

# The Harm They Inflict When Values Conflict

## Why Diversity Does not Matter

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### ABSTRACT

*Some policies that manage natural processes have the purpose of conserving and/or promoting the diversity that exists in an ecosystem. On many occasions, these policies conflict with values such as individual wellbeing. This paper looks at this issue. It focuses first on clarifying the concept of diversity. Second, it looks at whether diversity has value, and what kind of value it may have. Finally, it argues that although diversity is valuable, it may be overridden in cases in which actual harms exceed future benefits. Therefore, policies that promote diversity should, in some cases, be abandoned.*

*Keywords:* diversity, value, natural processes, ecosystems, non-human animals, wellbeing, prevention, harm; intervention, ecosystem collapse.

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### 1. INTRODUCTION: THE HARM THEY INFLICT

There are a great number of policies that manage natural processes. An example would be planning to conserve a natural area for the next ten years. In most cases, these policies require intervention in nature in one way or another, although in a few cases they do not. The reasons/ends that motivate the policies that manage natural processes vary. A great number of these policies have environmental aims. This means that their final aim is the conservation of ecosystems in an optimal functioning state, but they can also aim to conserve an ecosystem according to its original state.

When defining strategic management goals, one of the common aims that drive many interventions in nature is the promotion of diversity. Promoting diversity can involve a recommendation either to intervene in nature, or not to intervene. The management of invasive species is an

example of when promoting diversity requires intervening in nature. Invasive species occupy a territory that did not previously belong to them, and they become the new possessors of it. If the invasive species is a plant, this plant will be the new occupant of the natural territory, displacing the old occupants until they become extinct in the area. If the invasion is made by an animal species that happens to feed on a particular plants, the extinction of the plant will occur as a consequence of the feeding habits of the new inhabitants. The policy normally adopted here would be to restore the previous distribution of species, either by replacing the invasive plants with the original ones, or by eliminating the presence of the new animals. However, while restoring a plant species over other species of plants does not seem to involve any direct harm on the individuals who inhabit the ecosystem, restoring a plant species at cost to other species of animals, or restoring a species of animals over other species of animals, does.

In other cases, what promoting diversity will require us to do is to refrain from intervening in nature because the consequences of a possible intervention would reduce diversity. There are processes in nature that involve suffering at least, and harm, death and misery, at most. The natural processes that affect animals in the wild are often of the latter kind. Most animals that live in the wild die of thirst and starvation. Natural disasters lead to their suffering from diseases or physical injury. A significant number suffer and die from parasitism, and others die as the victims of a predator, suffering a great amount of distress during their – normally short – lives. As consequence, the disvalue to which their lives amount seems to outweigh the positive value. Should not we intervene in such cases to alleviate the suffering of animals? Recent discussions in the field of intervention in nature give compelling reasons to support such interventions under the premise that animals are not “there in the wild” as other parts of natural systems are, like for example trees or rivers. Animals, as other sentient beings, have moral status and therefore their interests need to be considered when designing the management of natural processes. However, one of the difficult questions that arises after deciding that intervention is required is how we ought to intervene in such cases. What is the best policy of intervention to adopt in view of the bad consequences for non-human animals that these natural processes involve? Feeding and treating animals with diseases are easy policies to implement. Some authors have also suggested patterns of intervention that would alleviate the suffering of prey, for example. For this, they have proposed the controlled extinction of some predators (Pearce 2009). A common objection to this would be to say that a policy like this would diminish the number of species in our ecosystem and therefore also the amount of diversity in the world.

Far from the case of animals that suffer in nature, other cases can be found in which promoting diversity requires refraining from intervening in order to alleviate a certain sort of suffering. The natural endowment an individual is born with is the consequence of a natural process. The genetic material from which a fetus is formed depends mostly on the genetics of the biological progenitors, and even when mutations in genes happen, there is a huge component of heritability in them. Genetically inherited disabilities and illnesses are the result of these natural processes of genetic combinations that end up bringing new individuals into the world with conditions that to some extent will compromise their wellbeing<sup>1</sup>. Some have argued that we should oppose intervention in these genetic processes on the grounds that it would in the end reduce the diversity of people existing in the world, affirming that it would be bad if people with Down syndrome, for example, no longer existed. Nevertheless, rejecting intervention to prevent these cases presumably brings into the world a state of affairs that involves the existence of unnecessary extra suffering.

