crisis, which, along with the decline of biodiversity, poses an existential threat to our future. Biodiversity, the rich variety of life forms and their interconnections with each other and the environment, is everywhere: inside our bodies as ubiquitous microbiomes, in our backyards, villages, towns, and cities, and in remote wild places as well-organised ecological communities and ecosystems. Maintaining and enhancing biodiversity on land and in oceans is perhaps the least expensive mechanism to sequester carbon dioxide from the atmosphere so as to cool our land and oceans.

Mitigation of climate change is but one of the several benefits we derive from biodiversity. It also fulfils our basic needs for food, shelter, medicines, mental health, recreation, and spiritual enrichment. To face the continuing decline in the quality of our environment, we will need to rely more and more on solutions that draw upon biodiversity or nature, also called nature-based solutions to secure our future. It is biodiversity that will restore our degraded lands and polluted rivers and oceans and sustain our agriculture in the face of climate change. It is biodiversity that will form the basis of a new sustainable green economy. And it is biodiversity that will inspire our children to opt for a more humane, just, and hopeful future, which accords primacy to the living world.

Despite the importance of biodiversity that ultimately sustains all human endeavours, we have been poor stewards for caring and nurturing life on earth. Globally as well as in India, we have failed to adequately conserve and manage our precious, irreplaceable natural heritage. Biodiversity is declining worldwide, and our last remaining, largely isolated ecosystems are degrading due to changes happening around them, such as loss of species, climate stressors, and continuous human pressures.

In India, the Forest (Conservation) Amendment Bill will further weaken our resolve to sustain the remaining biodiversity.

In many ways, biodiversity is us and we are biodiversity. Thus, civil society must play a critical role in sustaining our biodiversity. A paradigm shift in the care of biodiversity, long overdue, must begin now, flowing from this International Biodiversity Day.

Let us first change the way we manage our biodiversity. Currently, the main custodian of the natural world is the Indian Forest Service. But the term “Forest” to describe our immense and unique natural heritage is flawed. India’s biodiversity is not only on land but also in waterbodies, rivers, deltas, and oceans. A rich array of our ecosystems is in the form of grasslands, savannas, alpine pastures, deserts, and other types of ecological communities. Even in the 20th century, people had started to talk about living organisms and the interconnectedness manifested as ecosystems and ecosystem services in multifunctional landscapes dominated by humans. In the 21st century, the basic terms “forests” and “wildlife” have limited meaning or usefulness.

We must think of multifunctional landscapes, where aspirations, beliefs, traditional knowledge, and direct participation of local communities are central to the notion of conserving and sustaining life on earth. In 2006, policymakers in India enacted the Forest Rights Act, that called for an increase in the stake of indigenous groups in ownership as well as management of biodiversity. However, the Act largely remains on paper, yet to be implemented on the ground. Seventeen years later, it is time to even move beyond the Act’s steps to fundamentally alter the way we manage our biodiversity. If biodiversity is everywhere, as it is, we must mainstream it into our daily actions — in every development programme, in every government department, in every public and private institution. And it is time to decentralise the management of biodiversity by bringing together multiple stakeholders, especially local communities, through gram sabhas and biodiversity management committees.

This very mainstreaming of biodiversity is the goal of the proposed National Mission on Biodiversity and Human Wellbeing, an idea this writer has referred to in earlier columns. India’s leading conservation biologists, working under the umbrella of the Biodiversity Collaborative based in Bengaluru, conceptualised the idea and developed a road map for the Mission approved in principle by the Prime Minister’s Science, Technology, and Innovation Council.

The Mission will enable our country to meet critical challenges in climate change, natural and regenerative agriculture, and ecosystem and public health using biodiversity and ecosystem services — usually referred to as nature-based solutions. The ultimate goal is to enhance and conserve biodiversity to foster human well-being; more specifically, to meet the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals related to poverty alleviation, nutrition and health, and environmental protection, and support an era of new green economy.

People will be at the centre of the Mission, the goal of which is to have all citizens engaged in the conservation and sustainable use of biodiversity, embed consideration of biodiversity in every development-oriented programme of the public and private sectors, and arouse curiosity about nature and a sense of responsibility for safeguarding biodiversity — and our very future — in the minds of every child and every student. Undertaking such a pledge would be a fitting celebration of our precious and irreplaceable natural world.

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