

# Biodiversity



## DEFINITION

---

'Biological diversity' means the variability among living organisms from all sources including, *inter alia*, terrestrial, marine and other aquatic ecosystems and the ecological complexes of which they are a part; this includes diversity within species, between species and of ecosystems.

Convention on Biological Diversity 1992[1]

*Biodiversity is a compound word derived from 'biological diversity' and therefore is considered to have the same meaning.*

---

## NOTES ON DEFINITION

---

The CBD definition is the internationally accepted definition of biodiversity. The E.O. Wilson version is included below (in further definitions) as the first recorded definition of the term and therefore of historical interest.

Functionally these two definitions are similar. The CBD definition explicitly incorporates the term [ecosystem](#) which is used in a comparable context to the word [biome](#) within the Wilson definition. Both definitions include genetic, species, habitat and geographic scales thereby

encompassing all living things and associated systems.

## FURTHER DEFINITIONS

---

The variety of life at every hierarchical level and spatial scale of biological organisations: genes within populations, populations within species, species within communities, communities within landscapes, landscapes within biomes, and biomes within the biosphere.

E. O. Wilson (1988), Biodiversity<sup>2</sup>

## KEY POINTS

---

- Biodiversity is being lost at an alarming rate which poses a risk to the provision of [ecosystem services](#).
- The [Convention of Biological Diversity](#) provides a global legal framework for action on biodiversity. It is a key instrument to promote sustainable development and tackle the global loss of biodiversity.
- Biodiversity can be measured through the use of quantitative [indicators](#), although no single unified approach exists.
- Biodiversity also underpins ecosystem function and the provision of ecosystem services.

## INTRODUCTION

---

The term biodiversity encompasses variety of biological life at more than one scale. It is not only the variety of [species](#) (both plant and animal) but also the variety of [genes](#) within those species and the variety of [ecosystems](#) in which the species reside.

## HISTORY

---

In the context of conservation science the term 'biodiversity', a contraction of 'biological diversity', is relatively young. 'Biological diversity' in its current sense began to be used in the early 1980s, with interest in the concept elevated by publications such as 'Limits to Growth'<sup>3</sup>, which discussed the implications of unrestricted population and economic growth on the environment. Use of the term has ranged from a focus on [species richness](#) (number of different species in a location/sample)<sup>4</sup> to greater emphasis on ecological and [genetic diversity](#)<sup>5</sup>. The specific origin of the word 'biodiversity' is often attributed to W.G. Rosen in 1985 during planning for the 'National Forum on Biodiversity' which took place in America

later that year<sup>6</sup>. The proceedings of the forum were published by E. O. Wilson in 1988 in a book entitled 'Biodiversity', which is likely to have initiated the widespread use of the word<sup>7</sup>.

Initially the term biodiversity was used more in political forums than scientific ones<sup>8</sup>, progressing over time to become a term used to symbolise the concept of the "richness of life on earth"<sup>9</sup>. Importantly, biodiversity does not exclusively refer to species richness. It also encompasses diversity at a wider scale meaning that differences in the genetic makeup of populations is important. [Endemism](#) has a key role to play in this context because endemic species are restricted to small areas and provide pockets of particularly high genetic diversity.

The concept of biodiversity continues to evolve and more recently it has been included in the idea of [ecosystem services](#) in that it is a form of [natural capital](#) and thus underpins the functioning of ecosystems<sup>10, 11</sup>. Biodiversity itself is not generally considered an ecosystem service but rather supports environmental functions<sup>11</sup>.

## IMPORTANCE

---

The increasing use of the term biodiversity is being driven by the fact that, in an ecological context, global biodiversity itself is being lost at an alarming rate<sup>12</sup>. Although it has been shown that the significant global biodiversity loss that has occurred over the timeframe of human existence has not stopped global human population increase<sup>13</sup>, there is clear evidence that biodiversity loss can affect the wellbeing of society and have negative economic impacts<sup>14</sup>.

