



UNLOCKING HUMAN POTENTIAL FOR BIODIVERSITY

Unlocking Human Potential For Biodiversity

World Environment Day, June 5, 2020

Event Summary



Convention sur la
diversité biologique



Montréal 

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Review of mandate

On the occasion of World Environment Day, June 5, 2020, for which Montreal was the North American host city, Montréal Space for Life and the Secretariat of the Convention on Biological Diversity (SCBD) held a virtual event to take stock and seek to understand the levers that can be used to unlock human potential to preserve biodiversity, get in touch with nature and develop a roadmap for future action.

1. A detailed account of the discussions

a. General event

- Roundtable with dignitaries
- Remarks by Charles-Mathieu Brunelle, Director of Montréal Space for Life
- Panel with guest speakers
- Reactions to workshop chat

b. Ideas shared in two subgroup workshops

- Montréal Space for Life rapporteurs also took notes in the subgroups

2. A summary report on the event

a. Main topics discussed

b. Analysis of individual and community concerns

c. Summary of opportunities and project proposals to be explored, developed and initiated

The following pages provide a summary of the event.

On June 5, 2020, on the occasion of World Environment Day, for which Montreal was the North American host city, Montréal Space for Life and the Secretariat of the Convention on Biological Diversity (SCBD) held a virtual event to take stock and seek to understand the levers that can be used to unlock human potential to preserve biodiversity, get in touch with nature and develop a roadmap for future action. The topics explored and the ideas and project opportunities discussed in connection with protecting biodiversity are summarized in the following pages.

1. Main topics discussed

The COVID-19 pandemic and the ensuing global lockdown had collateral effects on the environment and biodiversity (reduction in urban traffic, less pollution, etc.). In the eyes of some, the pandemic revealed **nature's undeniable resilience**, biodiversity's ability to bounce back when given free rein—with some wild animal species even beginning to move around freely in urban areas.

Because the pace of human life slowed very suddenly, people began paying more attention and showing **greater curiosity and wonder about nature**. Lockdown awakened a **need for a closer connection to nature** for many people, especially those living in towns and cities.

With this **new awareness**, people are starting to have greater appreciation for nature's benefits. That has strengthened a feeling of belonging to a world of living beings that extends beyond humankind, **a realization that all living beings are part of the same huge family**, which includes human beings, and that can provide the **collective motivation to do things differently, for the well-being of humanity and that of the environment in which we live**.

a) Importance of protecting biodiversity in light of the coronavirus crisis

Through contact and proximity with nature, people come to understand its benefits and want to protect and preserve biodiversity. Biodiversity provides the things we need to sustain our lifestyles: water, air and food. Loss of biodiversity is a threat to the survival of humanity. For people to love, respect and take care of biodiversity, they have to be aware of its value.

i) Human health benefits

The source of the COVID-19 pandemic is to be found in the relationship between humankind and the wild and in the way humans destroy ecosystems and are constantly occupying more and more land. In the face of this health threat, governments and people have found the motivation to act and make drastic decisions that have provided more room for biodiversity. The pandemic has shown that governments are able to take decisive action and that people are ready to make sacrifices when human health is endangered.

If we could show even just a fraction of this decisiveness in our efforts to protect biodiversity, combat climate change and take care of the environment, we could unlock the potential needed to reverse the current trend.

Similarly, though on a smaller scale, cities are increasing social contacts between people and creating more opportunities for the passing on of traditional and ecological knowledge. On the other hand, living in bigger cities, deprived of contact with nature and depending on a more industrialized diet, contributes to the development of chronic illnesses and mental health problems. **Rethinking the design of our cities and allowing more room for nature would have beneficial effects on both our health and the protection of biodiversity.**

ii) Sustainable development benefits

Biodiversity lies at the heart of sustainable development and human communities. **In the short term, it supports the well-being and subsistence of humankind:** it is at the root of the supply of food, fibre and water. Biodiversity also helps alleviate the effects of climate change and make communities more resilient in the face of this change. It provides jobs in agriculture, fishing, forestry and many other sectors.

In the medium and longer term, if we let ourselves be guided by traditional and Indigenous knowledge, biodiversity can support more sustainable economic development. Preserving biodiversity helps to **maintain harmony between humankind and the cosmos: cultural diversity, the memory of ancestors and communities.**

Knowledge about biodiversity needs to be passed on to future generations; and seeds, especially their genomes, and their natural evolution need to be preserved. This protection must extend to Indigenous knowledge and include the obligation to assess the impact of biotechnology research on biodiversity.

iii) Food and agriculture benefits

At the start of the agricultural revolution, the practice of monoculture was presented as a way to increase agricultural productivity, but no mention was made of the fact that it also kills insects and bees. Yet an increase in yields does not necessarily mean greater well-being of humankind in general or of farmers in particular, nor improved well-being of biodiversity. Monoculture has a direct effect on the health of the soil, plants, consumers and farmers.

