

Global Biodiversity Governance Has a Big Blindspot

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March 3, 2023

In December 2022, the UN biodiversity conference concluded with an agreement which has been hailed as historic for conservation. However behind this veil of progress are instruments for biodiversity protection that don't just fall short in content, but also fail to shed the colonial legacies of conservation.

Biodiversity is in crisis. Over one million species are at risk of extinction, with many more exploited under increasing demand for wildlife by European consumers. Recent meetings of the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora (CITES CoP-19) and the UN Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD COP-15) pushed for greater regulation of wildlife and biodiversity protection. But can these environmental agreements address biodiversity decline and wildlife exploitation in Europe?

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Wildlife commodification in Europe

CITES determines regulations for the trade of wildlife threatened by overexploitation, and is signed by 184 parties. By establishing trade controls and traceability measures, the CITES regulatory process seeks to ensure the sustainable use of over 38,000 species of listed wild plants and animals. This year, the Convention reaches a milestone of 50 years since it was first established in 1973. Yet, during the Convention's tenure, wildlife exploitation has increased and the fate of wild species has grown increasingly fragile.

As the main import market for CITES-listed wildlife, and a major consumer and transit market for illegally traded wildlife (including timber, fishes, live animals, wild meat, and medicines – to name a few), the European Union (EU) is in a powerful position to prevent wildlife overexploitation. At the CITES conference in 2022 (COP-19), the EU pushed for 14 wildlife listing proposals, encompassing 280 species of plants and animals. With highly coordinated, established, and expert delegations – and a 27-nation strong vote – the EU holds significant sway.

The EU takes wildlife trade control one step further through unilateral wildlife trade regulations, which enforce stricter measures that require additional EU-import conditions than those within CITES. Such measures effectively establish trade barriers and disproportionately impact source countries. This interweaving of state and business interests extends historical patterns of colonial control in wildlife conservation, where EU-centric visions of 'appropriate' wildlife management are imposed on biodiverse countries (often in the Global South). These measures go beyond those that have been internationally

agreed by consensus through CITES, for example, by requiring additional permits. Rather than curbing the trade in wildlife overall, such restrictions often lead to a reduction in specific types of wildlife trade (e.g. in popular, charismatic, megafauna).

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Europe remains the largest legal importer of wildlife and thus perpetuates a global market-based conservation framework that de-values wildlife (by understanding their value in merely economic terms) and disproportionately benefits the powerful and wealthy. This expansion of control arising from the EU's wildlife trade legislation and negotiation processes is problematic as it opens the door to colonial 'Fortress Conservation' or Half-Earth models. These models restrict or prohibit wildlife use and trade and often exclude local communities from cultivated lands to give way for protected areas. Recent revisions of key EU legislation, such as the EU Action Plan Against Wildlife Trafficking and the EU Environmental Crime Directive, do not adequately address these inequalities, nor do they fill the gap in under-researched and unprotected species.

Whilst conservation-oriented, the CITES Convention is primarily a mechanism for regulating wildlife trade and is shaped by powerful businesses and state interests. Facilitation of trade and conservation of species are considered in tandem, with the focus on ensuring that trade does not contribute to species extinction. Defining wild species as resources in this way is typical of an anthropocentric worldview, where species are seen as economically valuable resources for human use, rather than valued in their own right. Considering this ubiquitous anthropocentric and economically driven outlook toward wildlife, it is perhaps unsurprising that both EU policies and the post-2020 Global Biodiversity Framework build on a similar logic.

“Nature-Positive” biodiversity politics

The post-2020 Global Biodiversity Framework agreed at COP-15 in December 2022 has been hailed as a “historic agreement on nature conservation” that aims to halt biodiversity loss by 2050. Mirroring the EU's Biodiversity Strategy, it aims to restore and protect 30 per cent of terrestrial and marine biodiversity by 2030, also referred to as “30 by 30”. Such a vast expansion of protected areas rests on the global shift towards “nature-positive” biodiversity politics. A central aim of nature-positive action is to ensure that, on balance, human activity is not harmful to biodiversity. This net positive approach reflects, for example, the core principle of “net zero” in global climate mitigation.

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Although the language of “nature-positive” action doesn't appear in the final Global Biodiversity Framework, the agreement rests on the fundamental assumption that human activity must be separated from nature to conserve biodiversity, for example, through the strict management of protected areas. Yet, this separation is not based on an intrinsic concern for biodiversity, but for preserving ecosystem functions and their economic utility. Some parties at COP-15, particularly those from Latin American

countries, fought hard to integrate an acknowledgement of alternative value systems that highlight the rights of “Mother Earth” into the agreement. However, similar to critical EU or UK biodiversity policies (e.g. the Biodiversity Strategies, the [25 Year Environment Plan](#), or the [Green Deal](#)), the Global Biodiversity Framework continues to define the value of biodiversity through its potential to contribute to the global economy. Alternative value systems only apply “[for those countries that recognise them](#)”. Thereby, it forms part of a global conglomerate of biodiversity policies that argue the “[business case for biodiversity](#)” by emphasising the enhancement and management of ecosystem services and the sustainable use of species.

