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Langscape

MAGAZINE



Voices of the Earth, Part 1

Langscape Magazine is an extension of the voice of Terralingua.
It supports our mission by educating the minds and hearts
about the importance and value of biocultural diversity.

We aim to promote a paradigm shift by illustrating biocultural diversity
through scientific and traditional knowledge, within an appealing
sensory context of articles, stories and art.

ABOUT THE COVER PHOTOS

Front: Caleta Douglas, Navarino Island, Chile.

Cristina Calderón collecting *mapi* (rushes) for traditional basketry.

Photo: Oliver Vogel, 2015

Back: North Pindos, Greece

The return of the shepherds and their flocks.

Photo: Stamos Abatis, 2015

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BIOCULTURAL Diversity

REASON, ETHICS, AND EMOTION

David Harmon



Not long ago, Luisa Maffi shared an email with me. It was from a writer, well-traveled and worldly, with a background in both anthropology and biology. He had spent considerable time in Mexico walking the countryside, thinking in the open air, trying to unlock aspects of his experience that were eluding his understanding. “I was looking,” he said, “for some link between human culture and biodiversity when I came across your work. It was something of a revelation.”* This is not the first time that one of us has heard from someone struggling with a deeply felt but inchoate sense that there is a basic interconnectedness which defines existence. Someone who was looking, looking, looking for a way to bring the bewildering variety of life on earth into clear focus. To me, Terralingua’s highest achievement in its first two decades is having developed a vocabulary—of both words and ideas—that helps people speak to themselves and others about these sorts of feelings. Terralingua offers people a framework in which they can come to their own understandings about the significance of diversity in nature and culture.



The framework is not just intellectual and emotional, but ethical. Around the world, Terralingua has inspired discussion of the intrinsic value of biocultural diversity and why we should work to ensure its continuation. People are reaffirming—or realizing for the first time—that a thriving interplay between nature and culture is essential to a good and vibrant life. The worth of this flourishing, this benevolent abundance, goes far deeper than whatever monetary or other practical value it may have.

*[*Editor’s note: That was Aran Shetterly, whose article also appears in this issue.]*

Such lofty accomplishments were not what I imagined back in 1995, when I responded to a call for papers for a Symposium on Language Loss and Public Policy to be held in Albuquerque, New Mexico. I had been interested in the parallels and intersections between the natural world and human culture for some years, and had worked up some rather rudimentary data showing that the well-known latitudinal species gradient—the pattern in which biodiversity, or species richness, increases as you move away from the poles and towards the tropics—is similar, often remarkably similar, to the distribution of linguistic diversity. My aim was simply to share these data, and some tentative ideas explaining them, with a professional meeting of linguists to see if the arguments would fly. Fortunately for me, the organizers accepted my proposal. So I went and gave a paper called “Losing Species, Losing Languages: Connections Between Linguistic and Biological Diversity.” It was, if memory serves, pretty well received by the audience—although, as I expected, there were some skeptics who didn’t like the comparison.

“...anyone can contribute to the continuing flourishing of biocultural diversity. No credentials necessary; the only prerequisite is that you must care.”

After the session was over I was sitting in the lecture hall when an audience member came up to me, practically bursting with excitement. My life was about to change, because it was Luisa Maffi. From her training in anthropology and ethnobiology she was well aware (as I was not) of the foundational work of the International Society of Ethnobiology and its declaration of an “inextricable link between cultural and biological diversity.” She had been looking for facts and figures to support the worldview embodied by that declaration, and my tables comparing species and language richness country-by-country, and cross-mappings of them, had fired her enthusiasm—which was as contagious as it was unquenchable. Before we left Albuquerque the idea for Terralingua had been born.

Now, twenty years on, and thanks in great part to Terralingua and its supporters and collaborators, the concept of biocultural diversity is solidly embedded in the world of academic research and debate. But more important than that, it is also the focus of a community of stewards, “the individuals, institutions and small communities whose role and passion is to care for, embody, perform and explain knowledge, relationship, lands, species, art forms and indeed all manner of beautiful unusual biocultural things across the generations.” These words, from another leading light of the biocultural diversity movement, the Christensen Fund, emphasize the strong strain of self-reliance that animates practitioners. Around the globe there are growing numbers of people who “actively maintain what they care for alive in the world as well as in the human imagination.”

Darrell Kipp was one of them. Kipp, who died in 2013 at the age of 69, co-founded the Piegan Institute, which is dedicated to preserving the language of his people, the indigenous Blackfoot Nation of Canada and the USA. In a guidebook widely used by other Native American language activists, Kipp hammered home that the only obstacle to setting forth was one’s own feelings of inadequacy and helplessness:

Don’t ask permission. Go ahead and get started, don’t wait even five minutes. Don’t wait for a grant. Don’t wait, even if you can’t speak the language. Even if you have only ten words. Get started. Teach those ten words to someone who knows another ten words. In the beginning, I knew thirty words, then fifty, then sixty. One day I woke up and realized I was dreaming in Blackfeet.

Kipp knew that anyone can contribute to the continuing flourishing of biocultural diversity. No credentials necessary; the only prerequisite is that you must care. A common respect for the value of diversity is what allows people from divergent viewpoints to work together, even if their viewpoints represent understandings and truth-claims about the world that are at odds with one another.

Here's a personal example. My own orientation to the world is pretty much a conventional Western scientific/rationalist stance. I interpret things through a neo-Darwinian evolutionary lens, and I take a physicalist view of what constitutes reality. That's my framework for understanding things. It certainly runs counter to the orientations of many of the friends and colleagues I've met over the years. To some, my views are nothing short of anathema because they consider them reductionist. However, because I recognize that my way of thinking is not the only valid way, or the only worthwhile way, I am able to work with and learn from people even though we may disagree, sometimes fundamentally so, over what constitutes "the facts"—not to mention their significance.