Consuming foods that are the product of mono-industrial agriculture often induces chronic diseases in people, whereas eating foods produced by mixed farming tends to improve our state of health. To take an example, industrialized food production has increased the mortality risk of COVID-19 patients (80% of fatalities have been linked to cases of comorbidities such as obesity or diabetes). Views touting the benefits of monoculture and its increased yields must be replaced by arguments promoting the human and natural health benefits of polyculture.

That is why it is now crucial to think in terms of **“One Earth, One Health”** in order to cement the deep bond between the health of biodiversity and the health of humankind.

b) Protecting biodiversity

i) At the community level

Nature at the heart of communities

In villages, biodiversity lies at the heart of the community. This ensures greater benefits to the health of the entire community. Moreover, a strong sense of community also facilitates the transfer of knowledge about biodiversity: knowing one's community means more opportunities to share and pass on traditional and ecological knowledge.

In the biggest cities, this sense of community tends to wither, which is harmful to both human health and the health of biodiversity. By creating green spaces that bring nature into the city, this

sense of community and closeness typical of village life can be recreated. What is needed is smart urban growth that incorporates nature into the city as an integral part of its development.

Humanity's salvation depends on social relationships and creating bonds. The transfer of knowledge—Indigenous knowledge and traditional knowledge in particular—has an essential role to play in protecting biodiversity. Social bonds and the sense of community are major factors in the transmission of knowledge. In India, for example, Navdanya, the organization founded by Vandana Shiva, has established “grandmother universities” to pass on knowledge from one generation to the next.

Nature at the heart of local and international commitments

Decades of negotiations to tackle climate change have not led to reduced greenhouse gas emissions, yet in just a few weeks, the pandemic drastically curtailed human activity and its carbon footprint. The current crisis has shown that governments and people have the ability to rally together and come up with bold solutions. The pandemic has made people aware of the links between protecting our health and protecting biodiversity. But it's only with the support of the people that we will be able to protect biodiversity and preserve its benefits for future generations.

The United Nations Convention on Biological Diversity, the post-2020 global biodiversity framework of which will be negotiated in the coming months, is of crucial importance. The framework proposes ambitious goals and concrete commitments that have been accepted by all. As a result, governments at all levels—from municipal to national—will have a role to play in achieving these goals.

Locally

Governments have a major role to play in the protection and restoration of biodiversity, because they oversee land-use planning. The decisions that cities will make in the next few years regarding ecosystem and biodiversity protection will help not only to mitigate the effects of climate change, but also to promote the development of the local economy. Designing cities in a way that protects biodiversity means fostering urban dwellers' contact with nature and educating them about the need to preserve and protect it.

For example, the urban wetland project in Davenport, Iowa, which involves an association of 90 mayors of Mississippi River cities and towns that are regularly hit by flooding, is an excellent example of how ambitious targets can be implemented as concrete projects. Instead of building a dam or a dyke, Davenport has turned the flood-prone land into a nature preserve that allows the river to overflow its banks naturally, but in a controlled way. The project thus helps mitigate the impact of climate change, promote biodiversity and boost the local economy through tourism.

Similarly, in Montréal, the purpose of the Grand Parc de l'Ouest project is to protect ecosystems—wetlands, green spaces and wooded areas—from real estate development by creating the largest urban park in Canada. This project will also make it easier for Montrealers to come into contact with nature.

Internationally

Ambitious targets and solid commitments under the United Nations Convention on Biodiversity will be the demonstration that not only local, national and international decision makers, but regular people, too, have realized what needs to be done—that we cannot go on degrading and destroying our natural environment, our ecosystems and all the biodiversity they contain at the rate and on the scale that's happening now. For instance, Canada has committed itself to raising its targets, vowing to protect 25% of its land and ocean areas by 2025.

ii) At the individual level

Determinants of motivation

During the pandemic, people's concerns about their own health have indirectly given biodiversity and nature a chance to reclaim their rights and their space. **Most people's motivation to act to preserve the environment is not related directly to the environment itself, but rather to a desire to be healthy, to have social connections, to protect and develop themselves as individuals, to feel good, to preserve their identity and to enhance their sense of belonging.**

Focusing on motivation as a way to spur people to action

Human beings want to live in harmony with nature and protect the environment, but sometimes their actions indicate the opposite. The environment is often seen as a problem to be solved, and not something to be shown in a favourable light. Hence **the importance of creating new pro-biodiversity narratives that speak to the fundamental and social needs of human beings.** The narrative must refocus on the issues that affect people more directly and then make the link between these issues and the environment. Motivation will thus be self-determined and more profound. In a sales pitch, it's important not to insist solely on the environment, nor to put that argument front and centre.

