

Forum: Environmental Commission

Topic: Balancing state sovereignty with the protection of Earth's biodiversity

Chair

Introduction

Biodiversity refers to the variety of life on Earth, including different plants, animals, fungi, microorganisms, their genes, and the ecosystems they form. This is crucial because healthy ecosystems with many kinds of life are more stable and useful to people, also supporting the natural systems humans depend on. Biodiversity provides food through crops, pollinators, soil organisms, and fish. A wider mix of species also reduces the risk that one pest or disease would wipe out entire harvests. Many lifesaving medicines also come from animals, microorganisms, and plants directly, which is another aspect that highlights the importance of biodiversity. When species disappear, lifesaving medicine and cures become nearly impossible to recreate. Wetlands, forests, and rivers absorb carbon dioxide, which helps filter pollutants, keep waterways functioning properly, and store water. All human well-being falls under biodiversity as it supports food, health, water, and climate systems all at once. When biodiversity declines, all life-supporting systems become weaker, less reliable, and more expensive to replace.

Under international law, all states have the right to have the authority to exercise over their territory, population, and domestic affairs, free from external interference without infringing on the laws set by the United Nations (UN). This means that governments are responsible for deciding how their forests, oceans, minerals, and lands are used. Many countries use this to their benefit, for example, using their natural resources to create job opportunities and economic growth, such as extracting oil and trading with other countries for gold. Extracting oil creates many job opportunities for workers, and trade boosts the country's economy. However, how these resources are managed can majorly affect the Earth's biodiversity. Deforestation for farming, roads, or urban development can destroy habitats and place many plant and animal species at risk of extinction. Mining can also damage ecosystems through land destruction, water pollution, and release of harmful chemicals. Overfishing can reduce populations faster than they can recover or reproduce, threatening marine food chains and the livelihoods of coastal communities. Large construction projects can also fragment natural habitats and drive wildlife away from the areas they depend on for food, water, and shelter. Although all nations have the sovereign right to use their resources, environmental damage may spread beyond borders and affect shared ecosystems, oceans, and the global climate. Therefore, states must balance their right to develop economically with their responsibility to protect the Earth's biodiversity.

Environmental damage can affect the world because all the Earth’s systems are connected; as harm in one region can spread through climates, oceans, food supplies, and economies, it can

also threaten human health, biodiversity, and access to clean water and fertile soil. In big cases of environmental damage, the international community may intervene because the environmental damage does not stay local; it crosses borders through air, water, climate, food systems, and migration. This also helps prevent harm to human health and peace when ecosystems are damaged by pollution, conflict, or resource loss. This issue directly connects to the AMMUN XXV theme, “moderating morality”, because countries must balance two moral responsibilities. On one hand, all countries have the duty of respecting other countries’ sovereignty, decisions, and right to control their land and resources. While on the other hand, countries and global organisations also have the right and responsibility to prevent environmental harm that could harm people, ecosystems, animals, and future generations beyond borders.

Definition of Key Terms

State Sovereignty

The right of a state to govern its territory and make decisions without international interference. This includes controlling its natural resources and environmental policies, while also cooperating with international agreements when environmental issues extend beyond national borders.

Biodiversity

The variety of animals, plants, microorganisms, and ecosystems on Earth. It also includes genetic diversity and species interactions, making it essential for food security, climate stability, clean water, and healthy ecosystems.

Ecosystem

A community of living organisms interacting with each other and their physical environment. Ecosystems consist of both living (biotic) and non-living (abiotic) factors that work together to support life.

Conservation

The protection and responsible management of nature and natural resources. Conservation aims to preserve biodiversity, protect endangered species and habitats, and ensure that ecosystems remain healthy for present and future generations.

Sustainable Development

Development that meets present needs without preventing future generations from meeting their own needs. It balances economic growth, environmental protection, and social well-being by promoting the responsible use of natural resources.

Protected Area

A clearly defined location managed to conserve nature and biodiversity. Protected areas, such as national parks and marine reserves, help safeguard habitats, endangered species, and ecosystems from harmful human activities.

Transboundary Ecosystem

An ecosystem that extends across the borders of two or more countries. Since these ecosystems are shared, neighbouring states must cooperate to manage resources, conserve biodiversity, and address environmental threats effectively.