Biodiversity underpins ecosystem function and the provision of [ecosystem services](#). Biodiversity loss therefore threatens the provision of goods and services provided by ecosystems. Reduction in biodiversity can affect decomposition rates, vegetation biomass production and, in the marine environment, affect fish stocks<sup>15, 16, 17, 18</sup>. It is predicted that a reduction in marine productivity means that fisheries will not be able to meet the demands of a growing global population<sup>19</sup>. In addition to the gradual decline in environmental function linked to reductions in biodiversity, it has been suggested that there is a risk that at some point a threshold will be crossed and a catastrophe may occur. Research has highlighted that biodiversity loss could rival the problems of carbon dioxide increases as one of the major drivers of ecosystem change in the 21<sup>st</sup> century<sup>20</sup>. Whether from environmental collapse or gradual decline in function, our ability to adapt to a changing world may be considerably reduced if the environment on which we rely does not contain sufficient biodiversity to evolve and continue to support our needs<sup>13, 21</sup>.

## MULTILATERAL ENVIRONMENTAL AGREEMENTS

---

In response to the current rate of biodiversity loss, and on the grounds that biodiversity is a common concern for humankind, the [Convention on Biological Diversity \(CBD\)](#) was opened for signature in 1992. As of June 2013 it has been ratified by 193 parties (governments). The CBD provides a global legal framework for action on biodiversity<sup>22</sup> and is considered a key instrument for [sustainable development](#). Its three main goals are:

1. The conservation of biological diversity;
2. The sustainable use of the components of biological diversity;
3. The fair and equitable sharing of the benefits arising from the use of genetic resources.

The CBD's governing body is the [Conference of the Parties \(COP\)](#). It holds periodic meetings to review progress on the Convention targets, and advance its implementation<sup>23</sup>. To support implementation of the CBD, the United Nations General Assembly declared 2011-2020 the United Nations Decade on Biodiversity and adopted the Strategic Plan for Biodiversity 2011-2020. The Strategy is a ten-year framework for action adopted by signatory countries in 2010 in Nagoya, Japan. It builds on the vision that "by 2050, biodiversity is valued, conserved, restored and wisely used, maintaining ecosystem services, sustaining a healthy planet and delivering benefits essential for all people"<sup>24</sup>. The Strategy calls for all countries and stakeholders to effectively implement the three objectives of the CBD by establishing national and regional targets, feeding into the five strategic goals and 20 global targets (collectively known as the [Aichi Biodiversity Targets](#)) outlined by the Strategy. The primary framework for action set forth by the CBD is the [ecosystem approach](#), an integrated strategy for the management of biodiversity resources.

Biodiversity is also at the centre of a number of other Conventions e.g. the [Convention on Migratory Species \(CMS\)](#), the International Treaty on Plant Genetic Resources for Food and Agriculture (Plant Treaty), [The Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora \(CITES\)](#). It is also the subject of a number of associated Protocols such as the Specially Protected Areas Protocol and the [Cartagena Protocol](#).

A new platform, the Intergovernmental Science-Policy Platform on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services (IPBES), was established by the international community in 2012 and is open to all United Nations member countries. It is an independent intergovernmental body committed to providing scientifically-sound assessments on the state of the planet's biodiversity in order to support informed decision-making on biodiversity and ecosystem services conservation and use around the world<sup>25</sup>.

