**In Search of Biodiversity Respectful Leadership**

**Biodiversity loss is one of the biggest and most acute threats to human civilization. As such, it is not merely an environmental problem, but first and foremost a human problem: created by humans, impacting humans and in need of solutions from humans. BIODIFUL is an interdisciplinary research project that seeks to find these solutions.**

Biodiversity is not only about the number of species, living or extinct. Instead it can be viewed as the realized potential of a given area to maintain life and life-enabling processes. Take a patch of soil as an example: if there are enough sufficiently healthy worms, the soil remains nutrient and can support plants that create oxygen, feed pollinators and other insects in turn necessary for maintaining other types of flora and fauna. Biodiversity is a system, where each node supports a number of others, in total enabling nutritious soil, potable water and even breathable air.

The ongoing biodiversity loss is like a global game of Jenga towers. We keep removing building blocks at an accelerating pace, speeding towards the moment when the tower, the ecosystems that enable life as we know it, collapses. Not all life will be extinguished, nor will we humans most likely become extinct, but for our current civilization and social systems, such as the economy, the blow will be devastating.

**Lack of knowledge?**

Among biologists, biodiversity loss has been a thoroughly researched area for over four decades. The phenomenon is scientifically well understood, the threat verified and the drivers of the problem are well identified. In other words, there is no lack of scientific knowledge about the problem or even what should be done to tackle it.

What in turn is missing is mainstream awareness of the problem: while biodiversity loss is on par with climate change in terms of severity, it has garnered notably less space in media and public discussion. Despite a number of international conferences, high-level meetings and seminars aimed at delivering scientific knowledge to support societal decision-making, biodiversity continues to decline rapidly.

The main speed bump in between scientific knowledge and actionable awareness is the systemic nature of biodiversity loss. The mechanisms driving biodiversity loss are deeply integrated to our ways of life – how we consume, how we conduct business and what kind of political decisions we make. As such, there are no simple one-switch solutions that could be decoupled from business-as-usual, no one metric or figure we could focus our attention to. Measuring biodiversity and its loss is possible, and indeed done, but the units measured and the drivers included vary notably: there is no unanimous agreement about which elements should for example be included in diverse ESG frameworks. There are no one-stop solutions that would fit all.

**Or lack of action?**

On the other hand, the systemic nature of biodiversity loss is equally an opportunity. No-one can solve the whole problem, but everyone can participate in solving a part of it. Every species saved, every patch of land conserved, any node protected contributes to upholding the Jenga tower.

In BIODIFUL we aim to create knowledge that can be applied in the daily life of an individual, in business practices and in political decision-making. Additionally, we try to empower people: one of the big obstacles to environmental action is a certain hopelessness when faced with the immensity of the looming environmental calamities. In terms of biodiversity loss, there is still hope for reversing the decline, and maybe more importantly, it is something that almost everyone, in their diverse roles as consumers, citizens, business practitioners or public officials and elected decision-makers can do something about.

Every individual can impact through consumption choices: avoid overconsumption and change the diet to include more vegetarian and less meat-based products. Every business can assess their own nature footprint and aim at either avoiding it, minimizing it, mitigating the harm, or compensating where other options are not available. Political decision-makers are a breed of their own, but at the very least they could try to desist myopic decisions and to hone their skills in viewing the big picture, to see the long-lasting impacts of their choices.

**Biodiversity Respectful Leadership?**

In BIODIFUL, we view leadership from two perspectives: top-down and bottom-up. There is the traditional, formal leadership that is granted by status and position, wielded by business managers or politicians. Equally important is, however, the leadership emerging from the grassroots, without formal status. Such informal leadership can be witnessed in mothers choosing the diet for their families, friends inspiring others to engage in nature friendly actions, colleagues pushing through initiatives that inch the company towards greener pastures.

Both types have one thing in common: they require courage. Biodiversity respectful leadership is about the courage to act despite the opinions of others, despite the perceived vastness of the problem, despite the lack of perfect metrics and KPIs. Biodiversity respectful leadership is about initiating chain reactions, about dropping a pebble in the pond and awaiting the growing waves – taking action where possible and inspiring others to do the same. Biodiversity respectful leadership is about not giving in to laissez-faire, about trying, failing and trying again, about supporting and cherishing ideas seeking to make a difference regardless of where or from whom they emerge.

Biodiversity loss is a vast, complex and systemic problem that no-one can solve alone. But it can be solved, in time, if, instead of continuing to wait for the silver bullet or AI Messiah to deliver us from harm, we view it as a collection of nodes that each one of us touches. We all have the responsibility to take care of those nodes in the web of life our actions and decisions impact. And taking responsibility and acting accordingly, that’s genuine leadership.

D.Sc. Milla Unkila

BIODIFUL (2021-2027) is funded by the Strategic Research Council of Finland. It includes four universities and research institutes (UTU, JYU, LUT and Natural Resources Research Centre LUKE), over 40 researchers and 70 network members (companies, organisations, cities and activists). [www.biodiful.fi](http://www.biodiful.fi)