Indigenous Peoples and Local Communities (IPLCs)

Communities with historical, cultural, and economic connections to the lands and ecosystems they inhabit. Their traditional knowledge and sustainable practices often play an important role in conserving biodiversity and managing natural resources.

Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD)

An international treaty adopted in 1992 to promote the conservation of biodiversity, the sustainable use of biological resources, and the fair sharing of benefits from genetic resources. It is one of the main international agreements guiding global biodiversity protection.

International Law

The body of rules and agreements that govern relations between states and other international actors. In environmental issues, international law includes treaties and conventions that encourage countries to cooperate in protecting biodiversity while respecting state sovereignty.

Biotic and Abiotic Factors

Biotic factors are the living components of an ecosystem, such as plants, animals, fungi, and microorganisms. Abiotic factors are the non-living components, including water, soil, sunlight, air, and climate, which together influence how ecosystems function.

General Overview

According to the Intergovernmental Science Policy Platform on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services, approximately one million animal and plant species are currently at risk of extinction. A major contributor to this crisis is human activity, especially unsustainable development, weak environmental planning, and the ongoing transformation of natural ecosystems for economic use. Brazil is a strong example of this issue. As one of the most biodiverse countries in the world, it contains large areas of rainforest that support countless species and play an important role in absorbing carbon dioxide and regulating the global climate. Brazil also faces severe pressure to expand its industrial and agricultural sectors and to develop its infrastructure. All of which destroy habitats and reduce the space available for wildlife. Rising greenhouse gases are contributing to climate change, increasing the severity of natural disasters and continuously threatening ecosystems.

International efforts have attempted to respond to the environmental challenges, like the Paris Agreement, which aimed to limit global warming by reducing greenhouse gas emissions; the agreements created at the Rio Earth Summit helped shape environmental cooperation. Although many of the agreements are legally binding, they often rely on states to implement their commitments through national laws, policies, and reporting systems, while international enforcement mechanisms remain limited. As a result, some countries may fail to fully meet their obligations as they prioritise short-term economic growth over long-term environmental protection. This weak implementation has contributed to continued biodiversity loss across both land and sea. To ensure the agreements are enforced, meaning that some countries choose not to enforce the agreement as they prioritise economic growth over long-term environmental protection. As a result, biodiversity loss has increased across both land and sea. When forests, oceans, and other natural habitats are destroyed, ecosystems become less stable and produce fewer natural resources such as clean water, fertile soil, food production, and protection from natural disasters. This creates more disagreement over how land should be used, as governments must decide whether

environmentally important areas such as large forests should become protected or be used for mining, construction, or agriculture.

Subtopic 1: Nature's right to self-govern

A key role in finding a solution is respecting nature's right to self-govern, as nature should be treated not just as property to human use, but as something with its own value and limits that should be respected in law. This subtopic is important because biodiversity depends on ecosystems to regulate themselves. For example, healthy forests regenerate naturally, rivers maintain their water, and most animal populations survive through stable habitats. When humans change the environment/ intervene too much, these natural systems get ruined, in result, species lose their habitats and ecosystems become unstable. This subtopic also connects to sovereignty because it contrasts the idea that countries can use nature however they want inside their borders.

Subtopic 2: Balancing sovereignty With Fair supervision

Balancing sovereignty with fair supervision means a country keeping the legal right to manage its land, forests, water, and wildlife inside its borders, but accepting monitoring, reporting, and rules that prevent environmental harm from moving across borders and threatening global biodiversity. Full sovereignty does not work well for biodiversity because ecosystems do not stop at borders and damage in one place can spread through many different species, rivers, oceans, and climate systems. This is why international environmental law is crucial, as it treats biodiversity as a global concern instead of an issue in just one part of the world. Countries have the right to decide how to manage their resources, especially when the policies set affect jobs, meaning a successful system has to protect all nations' sovereignty while still preventing environmental harm.