The previous two cases have various things in common. The killing of massive numbers of individuals – normally members of an invasive species – is justified by referring to the modification of the previous state of natural diversity that they have disturbed. Extinguishing some predators – by stopping them from reproducing and without causing any extra harm to individuals – is commonly rejected due to the loss of species diversity it would imply. The rejection of intervention to ensure that people are born without disabilities is also frequently grounded in pro-diversity claims, i.e. the variety of people in the world would diminish if all were born with the same capabilities.

The purpose of this paper is not to defend the claim that the diversity of types of plants, non-human animals or humans has no value whatsoever. Instead, I will accept that diversity has value, but will try to show that the value of diversity can never outweigh the disvalue of promoting or protecting diversity when these cases involve harm, suffering and pain for individuals that could be avoided at a not very high cost. In the following sections I will focus on what diversity is and what its value in nature may be. Then, I will look at whether we should intervene in nature in favor of diversity. Finally, I will offer some conclusions for the future improvement of our policies of intervention regarding both nature and non-human sentient individuals.

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<sup>1</sup> I will leave aside here the question of whether this example really constitutes a case of harm, and the identity problems that harming individuals who do not exist and who might, if intervened with, never come into being, convey (see Parfit [1984] 1986).

## 2. WHAT IS DIVERSITY AND WHAT IS ITS VALUE?

Diversity is a *relational property*. This is because a single object does not offer any feature that differs from this object's own features (if we accept the identity principle, an object is always equal to itself insofar as *the properties of an object can never differ from themselves*). In other words, for an individual, X, there cannot exist two descriptions of the same property that are compatible. For example "Sarah Lopez is 1.2 meters tall and Sarah Lopez is 1.5 meters tall" is an incoherent statement as it is metaphysically impossible that Sarah Lopez has two different heights at a single point in time. Diversity, therefore, can only exist in sets, or groups, of objects. If the set in question contains at least two objects among which the relation of "not being equal to the rest of the objects of the set" holds – *a priori*, every time that we have a set with more than one element – then we can say that the set has the property of being diverse. Yet even though diversity is a property that can be predicated from a huge variety of sets, for the purpose of this article the evaluation of the role of diversity will be restricted to sets composed of sentient individuals.

Strictly speaking, diversity needs to be differentiated from numerical *plurality or multiplicity*. Plurality as a property that also applies to sets would mean "a plural number of things". Numerical plurality just means a number greater than one. Multiplicity or plurality are logically prior to diversity and therefore a necessary condition for it, but never sufficient, unless the things that are multiple in number are property-types. Thus, diversity is a property that expresses whether the members of a set differ or not – and how much they do so – in a particular way. For example, we could have a plural number of wolves, without that implying diversity in any relevant sense, such as, for example, species diversity.

However, what do we mean when we utter propositions such as "society X is diverse"? Such a proposition is not very informative on the value of diversity. Thus, the relevant question would be: what *should* be meant by sentences of this type? Following common use of the word "diversity", this word seems to be a thick evaluative concept already loaded with positive moral connotations. One of the reasons why we tend to apply positive connotations to diversity might be its frequent appearance in many relevant official documents, or in support of the human rights discourse. The 2001 *UNESCO Universal Declaration on Cultural Diversity* states in its first article that "as a source of exchange, innovation and creativity, cultural diversity is as necessary for humankind as biodiversity is for nature. In this sense, it is the common heritage of humanity and should be recognized and affirmed for the benefit of present and future generations" (2002, 4).

