

# Reappraising the Concept of Biocultural Diversity: a Perspective from South Africa

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**Abstract** Biocultural diversity has been conceptualised as the sum of the world's differences regarding biological diversity at all levels and cultural diversity in all its manifestations, and their interactions. The concept is often framed in the context of conservation as a retention versus loss model by emphasising the religious and spiritual values of the natural environment and the positive interactions between traditional indigenous people and conservation of natural ecosystems and indigenous species. On the basis of our research amongst the 'non-traditional' amaXhosa in South Africa, we argue that this interpretation is too narrow and that the concept needs to be reappraised in order to capture the dynamic, complex and relational nature of biocultural diversity relations. We conclude that the concept involves a complex of human values and practices related to the three main dimensions of biodiversity at landscapes, species and genetic levels. It is not only related to the conservation of wild species in culturally venerated natural ecosystems, but also to human creativity in creating hybrid nature-culture systems, including the incorporation of biodiversity in the human domain through the creation of human-modified landscape elements and agri-biodiversity. The biocultural values and practices are subject to various dynamics in relation to socioeconomic change. Some lose their importance as a result of modernization, but others endure even in urban conditions.

**Keywords** Biodiversity conservation · Cultural and spiritual values · Cultural practices · Cultural landscapes · Agri-biodiversity · Domestication

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## Introduction

Since the 1980s, the need for biodiversity conservation has received much attention from governmental and international environmental policymakers and legislators. Ethnobotanical research has played a significant role in recognising that biodiversity "[cannot] exist without the practices and knowledge developed by the societies that create it, and maintain or 'nurture it'" (Bégin and Marchand 2006:111). In 1988, the Declaration of Belém issued by the International Congress of Ethnobiology elaborated this principle by emphasising that indigenous peoples have been or are currently stewards of 99 % of the world's genetic resources. This has been interpreted as revealing an 'inextricable link' between biodiversity and cultural diversity (Posey and Overal 1990). The concept of biocultural diversity has been proposed for denoting this intimate link and for exploring the implications of this link for both nature and culture (Maffi 2005; Perica and Martin 2008). The concept was incorporated into international conservation policy in 1992, when the Convention on Biological Diversity formally included the need to recognise the value of biodiversity for indigenous peoples and local communities. It acknowledges that the knowledge, innovations and practices of indigenous and local people regarding biodiversity should be respected, preserved and maintained and that the benefits derived from this should be equitably shared (Posey 1999; McNeely 2000). The concept of biocultural diversity has therefore become interpreted as not only recognising the relevance of local environmental use and perceptions, but also as a vital component in the conservation of biodiversity (Pretty *et al.* 2009).

## Biocultural Diversity Studies in Africa

Most of the literature addressing biocultural diversity relations has been based on case studies from Latin America and Asia