

The Biosphere Ethics Initiative: Building global solidarity for the future of life

Individuals and communities across the world have been working together to conserve biodiversity, including biological and cultural diversity, as an ethical responsibility. In order to counter the unbridled self-interest that is dominating our society and destroying biodiversity, we need to learn from these communities of practice and build solidarity with one another and with nature to ensure the integrity of the future of all life, in all its diversity.

To keep nature alive, the International Union for the Conservation of Nature (IUCN), through its Commission on Environmental Law, and inspired and informed by the Earth Charter and the Convention on Biological Diversity, invites individuals, communities, organizations and governments to build a mutual commitment for the continuity and flourishing of life. The Biosphere Ethics Initiative (BEI) is this participatory promotion of the biological and cultural diversity of the biosphere. By ethics, we mean the domain of inquiry that examines claims about what is right or wrong or when responsibility attaches to human action. The sources of these claims may arise from both religious and non-religious traditions.

A society's ethical ideals are at the core of its vision of the common good and give insight into our hopes for the future. Ethical values and principles provide guidance as to what is considered right and wrong, good and bad, in human conduct, both individual and collective. In a deeply interdependent but vulnerable world, they help us take responsible action to address shared problems. To this end, the Biosphere Ethics Initiative bears witness to existing ethical action as evidenced by individuals, communities, organizations and governments. It learns from their experiences and shares their stories, fostering a continuing and living dialogue, for as new concerns arise, so will new forms of ethical response.

This process of mutual learning, or *Relato*, is the heart of the Biosphere Ethics Initiative. Since 2004, the Initiative has held four formal *Relatos*: the Chicago Wilderness *Relato*; the South African National Parks *Relato*; Brazil's Local Agendas 21 *Relato* and the Yunnan Province of China *Relato*. The resulting key ethical values, principles, aims and questions form the basis of the evolving Biosphere Ethic, with further explanation of concepts in the Annex and with implementation outlined in the Action Plan.

The Evolving Biosphere Ethic

From these communities of practice, informed by a scientific understanding of the biosphere and the place of humans within it, the evolving Biosphere Ethic gives voice and commitment to the following shared ethical values, seeking to guide concerted action for a sustainable and flourishing life within the biosphere.

Our foundational worldview:

1. We value the ecological integrity of the biosphere and its diversity of interacting ecosystems and species, independently of other values that humans place on them.
2. We value the genetic and cultural memories carried by species and human communities and recognize their continuity as the basis of the biosphere's resilience, adaptive capacity and potential for transformation.
3. We live within and are dependent upon the biosphere, which we understand as a diverse and dynamic system with limits that human societies must respect.

Our foundational principles:

1. Promote ecological solidarity between humans and nature, with the obligation to respect and the compassion of love as the basis for genuine care of living beings, places and people: love for the beauty and gift of the natural world with all of its living diversity; love for our places and our homes; and love for the people of today and tomorrow.
2. Support universal human rights and efforts for social, economic and environmental justice.

3. Recognize the danger in the commodification of life, the appropriation of life processes and the synthetic creation of new life forms being introduced into the biosphere.
4. Maintain, promote and nurture bio-cultural diversity.
5. Foster local and regional alliances which recognize the knowledge and understanding that each has to contribute.
6. Recognize that the application of scientific knowledge is not value-neutral.

Our foundational aims are to:

1. Keep nature alive and flourishing in the biosphere.
2. Provide representation of nature in decision-making on policies at all levels that affect natural resources and the living world.
3. Uphold decision-making that is participatory, inclusive, self-critical and democratic.
4. Advance just and sustainable forms of governance within our political and economic structures, including supporting efforts to recognize and implement the rights of nature.
5. Establish an economy rooted in ecological realities that reflects the diverse ways in which we understand and value our relationships with nature.
6. Exercise ecological reconciliation by confronting the truth of the past and reconciling ourselves with those impacts and consequences.
7. Promote a universally fair manner of human development and consumption patterns, sharing both the burdens and the benefits.
8. Act with precaution when faced with scientific uncertainty.

The Process of Ethical Inquiry

From these shared ethical principles, questions of population, economy, governance and priority are raised. Within this process of inquiry we must ask ourselves serious questions, placed within their often unique contexts. This process provides an opportunity to think ethically and thereby act responsibly.

1. What is a fair share of the use of natural resources for each individual that does not compromise the existence of other life?
2. How can we channel the resources required to mitigate climate change and redress vast inequalities in the world?
3. How do we counter short-term economic arguments against biodiversity conservation with the long-term thinking required in ethical inquiry?
4. How do we support the common good within a society dominated by private property rights?
5. How can we sustain the integrity of the biosphere without much greater equality in economic opportunities and incomes?
6. How can we promote the common good of all communities and deter the harmful ambitions of those seeking excessive power?
7. What kind of domestic and international law systems do we need to empower institutions to respect, support and implement the Biosphere Ethics Initiative?
8. How can we ethically balance the rights of nature and the rights of humans?
9. What obligations should societies assume towards poverty alleviation in recognition of the pressures that our growing population place on the biosphere?
10. How can we empower communities in ecological, military, and/or economic distress to promote biodiversity conservation?

Our Invitation

The Biosphere Ethics Initiative is engaged in an ethical inquiry in order to communicate and stimulate ethical thinking and acting. We are seeking to better understand the ethical imperatives needed to keep nature alive, and how we can best translate those imperatives into real action. Within and beyond the Secretariat, members and partners of IUCN, the Initiative invites individuals, communities, organizations and governments to contribute to the evolving Biosphere Ethic through local dialogue. Let us together build a movement of global solidarity for the future of life.