Diversity seems typically a good value to promote, but there is nothing necessarily good about diversity along some dimensions. The justification of the relevance of diversity that this document implies does not seem to commit to the defense of the intrinsic value of diversity. On the contrary, it recognizes its extrinsic value. The relevance of the good consequences is clearly manifested next in the text. Finally, article 3 clearly states that cultural diversity is a crucial factor for development, as it widens the range of options to everyone, not only in economic terms, but also intellectual, affective, moral and spiritual. So even when the declaration does not use the term as a thick evaluative concept at all, but just as a value that is good, the relevance of the documents in which “diversity” is used, and the frequency with which it appears, seem to put the world in a morally privileged state.

A paradigmatic case of the concept of diversity being loaded with evaluative meaning is the use of the concept “functional diversity”. Within the disability literature, the expression “functional diversity” has commenced to substitute “disability” to describe the state that characterizes a person with a disability. By substituting “disabled body” by “body with diverse functioning” they make sure that disabled people become just part of the majority. Actually they become part of the total set of individuals, because everyone has, by default, bodily functioning that is *different* from that of their fellows; either everybody is a person with a “diversely-functioning body”, or nobody is. Thus, this inclusive term loses in explanatory power.

It is difficult to disagree with the fact that there are many paradigmatic cases in which diversity seems to be a *prima facie good value to promote*. Diversity of cultures in the world would be one of them. Cultural diversity is of instrumental value as it is a launch pad for obtaining other good values such as peace, tolerance or wider knowledge, as stated in the *Universal Declaration on Cultural Diversity*. However, the property “diversity” seems to be only an *extensional* way of referring to the set of individuals under consideration. It refers to the grade of variability in the typology or characteristics of the elements under consideration that we can find in a concrete set. The previous description does not provide any further information about the morally relevant characteristics of the individuals under consideration that count when it comes to deciding the properties that living individuals should have, because it focuses on a relational description. Equality is also a relational concept and, as is the case with diversity, only the equality of certain things matters. Thus, not all differences are good, and in some cases such as “diversity of health” or “diversity of income” there seems not to be any good aspect in such a distribution. Thus, as a potential value, not all the ways in which a set can be diverse are morally relevant.

A particular population – a set of sentient individuals – might have a huge variety in types of haircuts without that being any relevant characteristic of the moral value of that population, or of the people’s lives within it. The same could be said about a population with considerable ideological diversity. Let us see why. When we see many differences in a society we may have reasons to suspect it is particularly tolerant, but that might not be necessarily the case. *Diversityland* is a society in which most of its citizens have different opinions. Some would argue that this feature gives the society a great amount of value, due to the fact that every opinion or belief contains value in itself and therefore they are incommensurables. Still, most of the opinions of the inhabitants of *Diversityland* are stupid, morally bad and wrong. In this society everybody seems to make very innovative claims. There is considerable difference among these people’s opinions, which provides a huge range of available views about the world. Nevertheless, among this tremendous diversity of opinion and this rich culture, the citizens of *Diversityland* also seem to be quite ludicrous and often fail in terms of rightness. Every person seems to give original hypotheses about the functioning of things: morality, the world, the universe, etc., but the fact that almost all the opinions of this society differ from all the others does not guarantee the quality of any of them, and therefore other important values such as rightness or wellbeing might end up being affected by this diversity which, in the end, seems rather more like disparity.

The same reasoning might follow for many other examples. The reason why schools apply a diversity policy might be different from a commitment to integration and equality. Hopefully this will not be common, but it might be the case that these policies represent an interest in capturing a larger number of students. Nevertheless, even if this were the case, the fact that there were students from different countries, with different religions and different abilities, would be something to value for its presumably good consequences. Hence, *what is the nature of the value of diversity?*

Ultimately, it seems that there is nothing particularly good about diversity of many things. Wellbeing is a good example of this. A diverse distribution of wellbeing – i.e. wellbeing distributed in different quantities among the individuals of a group – seems not to be something to value at all. I have not denied that diversity could have extrinsic value and that its value could give us reasons to act in favor of it. What reasons are there for the case of intervention in nature?