Subtopic 3: Selecting And Vetting Caretakers for These Lands

Despite the importance of following specific guidelines on protecting natural reserves and lands native to many species and ecosystems. Protecting biodiverse lands needs more than just basic laws it also requires choosing the right caretakers, supervisors, or organisations to manage the areas responsibly. The caretakers must be carefully selected and evaluated to ensure that they have the correct knowledge, commitment, and interest needed to protect ecosystems without using them for political or economic gain. This becomes most important in regions with extremely high biodiversity like South America, where forests and other ecosystems contain species that are important to environmental balance.

Major Parties Involved

Brazil:

Brazil is one of the most important parties because it contains the Amazon rainforest and an estimated 15-20% of the world's biological diversity. Brazil must balance protecting its ecosystem with agriculture, mining, energy production, infrastructure and economic development. It also strongly defends its sovereign right to control the natural resources located inside its territory.

Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC):

Containing a large part of the Congo Basin rainforest and depends heavily on natural resources for development. It faces the challenge of protecting forests and wildlife while also using land and minerals to reduce poverty and support its economy.

Indonesia:

With extremely rich marine resources, Indonesia's species are heavily threatened with extinction. The country must balance biodiversity protection with its agriculture, infrastructure, and the economic use of biological resources. Indonesia strongly values its sovereignty and its right to manage its own natural resources; At the same time, it participates in international biodiversity agreements and has introduced the Indonesian biodiversity strategy and action plan for 2025-2045.

European Union (EU):

The European Union is a major party because it supports strong international biodiversity rules. Its biodiversity strategy for 2030 aims to protect nature and reverse biodiversity loss. But developing countries may argue that the European Union should provide funding and technology rather than only putting environmental conditions on other states.

Convention on Biological Diversity:

The Convention on Biological Diversity is the main international agreement connected to this topic. It protects three principles: conserving biodiversity, using it sustainably, and fairly sharing the benefits gained from genetic resources. Article 3 recognises that states have the sovereign right to use their natural resources, but it also says they should not cause environmental damage to other states or regions.

Timeline of Events

Date	Event
5–16 June 1972	United Nations Conference on the Human Environment: The Stockholm Conference made environmental protection an international concern and led to the creation of the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP). UNEP helps countries cooperate on environmental problems while respecting their authority over their own territories and resources.
23 June 1979	Convention on the Conservation of Migratory Species: This convention was created to protect animals that migrate across national borders. It shows that one country cannot protect migratory species alone, meaning states must cooperate to protect shared biodiversity.
1984	CITES Became a UNEP-Administered Agreement: The Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species helps prevent international trade from threatening wild animals and plants. Countries maintain control over trade within their borders but agree to follow shared international rules.
3–14 June 1992	United Nations Earth Summit: The Earth Summit strengthened international cooperation on environmental protection and sustainable development. It recognized that countries have the sovereign right to use their resources but also have a responsibility to prevent environmental harm beyond their borders.

8 September 2000	United Nations Millennium Declaration: The Millennium Declaration connected environmental sustainability with international development. It showed that economic development should not destroy the ecosystems and resources needed by future generations.
29 October 2010	Nagoya Protocol on Access and Benefit-Sharing: The Nagoya Protocol created rules for fairly sharing the benefits gained from genetic resources, such as plants used to develop medicines. It recognizes countries' control over biological resources while encouraging fairness and international cooperation.
12 December 2015	Paris Agreement: Although the Paris Agreement mainly focuses on climate change, it is relevant because rising temperatures, forest fires, and extreme weather threaten biodiversity. Countries create climate plans based on their own circumstances, balancing sovereignty with shared environmental responsibility.
5 June 2021	Launch of the United Nations Decade on Ecosystem Restoration: The initiative encourages countries to prevent, stop, and reverse ecosystem destruction. States remain responsible for restoration within their territories, while UNEP supports cooperation, funding, and knowledge-sharing.

Attempts to solve the issue

1979 – Convention on the Conservation of Migratory Species

The convention was created to protect animals that migrate across national borders. It shows that states must cooperate because the laws of only one country cannot protect migratory species.

1984 – CITES Became a UNEP-Administered Agreement

The Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species helps control international trade in threatened plants and animals. Countries retain authority over activities within their borders but agree to follow international rules to prevent species from becoming extinct.