Giving people choices rather than forcing them to act

People should be **left to make their own choices, provided they have the tools and support they need to make these choices and that they belong to a group or community where they can create more connections.** That helps avoid a feeling of helplessness and promotes more collective behaviours and eco-citizen engagement. **Reducing eco-anxiety requires getting involved in meaningful collective initiatives that develop a feeling of community competency,** such as social engagement in the public sphere, interaction and a connection with others. The connection with nature is crucial in this respect, but it is also a very strong motivator and driver of awareness of environmental issues for most people (especially children), and helps produce well-rounded environmentally conscious citizens. Wonder

People are fearful of COVID-19 at the moment, but they don't sense any immediate danger with respect to the environmental future of our planet. Something that is cognitively more powerful is therefore needed to inspire people to take and support environmental action. Goodwill and

altruism are the only two concepts that provide a link between short-term (social justice), medium-term (need for self-development) and long-term (taking care of future generations) concerns. These two key concepts can bring all actors (specialists, decision makers, entrepreneurs, engaged citizens) together around the project of building a better world.

Wonder helps to weaken individual egos, unify identity and develop a feeling of belonging to and interdependence with nature. It makes us more altruistic, while the beauty of the wild motivates us enormously to respect and take care of nature and take action to protect and preserve it.

Compassion

To invent the world of the future, it is vital to give the podium to people capable of thinking outside the box. As they are not at the heart of the current economic system, marginalized people—which unfortunately includes women in most countries, as well as Indigenous peoples—have a better understanding of what it means to belong to biodiversity and are better able to speak up on its behalf.

Being closer to nature and biodiversity, these marginalized people have a greater sense of compassion. And that compassion gives them the courage to act to protect biodiversity. Compassion is an extremely positive human quality that strengthens our courage to act, our potential for action and our altruism.

Like any other quality or ability, compassion can be developed and raised to a higher level, that of goodwill and unconditional love for others, for nature and for biological diversity. We have to view biodiversity and nature as if they were part of our family. Nature and biodiversity are integral parts of the great human, animal and plant family. All living beings on Earth must be perceived as parts of a whole.

Courageous compassion is required if we are to be successful in protecting biodiversity.

2. Opportunities and projects to unlock human potential to foster biodiversity

A number of opportunities and project proposals emerged from the discussions between the panellists, but also between participants and from the talks given by political decision makers, which could unlock the individual and collective human potential to take action to promote biodiversity. In the section below, these ideas are grouped together under three headings: rethink the urban environment and its design, develop compassion and take action, and foster the passing on of knowledge.

a) Rethink our environment and its development by conserving and reintroducing nature

- Create protected natural areas within towns and cities, like the Grand Parc de l’Ouest in Montréal, which is the largest urban park in Canada.
- Rethink land use on a municipal level in order to be able to mitigate the effects of climate change and promote biodiversity, as illustrated by the urban wetland project in Davenport, Iowa, which allows the Mississippi River to overflow its banks naturally.
- Create green spaces in the city to reduce the perceived size of the city and thereby recreate the feeling of community belonging typical of village life.
- Revitalize the economy by combining job creation with green commitments, in particular through green infrastructure projects, conversion to green industrial production and the development of ecotourism.
- Set ambitious concrete goals on a national level to protect natural ecosystems and biodiversity, as illustrated by the Government of Canada’s announcement that it is raising its targets and vowing to protect 25% of its land and ocean areas by 2025.

b) Develop compassion, a feeling that can spur people to take action

- Develop direct contact with nature from the time children are infants so as to awaken their environmental awareness and help them become well-rounded eco-citizens.
- Create inspirational public awareness campaigns, involving the use of art, images and photos of beautiful natural places in order to foster wonder and goodwill toward nature.
- Use art to raise awareness by appealing to emotions, influence behaviour and spur people to take action to foster biodiversity.
- Reinforce people’s attachment to and discovery of nature through projects that help them reconnect with it, that give them an opportunity to get their hands dirty.
- Provide assistance for community initiatives that strengthen feelings of individual and collective competency and that develop the feeling of social belonging, like the virtual project hives facilitated by Montréal Space for Life and the Secretariat on Biodiversity.

c) Foster the passing on of knowledge (traditional, scientific, cultural, intergenerational) by means of youth education, raising public awareness and quality outreach programs

- Facilitate the transfer of knowledge from one generation to the next, as is being done through grandmother universities in India.
- Protect and foster the passing on of traditional Indigenous knowledge, which plays an essential role in preserving biodiversity.
- Ensure that environmental awareness and eco-citizenship are part of the core focus of the education system.

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