## MEASURING AND MONITORING BIODIVERSITY

---

Over the last 30 years, many different definitions of biodiversity have been used. As early as

1992, the year the Convention on Biological Diversity was opened for signature at the [Rio Earth Summit](#), it was noted that the definitions of biodiversity are “as diverse as the biological resource”<sup>26</sup>. While the CBD definition is commonly accepted, the variety of definitions of biodiversity is particularly relevant when it comes to the scientific measurement of biodiversity. For the purposes of detailed analysis, and the creation of [indicators](#) to measure or monitor trends, exactly how biodiversity is defined will influence what is measured <sup>7, 27, 28</sup>. Biodiversity indicators aim at using quantitative data to measure aspects of biodiversity, ecosystem condition, services, and drivers of change. This advances understanding of how biodiversity is changing over time and space, why it is changing, and what the consequences of the changes are for ecosystems, their services, and human well-being. The huge variety of elements included in the definition of biodiversity results in a varied set of methodologies to measure the natural environment<sup>29</sup>. There is no unified metric for quantitative measurement. The variety of metrics employed include<sup>30</sup>:

- [species richness](#) (number of species);
- [population](#) number (number of genetically distinct populations of a particular species defined by analysis of a specific element of its genetic makeup)<sup>31</sup>;
- [genetic diversity](#) (The variation in the amount of genetic information within and among individuals of a population, a species, an assemblage, or a community<sup>32</sup>;
- species [evenness](#) (measurement of how evenly individuals are distributed among species)<sup>29</sup>; and
- [phenotypic](#) (organism characteristics) variance, (the measurement of the different between the phenotypes within a sample)<sup>30</sup>.

## BIODIVERSITY MEASUREMENT AND POLICY

---

The detail of how to measure biodiversity is an area of discussion particularly relevant at the science/policy interface<sup>33</sup>. The CBD-mandated Biodiversity Indicators Partnership (BIP) promotes the development of indicators in support of the CBD and related Conventions, national and regional governments and a range of other sectors. Indicators initiated under the partnership are linked to the goals of the Strategic Plan for Biodiversity 2011-2020<sup>24</sup> and include habitat extent, protected areas and species extinction.

## REFERENCES & WEBSITE

---

1. [Convention on Biological Diversity \(1992\) Convention on Biological Diversity. Secretariat of the Convention on Biological Diversity, Montreal, Canada](#)<sup>34</sup>

2. [Wilson EO \(ed\) \(1988\) Biodiversity. National Academy Press, Washington D.C., USA](#)
3. Meadows DH, Meadows DL, Randers J, Behrens WW (1972) The Limits to Growth. Universe Books, New York, USA
4. Lovejoy TE (1980) Changes in Biological Diversity. In: Barney GO (ed) The Global 2000 Report to the President, Vol 2 (The technical report). Penguin, Harmondsworth, UK, pp 327–32
5. Norse EA, McManus RE (1980) Ecology and living resources biological diversity. In: Quality C on E (ed) Environmental quality 1980; The eleventh annual report of the Council on Environmental Quality. Council on Environmental Quality, Washington D.C., USA, pp 31–80
6. [Hawksworth DL \(1995\) Biodiversity: Measurement and Estimation. Chapman & Hall, Oxford, UK](#)
7. [Hamilton AJ \(2005\) Species diversity or biodiversity? Journal of environmental management 75:89–92](#)
8. [Ghilarov, A. \(1996\) What does “biodiversity” mean - scientific problem or convenient myth? Trends in ecology & evolution 11:304–6](#)
9. [Noss RF, Cooperrider AY \(1994\) Saving Nature’s Legacy: Protecting and Restoring Biodiversity. Saving natures legacy protecting and restoring biodiversity T2 - A2:416](#)
10. Barker T, Mortimer M, Perrings C (2010) Biodiversity , ecosystems and ecosystem services. In: Kumar P (ed) The Economics of Ecosystems and Biodiversity: Ecological and Economic Foundations. Earthscan, London, UK, pp 41–104
11. [Mace GM, Norris K, Fitter AH \(2012\) Biodiversity and ecosystem services: a multilayered relationship. Trends in ecology & evolution 27:19–26](#)
12. [Chapin FS III et. al. \(2000\) Consequences of changing biodiversity. Nature 405: 234-242](#)
13. [Jenkins M \(2003\) Prospects for biodiversity. Science \(New York, NY\) 302:1175–7](#)
14. [Balmford A, Bruner A, Cooper P, et al \(2002\) Economic reasons for conserving wild nature. Science \(New York, NY\) 297:950–3](#)
15. [Reich PB, Tilman D, Isbell F, Mueller K, Hobbie SE, Flynn DFB, Eisenhauer N \(2012\) Impacts of biodiversity loss escalate through time as redundancy fades. Science 336:589–92](#)
16. [Cardinale BJ, Matulich KL, Hooper DU, Byrnes JE, Duffy E, Gamfeldt L, Balvanera P, O’Connor MI, Gonzalez A \(2011\) The functional role of producer diversity in ecosystems. American journal of botany 98:572–92](#)
17. [Cardinale BJ, Duffy JE, Gonzalez A, et al \(2012\) Biodiversity loss and its impact on humanity. Nature 486:59–67](#)
18. [Worm B, Barbier EB, Beaumont N, et al \(2006\) Impacts of biodiversity loss on ocean ecosystem services. Science 314:787–90](#)
19. [Pauly D, Christensen V, Guénette S, Pitcher TJ, Sumaila UR, Walters CJ, Watson R,](#)