3. SHOULD WE INTERVENE IN FAVOR OF DIVERSITY?  
A NORMATIVE ASSESSMENT OF DIVERSITY

Going back to the policies that intervene in nature with the aim of promoting natural diversity, what these policies imply by their interventions is that the value of diversity is either (I) intrinsic, because they value diversity in itself, or (II) dependent on other values. From what we have seen, it seems that diversity does have some value. If the value of diversity is dependent on the promotion of other values, these policies would seem to be addressing one of the following value judgements:

*To lose environmental diversity is bad because the diversity of the world [...].*

I. [...] *represents the traditional or historical natural order.*

This view represents a sort of general conservatism – namely *natural conservatism* – that may be motivated by different moral or theological reasons. Under this view, traditional or historical orders are valuable and need to be conserved.

II. [...] *is a natural order.*

This view, though similar to (i), is motivated by the assumption that what has intrinsic value is natural environments. Environmentalism would be an example of this view.

III. [...] *has aesthetic value.*

Under this view, environmental diversity has aesthetic value. Like a famous picture which is kept in a museum for its conservation, environmental diversity needs to be preserved as well.

IV. [...] *helps to maintain ecosystems in good functioning.*

Under this view, an ecosystem that functions optimally is what possesses value. Some environmental policies assume this justification.

Now, for (III) to be a coherent position of value-adscription it would seem reasonable that its advocates would aim not only to preserve diversity, but also to promote diversity whenever this was an available option that did not conflict with stronger values. Why is it better that the *already existing* diversity be preserved rather than a greater amount of diversity being artificially created? The latter would not seem to be a popular policy. However, if intervening to prevent the existence of disabilities to avoid future suffering is bad due to the loss of human diversity that it implies, why not promote research to create lab-made new types of individuals? If we are prepared to kill thousands of individuals because they would make a particular type of plant in the area, why are not laboratories full of scientists designing new types of trees or flowers?

However, there is a case in which the justification for the loss of diversity being bad seems reasonable. Option (IV) seems to deserve some credibility as a justification of the interventions that promote diversity in nature. Diversity is good for individuals as it helps to maintain systems and ecosystems in their correct functioning<sup>2</sup>. A way of talking about the perils that the disappearance of diversity implies is by referring to the systemic risk of an ecosystem or *ecosystem collapse* (MacDougall et al. 2013). This common term issued in biology refers to the fragmentation of habitats due to the lost of equilibrium among different species' vital functions. If scientists are right about their predictions, the collapse of an ecosystem would imply the future progressive suffering of sentient beings by the pauperization of the living conditions that would hold in it.

I have shown how intervention in nature must be guided by the protection of all individuals' basic interests and how the promotion of diversity most commonly frustrates the interests of the vast majority of them, such as for example the interest in having a flourishing life or staying alive. Nevertheless, biodiversity seems to be a clear case in which the promotion of diversity is valuable because it in turn promotes the wellbeing of all the sentient members of an ecosystem. If the previous biological prediction is true, the morally relevant consequences here of environmental change and loss of diversity would include, among others, the future suffering of sentient individuals. Hence, the pertinent question that we should ask is: *can future wellbeing ever justify present suffering?* If the answer is yes, the policies we have been criticizing might in some cases have a possible justification.

The conflict between the aims of ecology and the interests of non-human animals that live in the wild has been extensively highlighted (Horta 2010; Faria 2013). The problems caused to some animals by the implementation of the environmental policy of reintroducing wolves in a particular area in which they had previously disappeared (Horta 2010) is just an example. Intervening in nature to promote diversity by introducing new predators, or by killing thousands of members of a species, conflicts with the basic interests of many animals, such as the interest in staying alive, or the interest in having a flourishing life. Moreover, this violates a sort of equality that matters, namely the equal consideration for all sentient beings. Having said that, allowing harm to be inflicted on individuals is not

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<sup>2</sup> The mere maintenance of ecosystems in functioning does not seem to be valuable. The existence of ecosystems that function badly would probably allow a significant degree of harm for the individuals who inhabit it. Moreover, it is not completely clear whether the painless disappearance of ecosystems would constitute a loss of value. Believing so would imply the assumption that entities as ecosystems possess intrinsic value.



always wrong. We concede a certain amount of suffering to be justifiable in some cases, namely those in which this implies a benefit that exceeds the harmful consequences of the intervention. It might be the case that the policies of intervention in nature that promote diversity can save animals from a greater disvalue in the future, and therefore be morally compelling.

