



Why stories matter to move people and policies into action for biodiversity

Biodiversity has an immense economic value. Yet, action to protect it is not strong enough to stop the ongoing degradation. The BIOMOT project aims to find out what the secret is behind the motivations of those few who do move into committed action for nature. What drives them? And can these drives be translated into conditions for more effective biodiversity policies?

Most people know that there are good arguments to protect biodiversity. Yet only few act accordingly. Apparently, knowing that it would be rational to do something is not enough. Conversely, those who do come into action refer, when asked, only seldom to abstract arguments to explain why they act. They tell a narrative, a story that explains why it makes sense to act for nature.

The philosopher Bernard Williams argued that a detached, impartial perspective fails to provide a motivation for action. We do not act out of pure rational reasons. Instead, we only act when we are engaged in a morally significant world. Therefore, moral philosophy should start “from the ways in which we experience our ethical life.” It should take its starting point at existing moral experiences. Unfortunately, dominant environmental ethics does the opposite and focusses on rational justification. A good example is environmental ethicist Paul Taylor. According to Taylor, respecting the inherent value of all living beings is the most rational, therefore, the most ethical thing to do. The same would hold for ecosystem services; it is rational to maintain them. For Taylor that insight generates sufficient reasons to act because acting rationally is or should be imperative.

But why should the realisation that something is rational automatically result in a motivation to act? Taylor does not ask that question. And that is strange, since we know that most people do not act automatically because something is rational. Neither is it true that everything that is rational is good by definition. Only those who already believe that rationality should be the guiding principle in our lives could be expected to act on intrinsic values or ecosystem services – others not. Something different or extra needs to be present, a something that Williams calls *commitment* and that others call connectedness – to people, to nature, or to other things that matter to us; in short: to something meaningful.

Things that are meaningful to us are often personal and subjective, not general and rational. Yet, they are our real reasons to act. A paradoxical consequence of this ‘divorce between ratio and reason’ is that you can have irrational reasons and meaningless rationalities. A consequence that throws up all sorts of problems, also for biodiversity policies. For instance, does the economic valuation of ecosystem services produce only meaningless rationality?

This divorce between ratio and reason did not always exist. Ancient Greek moral thought, for instance, assumed that the world was a wonderfully ordered whole, physically and morally at the same time, a *cosmos* in which everything had its natural place and purpose. In other words, the

world was a whole in which *what is* and *what ought to be* overlapped and could be understood in a single line of thought. What you were defined how you ought to act. Life, all life, has a purpose and a meaning – otherwise it would not be.

Since then, our worldview has changed drastically. The underpinnings of the Greek cosmological world view disappeared. We no longer believe that we live in a morally ordered universe. The ‘real’ and ‘objective’ world as revealed through science is seen as merely factual and morally neutral. Our moral judgments are seen as nothing but purely subjective judgments, as a result of highly personal taste. Interestingly however, the philosopher Alasdair MacIntyre showed that remnants of classical Greek ethics still exists in the current moral perception of Western people. We still feel that there is a moral order to the world that we should try to attune ourselves to, and ‘doing’ so tends to give a feeling that life makes *sense*. The only difference between us moderns and the ancient Greeks is that, whereas for the Greeks the moral order of the world could be revealed through science and metaphysics, for us the world only appears morally meaningful in virtue of the *stories we tell about it*. The meaningful order we experience has become embedded in our narratives.

Narrative ethics tries to do justice to this phenomenon. It does so by collecting people’s stories and examine how they give meaning to their life and role in the world, and explain their action and moral choices. It turned out that the social and physical environment, and within the last one, nature experiences, often play a special role in these stories. As philosopher John O’Neill recently put it, “we make sense of our lives by placing them in a larger narrative context [...]. Environments matter because they embody that larger context.” A person who is motivated to act will do so out of the feeling that this action makes sense in a life that makes sense, embedded in a meaningful world.

A narrative does not merely depict the world, it lets the world present itself in a particular way. In a way it *creates* the world by bringing it into life and ordering it . A narrated world is a meaningfully ordered world. But narration works through language, and because of this, it will always be dependent on specific historic cultural settings and contingencies, and a specific time and place. In other words: stories will never be universal, impartial, or objective. These local, historical, contextual conditions and traditions, and the stories based on them are vital to understand why people act, e.g. why people act for nature or biodiversity.

In the BIOMOT project, we used this insight to collect some 200 life stories of people who were motivated to act for nature or other societal causes. We did this in the expectation that those stories would reveal that their actions give meaning to their lives and are embedded in a social context, that grants existential meaning to (acting for) nature and biodiversity. From this perspective, one would expect that for people who are highly motivated to act for biodiversity, the natural world is important, not just as a valuable object, that needs to be appreciated, but as a meaningful whole, that provides a context for self-realization.

The initial findings from the interviews seem to validate our assumptions. Hardly any interviewee expresses that rationalities of intrinsic value or ecosystem services have had any motivational impact. Overwhelmingly, the life stories themselves turned out to be structured as narratives, or more specifically as a quest for meaning, journeys during which a moral meaning was discovered in the world, a meaning that compelled the need to act: it made acting for nature the natural way to react and to become. By doing this, our interviewees *create* stories that ‘remind’ them of what their life is about and how their life makes sense as part of a sensible, meaningful whole. These stories can inspire others to act for nature. That is how stories work.

Policy makers can use this insight to promote the embedding of biodiversity in narratives: narratives of places and landscapes, narratives of evolution, narratives of human lives. This requires the promotion and continuation of languages, practices and cultures of connectedness with nature. And these, in turn, as other findings of BIOMOT will show, are conditioned by opportunities of true encounter of humans with nature.



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(This Findings for All was written about data that was gathered by the whole BIOMOT team.)



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