Biodiversity loss is a European problem

Both CITES and the Global Biodiversity Framework, therefore, share a view of wildlife and biodiversity that is rooted in economic models of continuous growth and market expansion. The negotiations at CITES COP-19 and CBD COP-15 demonstrated that influential parties like the EU are at a significant advantage in shaping global wildlife trade and biodiversity regulation, which is concerning for three reasons.

Firstly, when conservation policies are driven by use, exploitation, and trade interests – even under the umbrella of “sustainable use” both wildlife and nature become [commodities](#) on the global market. Such conservation policies solidify an economic valuation of wildlife that reinforces [current systems](#) and fails to consider [other ways of valuing](#) and respecting nature. It is doubtful that “more of the same” will lead to the significant changes required to address the biodiversity and climate crises in simultaneously.

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Secondly, market-based conservation policies can legitimise certain forms of wildlife consumption (such as those [rooted in European cultural traditions](#)), while marginalising others (such as those practised by indigenous peoples and local communities). The EU functions as a significant consumer market for wildlife and wildlife products but possesses disproportionate political and economic influence in treaty and trade negotiations, which has practical implications for the types of wildlife use that fall under stricter regulations.

Thirdly, the current system of biodiversity governance rests on significant power asymmetries, which allows economically and politically influential parties – particularly from the Global North – to deflect responsibility for biodiversity loss to third countries, especially in Africa or Asia. This power imbalance often reinforces the legacies of colonialism; it places the responsibility to address root causes of biodiversity loss squarely on source countries that end up bearing the economic burden of trade restrictions and conservation initiatives.

Therefore, treating biodiversity governance as an exercise in maximising economic value reinforces patterns of socio-ecological injustices and inequalities that have significantly contributed to the biodiversity crisis in the first place. The allocation of financial resources for implementing the Global Biodiversity Framework proved to be a contentious issue at CoP-15, with countries from the Global South demanding wealthy nations to step up.

In turn, promoting the regulated commercialisation of trade in threatened wildlife through CITES does not target all relevant actors that may be responsible for biodiversity decline. Overlooking the role of European consumers in contributing to the overexploitation of wildlife, for example, through the illegal trade of endemic European wildlife by European citizens, means that policy responses can be misguided and, ultimately, ineffective. Green-collar crime is not sufficiently understood and tackled, meaning that legally registered entities within Europe (e.g. restaurants, hunting tour operators, fisheries) may knowingly or unknowingly facilitate the illegal trade in endemic European wildlife. In addition, the focus on CITES-protected species means that many non-CITES, native, endemic, or otherwise protected European species (for example, through the EU's Birds and Habitats Directives) are usually not included in existing wildlife trade policies. Yet, they are often heavily traded and are at risk of population decline (as is the case for some songbird species). Effectively halting biodiversity loss and reconfiguring biodiversity governance at a global level requires us to address these blindspots by placing the spotlight on what is happening in the Global North.

The future of European biodiversity politics

Nature conservation in the EU and its neighbourhood is in a dire state, despite significant expansions in publicly and privately managed protected areas (such as the Natura 2000 network) and attempts to reframe European governments as “green leaders” on the global stage. Illegal killing and exploitation significantly impact European populations of birds, fish, reptiles and mammals, undermining efforts to improve the health and resilience of wild species set out in the EU Biodiversity Strategy for 2030. The Aichi Targets were not met, and even the current goals outlined in the Global Biodiversity Framework are often vague and non-committal.

Unhelpful conservation narratives – driven by colonial histories and perceptions of nature as separable from people – need to be radically reconfigured in European biodiversity politics. Rather than expanding and enforcing an emphasis on ecosystem services and market-based values outwards, it is high time that European biodiversity governance addressed the threats from over-exploitation and consumption at home, particularly towards endemic European wildlife. Doing so requires a critical engagement with environmentally harmful practices rooted in cultural and national traditions (for instance, the consumption of glass eels or eating songbirds as exclusive delicacies in European countries).

Increased monitoring and enforcement of international trade regulations or biodiversity targets alone will yield few positive results if the underlying motivations for activities that directly contribute to biodiversity loss within Europe are not addressed. It may now be down to national governments to fill these gaps in the European and international biodiversity frameworks. If policies are to be truly transformative and harmonious in addressing global injustices towards people and the planet, perceptions of nature and wildlife must move beyond their Eurocentric confines of utility and market value. European governments and consumers must take responsibility and be accountable for their roles in biodiversity decline and wildlife overexploitation.



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Published March 3, 2023

Article in English

Published in the *Green European Journal*

Downloaded from <https://www.greeneuropeanjournal.eu/global-biodiversity-governance-has-a-big-blindspot/>

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