A “keystone species” is the one identified by biologists as a species whose removal is expected to result in the disappearance of at least half of the assemblage considered (Mills et al. 1993, 222). These species have a huge impact in the environment they live in. Applied to the cases of non-human animals, it would seem that some animals are more relevant for ecosystems than others. A common case that illustrates this is bees. Bees perform a crucial role as pollinators and thus their disappearance poses a real threat for the environment, as it would also imply the disappearance of many species of plants and trees whose only means of reproduction is pollination. As the number of pollinators is decreasing nowadays, some countries have decided to import them from other places. This is itself potentially problematic as it might cause a territorial conflict between old and new colonies, if the imported animals are bees, for example.

One of the main moral problems derived from the use of the concept of “keystone species” is that very often keystone species are identified with predators. The reduction in numbers of some species of predators provokes an increase in other predators, or in consumers and competitors that, subsequently, extirpate several prey or competitor species. Thus, it seems that the good functioning of an ecosystem already assumes predation – and therefore suffering – as a necessary part of itself, which, translated into moral terms, means the suffering, agony and the early death of thousands of non-human animals. Ultimately, the problem has to do with what we consider that ecosystems should be and what their correct functioning should be. Caring about the conservation of ecosystems at any cost should not be the aim of any policy of intervention in nature. Intervention should consider a new variable for making calculations, namely that of the suffering of non-human animals, to decide when a policy is worth being undertaken.

#### 4. WHEN VALUES CONFLICT: THE SUPREMACY OF INDIVIDUALS’ PRESENT WELLBEING

I have shown so far how diversity quite often has an important instrumental value and how there is not necessarily anything good about diversity as an end. I have mentioned some examples. It does not seem plausible to

affirm that the value of diversity comes from its intrinsic properties. On the contrary, there are some contexts in which a diverse distribution seems not to be desirable independently of its consequences.

This article concedes the moderate claim that diversity seems to be normatively relevant on some occasions. Diversity does provide reasons for action in some cases. Nevertheless, it is also committed to the claim that some values matter more than others. Hence, when the promotion of diversity conflicts with other values such as individual wellbeing, diversity policies should be more carefully considered. The reason invoked here is that the promotion of the diversity of animal species, plants diversity, biodiversity in general, or even diversity of intellectual capabilities, is not normally morally required because such promotions of diversity conflict with other values that provide stronger reasons to act.

Allowing and/or promoting the existence of great differences among individuals in relation to their intellectual capacities – and therefore a great diversity – would be instrumentally good. Surely, the knowledge we obtain from the mere existence of people with disabilities, their minds, bodies and behavior functioning in different ways, is valuable in different areas: medicine, science, politics, philosophy of mind, personal affection, and probably many others. This is something beneficial for our society, as it makes it more knowledgeable and rich in general terms. We could even agree with the fact that the existence of people with lower intellectual abilities makes us appreciate our higher complex intellectual functioning. Are these strong enough reasons to reject the practices that avoid people with disabilities being born?

Preventing the existence of some types of individuals might create a disvalue in the amount of knowledge that exists in the world, but it might in return benefit us with a decrease in the levels of inequality and suffering, and presumably also harm if we consider the case of predators. Furthermore, if the knowledge argument is coherent, why should not we increase the variety of capabilities and endowments in a laboratory, as the more types of distribution we have the greater the amount of knowledge a society would benefit from? However, the *price to pay* for this knowledge is too high, and permitting great differences in the natural distribution of endowments for the sake of knowledge seems perverse.

If the benefit adduced with the promotion of diversity has to do with preventing the clash of ecosystems, intervening in nature in the name of diversity seems compelling. Diversity in species of plants and non-human animals would only be a means for a greater long-term benefit that is actually related to individuals' wellbeing. The equilibrium of ecosystems is important to secure conditions of habitability in this planet, and is therefore something that needs to be preserved.