To me, a large part of the significance of biocultural diversity is that it is an elemental gauge of the *livingness* of earth—the amount of life that we *feel* to be around us. Let me try to explain what I mean, from my rationalist perspective.

When we look out upon our planet—no matter where, including the most desolate environments imaginable—we see a veritable carpet of living things, a blossoming, buzzing profusion of beings, each busily engaged in the business of *going on*. This primal struggle to continue, this *ur-impetus*, is how the eminent physicist Erwin Schrödinger defined life itself. "What is the characteristic feature of life? When is a piece of matter said to be alive?" he asked. And then, in answer: "When it goes on 'doing something,' moving, exchanging material with its environment, and so forth, and that for a much longer period than we would expect an inanimate piece of matter to 'keep going' under similar circumstances." This unceasing striving is necessary to maintain a fundamental level of physical order, which is the core condition of life itself.

If we restrict our gaze to one set of earth's beings, the ones we call human beings, we find that much of what we do is the same: laboring to stay alive. But on top of this routine work our species is distinguished by a proliferation, an almost wanton profligacy, of *creativity*. An urge to create that is the hallmark of the human life trajectory. Our creativity is registered in what my collaborator Jonathan Loh

has called the "second flowering of the tree of life"—the emergence of human cultural evolution. Other species have culture, and we need to recognize that. But ours is the only one to have created such an astonishing variety of culture, embodied in languages, beliefs, behaviors, and more.

So life, and the order its variety represents, is a ground truth of existence. But working against this biocultural generative power there is a countervailing truth: death—the ultimate disordering—comes in many varieties, too. Whether by disease or accident or senescence, it bursts forth from every nook and cranny of earthly existence, striking all alike without reference to justice or timeliness. The reason why stems from the ironclad Second Law of Thermodynamics, which states that in a closed system entropy either remains constant or—what is overwhelmingly more likely—increases over time. Entropy is not a force, like gravity. It is a measure, a measure of disorder in the overall physical universe or a portion thereof, and is stated as a quantity: the higher the entropy, the more the disorder.

"The more we come to appreciate the variety of life in nature and culture, the deeper this feeling of livingness goes."

In fact, the inexorable fate of any individual organism is to reach a point where it is no longer capable expending energy (which it must constantly extract from the surrounding environment) in order to stave off the natural tendency for entropy to increase. At that point, the organism reaches thermal equilibrium with its surroundings—which is to say, it goes stone-cold dead. Indeed, such a state of thermodynamic quiescence is how Schrödinger defined death from the standpoint of physics. Life, then, is simply the temporary preservation of order against the universe's tendency towards increasing disorder, as measured by entropy.

Similarly, human culture can be thought of as the intentional creation of order. This act of creation is not free-floating and generalized. Rather, it's the product of a specific group of people who are situated in a temporal flow of evolutionary change. Human beings need to make culture in order to fend

off cosmic disorder. The alternative, as Yeats famously lamented, is to descend into “mere anarchy” where “things fall apart; the centre cannot hold.” Still, the cultures we make are not immutable: they are handed down to our descendants who recalibrate them according to their own understanding of what constitutes the order they need. That understanding, while not unchallengeable, ought to be at its core autonomous. Every culture and language community ultimately has the right to self-determination, while at the same time being open to critique from other cultural viewpoints.

So then, biocultural diversity—the evolutionary marriage of nature’s fecundity with human creativity—is self-evidently a badge of existential success. All of the “beautiful unusual biocultural things” are rare—no, *very* rare—examples of things in the world that *are* in the world precisely because they have so far managed to stave off the ultimate disorder that is death.

My conjecture is that we, on some deep level, sense this success and register it as a feeling of joyfulness at being alive. The more we come to appreciate the variety of life in nature and culture, the deeper this feeling of *livingness* goes. I think this feeling, or something very much akin to it, is what motivates biocultural stewards.

Now, I realize that someone could be dubious about my arriving at such a conclusion through, as they might see it, a rationalistic totting-up of a cosmic ledger book where entropy is in one column and biocultural diversity is in another. I hope I will be understood as meaning that the process is nothing so simple as that. But equally I hope that defenders of biocultural diversity will always be open to the fertile interchange of perspectives that comes when Western science and other ways of understanding encounter one another.

And—literally as I sat down to finish off this essay—my inbox thudded with the receipt of a perfect example of what I mean. I was sent an interesting academic paper, exploring whether cultural relativism is impeding nature conservation (as practiced from a Western scientific perspective). It was published along with a vigorous response from a biocultural perspective, citing Luisa Maffi among others. The authors of these papers are in deep disagreement, yet they have produced a respectful, useful exchange of views.

As I was reading the biocultural response, it occurred to me that twenty years ago such a thing might not even have been possible. The fact that it now is—that the perspective of biocultural diversity is necessarily part of the discussion—is, I think, something we can credit in no small measure to Terralingua. And for that, we all ought to be grateful, no matter what our orientation to the world may be.

Further Reading

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Terralingua
UNITY IN BIOCULTURAL DIVERSITY

Terralingua n 1: the languages of the Earth, the many voices of the world's diverse peoples. **2:** the language of the Earth, the voice of Mother Nature. **3:** an international non-governmental organization (NGO) that works to sustain the **biocultural diversity of life** – a precious heritage to be cherished, protected, and nurtured for generations to come. ¶ From Italian *terra* 'earth' and *lingua* 'language'

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“The planet’s indigenous families are reaching out to us in their many native voices. What they’re saying speaks of survival, resilience, respect for the natural world, and respect for one another. It is not enough to simply listen. We should be standing beside them letting them lead us forward.”

--James D. Nations

