

BOOK REVIEWS

BIOCULTURAL DIVERSITY: A GLOBAL SOURCEBOOK

Luisa Maffi and Ellen Woodley

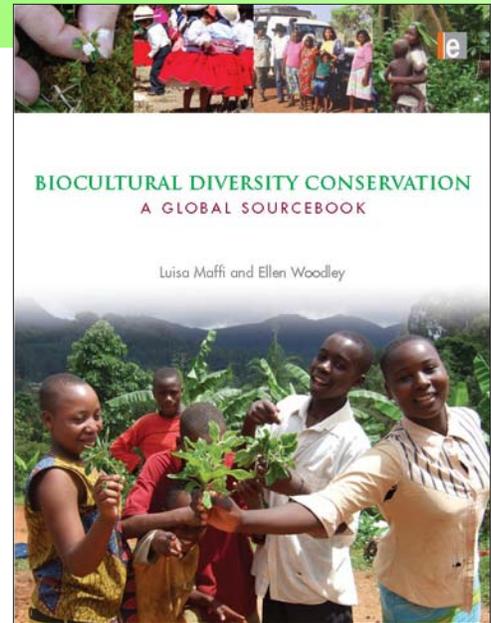
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Review by Sanjay Khanna

Biocultural Diversity Conservation: A Global Sourcebook, by biocultural diversity expert Luisa Maffi and environment and development consultant Ellen Woodley, is a rigorous, groundbreaking, and practical exploration of the increasingly influential concept of biocultural diversity. Seven years in the making, Maffi and Woodley's book is intended for researchers, professionals, policy-makers, Indigenous and other local organizations, international agencies and non-governmental organizations (NGOs), funders, and media. Amid the loss of biological species, cultures, languages, and habitats caused by global civilization's fast-growing ecological footprint, readers are encouraged to critically assess the premise that the protection, maintenance, and restoration of biological, cultural, and linguistic diversity ("biocultural diversity"¹) are necessary to support the longevity, vitality, and resilience of nature and culture.



Within the first two chapters, the authors establish that nature and culture comprise a highly differentiated and complex reality, the innumerable facets of which are necessary for humanity to adapt to a planet that is undergoing increasingly rapid and destabilizing change. The book's argument frames the decline of ecological diversity within a context of worldwide linguistic and cultural loss, which, the authors show, closely mirrors the staggering pace of global biodiversity loss. In the conservation arena, the book further compels readers to perceive biological, linguistic, and cultural diversity as correlated with ecosystem health. The implication is that conservation programmes should seek ways to build human cultural resilience and vitality as a necessary aspect of any effective plan to sustain biodiversity, a point worth making in the 2010 International Year of Biodiversity.

The book's contents are divided into three sections: the first explains the concept of biocultural diversity; the second surveys 45 projects from about 25 countries to showcase local interventions that attempt to strengthen the many facets of biocultural diversity; and the third provides recommendations for "connecting the dots" and "filling in the gaps" around biocultural diversity in research, policy, and practice. The book's appendices contain useful analytical tables, survey details, survey contributor information, and a directory of selected biocultural diversity resources.

The projects central to the book illustrate the biocultural approach to conservation, which identifies scientific, traditional, and local knowledge as examples of "adaptive tools...in relation to the environment and the continued intergenerational development, transmission and vitality of beliefs, values, institutions, knowledge, languages, and practices related to human-environment relationships."² Gathered from Africa, Arctic, Asia, Europe, Latin America, North America, and the Pacific, the surveyed projects – selected for being "integrative and synergistic," cognizant of the "importance of intergenerational transmission of local cultural values, beliefs, institutions, knowledge, practices and languages," and "endogenous or strongly participatory"³ – are local grassroots initiatives that support cultural resilience, linguistic vitality, and biodiversity, either independently of, or in collaboration with, international non-governmental organizations. These initiatives include, for

1 Biocultural diversity (definition): Biocultural diversity comprises the diversity of life in all its manifestations – biological, cultural, and linguistic – which are interrelated (and likely co-evolved) within a complex socio-ecological adaptive system. Maffi and Woodley, page 6.

2 Maffi and Woodley, page 19.

3 Maffi and Woodley, pages 23-24.

example, forest protection and management in the Cameroon highlands, aboriginal traditional knowledge and assessment of species at risk in Canada's northern territories, recovery of landscape health and cultural resilience in Mexico, revitalization of traditional seed exchange and cultural knowledge in Costa Rica, and maintenance of culturally rich agricultural systems in the context of food security in Nepal.

The authors analyze whether and how the chosen projects address the following four dimensions: (1) cultural practices that conserve biodiversity; (2) Indigenous, traditional, or local ecological knowledge; (3) maintenance or revitalization of Indigenous or local languages; and (4) biocultural diversity policy. In aggregate, the 45 projects contained in the book illustrate the complexity of the relationships between humans and the environment and the importance of striving to align local people's socioeconomic and cultural practices with the life support capacity of local ecosystems. Depending on their national or local context, by seeking to strengthen cultural resilience, the projects could inspire participants to use rights-based approaches – crossing scales from national to local levels or from local to national – to address inequities that have for centuries alienated diverse peoples and cultures around the world from natural systems and from sociopolitical redress of injustice. For example, the authors note a rights-based approach would beneficially involve, among other key tactics, “supporting land claims, resource tenure and governance systems to enable locally controlled decision making on sustainable use and management of local biodiversity.”⁴

Biocultural Diversity Conservation: A Global Sourcebook may prove to be a seminal contribution to the evolving dialogue on human survival, sustainability, and biodiversity. Academics, professionals, policy-makers, and others should note that the book's subtle, variegated, and well-grounded analyses gain strength by drawing on much-needed insights from threatened cultures. International and national agencies should heed the authors' plea to use the book as a resource for developing “policies and action plans...that support the integrated protection, maintenance and restoration of diversity in both nature and culture.” In essence, the book should be used as a tool to recognize and support the many intangible and tangible values of biocultural diversity.

After all, human civilization is arguably on an increasingly perilous course under business as usual. As protection against this unfortunate circumstance, time is of the essence in undertaking practical and relevant projects such as those described in Part II of the book and in developing policies and programs such as those suggested in Part III to conserve and enrich biocultural diversity. In authoring *Biocultural Diversity Conservation: A Global Sourcebook*, Luisa Maffi and Ellen Woodley have created a critical framework for supporting cultural renewal, ecosystem health restoration, and climate adaptation. During a period of increasing political conservatism, macroeconomic uncertainty, and climate change, however, the only question is how urgently and practically policy-makers and biocultural diversity practitioners can move to derive lasting benefit from the book's framing insights and recommendations.

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ECUADOR CONTEMPORÁNEO

Ángel Montes del Castillo (Ed.)
Universidad de Murcia, Spain, 2009
350 pp.

Review by Grazia Borrini-Feyerabend

If there is one country today that strives to achieve real change in all the dimensions dear to the majority of CEESP's members and partners, it is certainly Ecuador. The 2008 Constitution of Ecuador is a visionary document developed in a highly participatory way. It takes flight from a celebration of nature and peoples' history, spirituality, cultures, religions, and social struggles, and aims towards “good living” (*sumac kawsay*) for all the peoples and communities of Ecuador. A number of juridical innovations find their firm place in this new Constitution, ranging from “nature” as a subject of rights to the direct participation of Ecuadorian women and men in public decision-making, from the appreciation of a pluri-national society to the recognition of collective rights of peoples

4 Maffi and Woodley, page 156.