

Genes and memes: understanding biocultural diversity and its role in shaping landscapes.

Cultural landscapes gained global prominence through attention by the World Heritage Convention in 1992. In parallel, the concept of biocultural diversity was being developed at the First International Congress of Ethnobiology in 1988, which developed a common strategy to stop the ongoing decline in global diversity of both nature and culture. Some Anthropologists have argued that like genes, memes (cultural information or system of behaviour) may be passed from individual to individual by non-genetic or epigenetic means. The idea of feedbacks between genes (biodiversity) and memes (human cultural constructs) seems a useful and simple way to conceptualise bio-cultural diversity, without closing off continued research, reflection, and discussion.

Interplay between people and nature also generates the critical idea of sense of place. Across all continents, twenty-first century rural depopulation and ignorance of the importance of traditional ecological knowledge, means that rural landscapes are abandoned, yet not necessarily subsequently wilded – the concept of cultural severance. A consequence of cultural severance is a decline in ecological richness. In some cases, however, there may be the emergence of distinctive novel and recombinant ecologies. Thinking developed around the biocultural nature of landscapes offers frameworks for effective understanding of the value and potential of cultural landscapes, and the all-important role they play in conserving biological diversity, alongside cultural diversity.

But the dynamic nature of biocultural diversity means that conservation is a highly active process that can include restoration and rewilding (such as is possible in the current global context of rapid environmental change). Heritage embedded in cultural landscapes is both tangible and intangible. An understanding of biocultural diversity as heritage also allows for the deconstruction of “wilderness” ideas, that often militate against effective conservation of both biological and cultural diversity. Interactions between the two diversities, as well as the diversity of place, are the key to understanding, valuing, managing, and conserving the earths landscapes – all of which are biocultural.

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