

A fabric of life view of the world



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This month in Geneva, the 196 parties to the United Nations (UN) Convention on Biological Diversity will discuss the post-2020 Global Biodiversity Framework, in preparation for part two of the UN Biodiversity Conference (COP 15) in Kunming, China. By driving biodiversity actions worldwide through 2030 and beyond, this is arguably the most important biodiversity policy process of our time.

There is a general sense that time is running out. Policy-makers and the general public are increasingly well-informed about nature, but this has not translated into slowing down its fast deterioration. Most of the biodiversity goals that have gained public attention are not consistent with the connectedness between humans and other organisms, or between different places and peoples through living bodies. This is in part reinforced by technical definitions, metaphors, and social narratives associated with biodiversity that are not explicit about this connectedness. Public understanding is crucial because to achieve the transformative change called for by nearly all recent environmental reports, all sectors of society—not just academics and policy-makers—must weigh in on decisions about the future of life on Earth. Better ways to convey this picture are needed.

The expression “fabric of life” has long been used in lay communication to refer to the whole of the living world. The fabric of life on Earth has been described as “woven” by natural processes over many millions of years and in conjunction with people—our livelihoods, our institutions, our stories—for many thousands of years. The expression is starting to emerge at the interface of science and policy, such as in the 2019 Intergovernmental Science-Policy Platform on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services Global Assessment Report. Thus, far from being a quaint figure of speech, this expression could be a useful, timely, actionable metaphor to facilitate transformative change.

Why dwell on metaphors at a time when each day of inaction counts? Because action is urgently needed. Metaphors help make sense of the world. They provide a scaffold for thinking, which in turn frames action.

The fabric of life framing shines a spotlight on our deep evolutionary kinship with, and physical and cultural dependence on, the rest of the living world. Although not

intended to replace the term “biodiversity” in ecological research, a metaphor that better resonates with other disciplines and sectors of society may spark new questions, engage the public imagination in inspirational ways, and mobilize meaningful action. I have seen people who would normally stare politely but without interest at a presentation about the state of biodiversity suddenly listen with engrossed attention when hearing about the fabric of life, humanity’s entanglement within it, and the vast richness of nature’s contributions to people.

In the context of the upcoming UN meetings, the fabric of life framing could help design a more powerful set of goals, targets, actions, and indicators in intergovernmental biodiversity strategies. The evidence is overwhelming

for pervasive and deep connections between people and the rest of the living world everywhere, and for socioecological systems increasingly being influenced by distant demands and decisions. However, the science-policy interface has yet to catch up. For example, the first segment of the UN Biodiversity Conference in October 2021 saw a strong emphasis on goals, targets, and pledges that deal with the immediate, local causes of biodiversity decline.

This focus could be broadened to tackle the systemic and connected underlying causes that are embedded in the ways people consume, trade, and allocate subsidies, incentives, and safeguards. This could take, for example, the form of redeploying current subsidies, incentives, and penalties toward activities that preserve and ideally help “reweave” the fabric of life. Another example is the present emphasis on expanding protected areas. Equal attention should be paid to shared landscapes and seascapes that make up the vast proportion of the planet’s surface and where people’s everyday entanglement with other organisms is the most obvious.

By thinking about the living world as an intermeshed fabric, we start to shift (or broaden) the spotlight of inquiry and action, making them more focused on connections and entanglement, and more interdisciplinary and socially inclusive. This is a small but necessary step to rally a wider range of society into producing new knowledge and spurring action for a better future. Suitable metaphors have been instrumental to many social changes in the past; we should not underestimate their importance this time.

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