The objection against rejecting interventions in nature in the name of diversity would not affect our first case of diversity in the distribution of natural endowments, however. Following the definition of keystone species, the disappearance of *some types* of human beings – namely those who are born with severe disabilities – would not seem to pose a threat to the environment they live in, in biological terms. For that to be the case, more than fifty per cent of the diversity of the environment they live in would have to disappear (Mills et al. 1993), and that does not seem to be the case for their ceasing to come into existence. Even more importantly, individuals with disabilities are not a species as such, but a type of individual that belongs to the species of human beings. The objection to intervening in nature in the name of diversity would nevertheless affect the case of biodiversity in ecosystems. Still, an argument against present policies of natural management of nature in favor of diversity can be made.

The argument against present policies of intervention in nature that favor diversity can be made by noting that considerations about long-run future harms have to be weighed against the current harm being inflicted on millions of currently existing sentient individuals. The good functioning of an ecosystem through the promotion of biodiversity would prevent the possible future suffering of non-human and human animals by avoiding the consequences of an ecosystem collapse. *However, the prevention of future suffering by avoiding the loss of diversity is normally performed in a way that already consists of a huge amount of suffering.* Individuals that disrupt the diversity of a particular ecosystem must be exterminated, which involves millions of deaths and suffering. Moreover, ecosystem conservation assumes within its premises the function of predation as indispensable, which also results in the current suffering and deaths of millions of individuals as victims of predation.

Ultimately, more scientific research is needed in order to be able to quantify the loss and the speed at which the degeneration of an ecosystem would be produced due to the loss of diversity. Future environmental and biological research might show that the harming interventions – which translate into a huge amount of suffering for sentient individuals – that this paper has been discussing, might not be worthwhile in the end. Only the possibility of avoiding catastrophically bad consequences for sentient individuals in the future – greater than the ones already suffered by many non-human animals – could justify such policies. As it does not seem possible to guarantee this hypothesis at the moment, diversity policies such as the ones discussed in this paper should be abandoned.

## 5. CONCLUSION

I have concluded that diversity contributes to personal wellbeing. Nevertheless, diversity as a value can sometimes be overridden. The reason for this is that in some cases diversity promotes a great amount of actual current suffering over an uncertain amount of future prevention of harm.

This paper has shown that long-run benefits to individuals' wellbeing need to be weighed against current suffering already being inflicted on individuals. Still, more scientific research is needed in order to weigh such harms and benefits. More specifically, more moral and biological research needs to be done on the issue of interspecies comparisons of wellbeing to find the best way of prioritizing some policies of intervention over others.

A sentient-based approach to ecosystem functioning is also needed. A shift in the way correct ecosystem functioning is understood is crucial for this. This new approach needs to give up considering non-human animals as mere parts of the ecosystem they live in. Unlike plants, rivers or mountains, non-human animals are sentient individuals, and therefore possess moral standing.

A crucial challenge for a new sentient-based understanding of ecosystem functioning is the existence of predation. Predators are sentient individuals who are typically responsible for high levels of suffering that they inflict on other individuals, namely their prey. Optimally perfect ecosystems are always thought to contain the function of predation within the rest of functions that typically guarantee a well operating ecosystem. Some ways of avoiding predation have already been proposed. The painless extinction of predators could be one way of proceeding. Genetically reprogramming the instincts of predators so that they stop being hunters, but also their metabolisms so that they can survive with a meat-free diet, would be another possible way to proceed. Again, for this case, more research is needed in order to evaluate the feasibility of such policies.

Finally, a shift in how we generally understand intervention in nature is needed. Diversity loss may lead all sentient individuals to live in an impoverished future ecosystem. However, current problems such as parasitism, natural disasters, predation or illnesses already mean that a great number of individuals that live in the wild have to live very short and poor lives. If preventing possible future suffering gives us reasons to intervene in nature, it seems obvious that a considerable amount of current suffering would mean that we are required to intervene in favor of the victims of such events.

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