

Backgrounder

Biodiversity

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Potato Park, Peru. Credit: Khanh Tran-Thanh, IIED



Nature-based solutions or the ecosystem approach?

A debate over terminology risks distracting attention from the key issues under discussion in the post-2020 Global Biodiversity Framework. Here, we gauge how far the two concepts differ

The targets of the emerging post-2020 Global Biodiversity Framework include multiple references to the application of 'nature-based solutions' (NbS). But some Indigenous Peoples and local communities have expressed concern at the use of this term (see 'Southern perspectives', overleaf), as have a number of negotiators. Negotiators point out that the Convention on Biological Diversity has already endorsed the 'ecosystem approach', including a full set of principles and even guidance for application. Given this, the term NbS is seen as either competing with, or potentially replacing, an agreed concept. Contention over these two ideas has already taken up vital negotiation time in the discussions on the post-2020

Framework and threatens to keep doing so. But how different are they, and how can we move on?

Common ground and incompatibilities

The ecosystem approach's core aim is the conservation of ecosystem structure and functioning, in order to maintain ecosystem services. To support this, the 12 interlinked principles¹ underpinning the ecosystem approach emphasise 'systems thinking'; for example, understanding that ecosystem management must consider the multiple, complex interactions that occur within an area as well as between it and adjacent ecosystems.

KEY TERMS

Ecosystem approach: The Convention on Biological Diversity describes this as 'a strategy for the integrated management of land, water and living resources that promotes conservation and sustainable use in an equitable way ... It recognizes that humans, with their cultural diversity, are an integral component of many ecosystems.'³

Nature-based solutions (NbS): defined by the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN) as 'actions to protect, sustainably manage, and restore natural or modified ecosystems, that address societal challenges effectively and adaptively, simultaneously providing human well-being and biodiversity benefits.'⁴

KEY SPACES

- Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD) negotiations on the post-2020 Global Biodiversity Framework (GBF)
- These will take place in the run up to the 15th meeting of the Conference of the Parties to the Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD COP15), in October 2021.

WHY IS THIS IMPORTANT?

In February 2020, the second meeting of the Open-ended Working Group on the post-2020 Global Biodiversity Framework spent significant time discussing whether the term 'nature-based solutions' works for everyone. As negotiations intensify ahead of CBD COP15 in October 2021, it is critical that debates over terminology do not derail the number one priority: agreeing an ambitious framework

The principles also highlight the need to draw on all forms of science and knowledge — including Indigenous and local knowledge — and for all sectors of society to participate. Significantly, the principles advocate decentralisation of management to the lowest appropriate level.

Recent research² suggests that the conceptual framework for NbS actually emerged from the ecosystem approach. Many of the eight criteria in IUCN's recently published Global Standard for Nature-Based Solutions cover similar ground to the principles of the ecosystem approach. But there are differences. For example, NbS is perhaps more ambitious in its focus on mainstreaming and policy coherence as well as on practical implementation, whereas the ecosystem approach emphasises decentralisation, local involvement and traditional knowledge.

The biggest difference, however, is that NbS looks beyond biodiversity conservation to address other societal challenges, including climate change and food security. In fact, the Global Standard stipulates that 'NbS must deliver tangible and substantive benefits to human wellbeing.'

Effect on global biodiversity ambition

The term 'nature-based solutions' appears in two targets in the draft post-2020 Global Biodiversity Framework (GBF):

Target 7. By 2030, increase contributions to climate change mitigation adaptation and disaster risk reduction from nature-based solutions and ecosystems-based approaches,

ensuring resilience and minimising any negative impacts on biodiversity.

Target 10. By 2030, ensure that nature-based solutions and the ecosystem approach contribute to the regulation of air quality, hazards and extreme events, and the quality and quantity of water for at least [XXX million] people.

As both targets go beyond biodiversity and ecosystem conservation — aiming to contribute to other social challenges — it seems appropriate that they emphasise NbS. It is noteworthy, however, that they also refer to the agreed ecosystem approach.

However, it will be important to ensure that some of the key principles of the ecosystem approach, which are weaker in the NbS framework, are adequately reflected in the GBF — particularly those associated with respecting and applying the rights and knowledge of Indigenous Peoples and local communities, reflecting their deep respect for nature. To achieve this, additional text to include and highlight the application of traditional concepts and knowledge could be inserted into the NbS targets, and should also appear in the enabling conditions and implementation support mechanisms.

Looking ahead

The successful negotiation of a strong and ambitious post-2020 Global Biodiversity Framework is a critical first step to improving progress on tackling biodiversity loss over the next decade and beyond. Arguments over exact terms risk distracting attention from the real purpose — ensuring a socially just, climate-neutral, nature-positive world. If the ethos of the ecosystem approach — including its attention to Indigenous and local knowledge and practice — is reflected in the Framework goals, targets and enabling conditions, then debate over particular terminology used should not be a reason for us to fail.

that can both halt biodiversity loss and deliver for human wellbeing.

SOUTHERN PERSPECTIVES

Representatives of Indigenous Peoples (IPs) have expressed concern that 'nature-based solutions' (NbS) is another western term that separates people and nature. The idea that nature delivers solutions to people implies a one-way relationship. This contradicts Indigenous worldviews, in which people and nature — or biodiversity and culture — are inextricably linked and inter-dependent. The relationship is reciprocal, not linear. IPs worry that as the concept of NbS does not reflect their worldviews, neither will NbS interventions.

In the Peruvian Andes, for example, the concept of '*ayllu*' (which requires balance between nature and people) is very much alive. But *ayllu* is undermined by national policies and projects, including ecosystem-based adaptation and others originating from the environment sector, because their focus on western science provides little space for traditional knowledge.⁵ Forest Peoples Programme points to further concerns including the need for rights-based approaches to NbS.⁶

¹ www.cbd.int/ecosystem/principles.shtml

² Cohen-Shacham, E, Andrade, A, Dalton, J, Dudley, N, Jones, M, Kumar, C, Maginnis, S, Maynard, S, Nelson, CR, Renaud, FG, Welling, R and Walters, G (2019) Core principles for successfully implementing and upscaling Nature-based Solutions. *Environ Sci Policy* 98, 20–29.

³ www.cbd.int/ecosystem/description.shtml

⁴ Cohen-Shacham, E, Walters, G, Janzen, C and Maginnis, S (2016) Nature-based Solutions to address global societal challenges. IUCN, Gland, Switzerland.

⁵ Swiderska, K, Argumedo, A and Pimbert, M (2020) Biocultural heritage territories: key to halting biodiversity loss. IIED, London. pubs.iied.org/17760iied

⁶ Tugendhat, H (2021) Re-thinking nature-based solutions: seeking transformative change through culture and rights: A briefing for the post-2020 Global Biodiversity Framework. Forest Peoples Programme.



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