- [Zeller D \(2002\) Towards sustainability in world fisheries. Nature 418:689–95](#)
20. [Hooper DU, Adair EC, Cardinale BJ, Byrnes JEK, Hungate BA, Matulich KL, Gonzalez A, Duffy JE, Gamfeldt L, O'Connor MI \(2012\) A global synthesis reveals biodiversity loss as a major driver of ecosystem change. Nature 486:105–8](#)
  21. [Hassan RM, Scholes R, Ash N \(2005\) Ecosystems and human well-being: current state and trends: findings of the Condition and Trends Working Group of the Millennium Ecosystem Assessment. Island Press](#)
  22. [CBD Secretariat \(2013\) Introduction.](#)
  23. [CBD Secretariat \(2010\) Convention on Biological Diversity Factsheet. Convention on Biological Diversity, Montreal, Canada](#)
  24. [CBD Secretariat \(2010\) The Strategic Plan for Biodiversity 2011-2020 and the Aichi Biodiversity Targets. Document UNEP/CBD/COP/DEC/X/2. Secretariat of the Convention on Biological Diversity, Nagoya, Japan](#)
  25. [Intergovernmental Platform on Biodiversity & Ecosystem Services \(2013\) About IPBES.](#)
  26. [Knopf LF \(1992\) Conservation and use of wildlife-based resources : the bushmeat crisis. Transactions of the North American Wildlife and Natural Resources Conference 57:241–242](#)
  27. [Baillie J, Collen B, Amin R \(2008\) Toward monitoring global biodiversity. Conservation Letters 1:18–26](#)
  28. [Butchart S, Walpole M, Collen B \(2010\) Global biodiversity: indicators of recent declines. Science vol. 328. 5982: 1164-1168](#)
  29. [Purvis A, Hector A \(2000\) Getting the measure of biodiversity. Nature 405:212–9](#)
  30. [Lyashevskaya O, Farnsworth KD \(2012\) How many dimensions of biodiversity do we need? Ecological Indicators 18:485–492](#)
  31. [Luck GW, Daily GC, Ehrlich PR \(2003\) Population diversity and ecosystem services. Trends in Ecology & Evolution 18:331–336](#)
  32. UN (1992) Environment and Development (Terminology bulletin: 344). United Nations, New York, USA
  33. [Turnhout E, Hisschemoller M, Eijsackers H \(2007\) Ecological indicators: Between the two fires of science and policy. Ecological Indicators 7:215–228](#)





Coral reefs are among the most biodiverse ecosystems. Richard Whitcombe/Shutterstock.com

Category:

[Internationally recognised definitions](#)

[Key terms: In depth](#)

Page last updated 17 December 2019