1992 – United Nations Earth Summit

The Earth Summit strengthened global cooperation on sustainable development and biodiversity protection. It supported the principle that states have the sovereign right to use their natural resources, while also having a responsibility not to cause environmental damage beyond their borders.

2010 – Nagoya Protocol on Access and Benefit-Sharing

. The Nagoya Protocol created rules for fairly sharing benefits gained from genetic resources, such as plants used for medicine. It recognises states' sovereignty over their biological resources while encouraging cooperation with other countries, companies and local communities.

2021–2030 – United Nations Decade on Ecosystem Restoration.

The initiative encourages countries to prevent and reverse ecosystem destruction. Governments remain responsible for managing ecosystems within their territories, while UNEP promotes international funding, cooperation and knowledge sharing.

Possible Solutions

Subtopic 1:

First, nations can expand their protected areas to include critical ecosystems like rainforests, wetlands, and coral reefs, especially those that are home to endangered species. By clearly marking these zones as off-limits to human interference and setting strict penalties, such as heavy fines for trespassing, governments can allow damaged habitats to recover naturally. This will help rebuild biodiversity and lower the risk of species extinction.

Second, governments can create zoning systems in highly sensitive regions like the Amazon Rainforest. By placing the most vulnerable areas under strict protection while allowing the surrounding areas to be used for sustainable agriculture, eco-friendly tourism, or controlled development, states can protect biodiversity without completely giving up the economic use of their natural resources.

Finally, global and national oversight can be improved. Countries should be encouraged to carry out thorough environmental impact assessments before approving large development projects to ensure no permanent damage is done. To incentivise these actions, the United Nations could also create a special prize or recognition program to reward countries that successfully reach these conservation goals.

Subtopic 2:

To address the issue of balancing sovereignty with fair supervision, possible solutions should be explored. First, states should remain in control over the natural resources within their territories, but they should also agree to increase transparency on biodiversity loss, deforestation, and endangered species. This could be done through reporting systems under international environmental agreements, allowing the UN to monitor progress while respecting the sovereignty of the state by respecting boundaries in its internal governance. Additionally, international supervision should focus more on cooperation than punishment by providing countries with scientific support, environmental technology, and financial assistance to help them meet biodiversity goals. This would make supervision fairer, especially for the developing countries that may lack the resources they need to properly protect their ecosystems. Lastly, countries sharing rainforests, rivers, oceans, or animals that travel between different areas seasonally could create a conversation that ends in agreements to manage these ecosystems together while still respecting

each state's sovereignty.

Subtopic 3:

To make sure that the people in charge of protecting biodiverse lands do their jobs honestly and effectively, governments need to set up a clear and fair system for choosing and monitoring caretakers. First, responsibility over these sensitive areas should only be given to qualified experts like environmental scientists, conservation groups, and trained local authorities through an open and public selection process that prevents political corruption or corporate greed. Next, it is crucial to include indigenous peoples and local communities as partners in managing these ecosystems, because they hold valuable traditional knowledge of the land and are much more likely to support conservation efforts when they are treated as respected collaborators rather than outsiders. Finally, all selected caretakers must be held accountable through regular, independent check-ins and public environmental reports to guarantee they are not abusing their power or using the land for economic gain. By combining expert selection, local partnership, and strict oversight, countries can create a reliable system that protects the Earth's most valuable ecosystems responsibly.

Guiding Questions

1. To what extent should states control the natural resources inside their borders?

2. When does biodiversity destruction become an international concern?

3. How can biodiversity be protected without limiting economic development?

4. Should countries receive financial compensation for protecting ecosystems?

5. What responsibilities do developed countries have toward developing countries?

6. Should international organisations be allowed to monitor national conservation policies?

7. How can indigenous peoples participate in biodiversity decisions?

8. Should companies be held legally responsible for biodiversity destruction?

9. How should countries protect ecosystems that cross national borders?

10. Can international sanctions be justified when a state seriously damages biodiversity?

Appendix

- https://environment.ec.europa.eu/strategy/biodiversity-strategy-2030_en?
- https://www.britannica.com/science/biodiversity
- https://www.cbd.int/doc/legal/cbd-en.pdf
- https://www.unep.org/environmental-moments-unep50-timeline?

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