



Faculty of Design

2022

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Suggested citation:

Singh, Ankita, Balachandran, Ajinkya, Khanna, Geetanjali, Kauntey, Harsh, Chandrikapure, Himanshu, Sipani, Preksha and Dave, Rucha (2022) The Silent Crisis: Unravelling the complexities of biodiversity loss. In: Proceedings of Relating Systems Thinking and Design, RSD11, 3-16 Oct 2022, Brighton, United Kingdom. Available at <https://openresearch.ocadu.ca/id/eprint/4331/>

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**Relating Systems Thinking and Design
(RSD12) Symposium | October 6–20, 2023**

The Silent Crisis: Navigating the complexities of biodiversity loss in the Anthropocene

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In the intricate dance of life on Earth, human activities have emerged as a formidable force, reshaping landscapes, economies, and ecosystems.

The Silent Crisis gigamap delves into the paradoxical interplay between human endeavours and the subtle yet profound crisis of biodiversity loss that has been set in motion. While our pursuits have ushered in remarkable progress and technological advancements, they have also triggered a silent and pervasive crisis, the consequences of which may only become apparent when biodiversity loss reaches a critical crescendo. At this pivotal juncture, humanity stands at a precipice, facing the sobering reality that urgent action and unwavering dedication to biodiversity conservation are no longer lofty ideals but imperatives for the survival of our species and the preservation of the intricate web of life that blankets our planet.

This brief is an accompaniment to the gigamap and serves to explore the multifaceted dimensions of human-induced biodiversity loss, investigating its causes, manifestations, and potentially far-reaching consequences. The project adopted an interdisciplinary approach, drawing on ecological, economic, political, sociocultural, and emotional perspectives to provide a holistic understanding of the crisis of biodiversity loss. By synthesising existing research and presenting novel insights, it aims to inform policymakers, researchers, and various stakeholders by drawing a parallel between the cost of neglecting and the cost of conserving biodiversity. The urgency of the matter is emphasised, highlighting

the need for a paradigm shift in societal values and policies to foster sustainable coexistence with the natural world.

Our research underscores the necessity of immediate and concerted efforts to address the silent crisis of biodiversity loss, urging humanity to transcend its current trajectory and embrace a harmonious coexistence with the intricate tapestry of life that envelops our world, focusing on the lack of conversation around the subject weighing out the costs of neglecting vs conserving biodiversity. The gigamap presented here serves as a metaphorical narrative, illustrating the vastness and complexity of the system being studied to facilitate a deeper understanding and aid in the development of strategies and solutions.

KEYWORDS: biodiversity loss, sustainable coexistence, societal values, policies, ecosystems, conservation

RSD TOPICS: Socioecological Design, Culture & Society

Project context

The global environment demands immediate and resolute action. In this precarious moment, the imperative for urgent measures and unwavering dedication to biodiversity conservation transcends the realm of noble aspirations; it becomes an absolute necessity for the survival of our own existence. The urgency is underscored by the realisation that our planet's intricate web of life is unravelling, imperceptibly slipping into a silent crisis of biodiversity loss. This research project is an earnest exercise in systems thinking, driven by the glaring absence of comprehensive conversations surrounding the intricate dynamics of biodiversity loss. The magnitude of the crisis lies not just in the loss of individual species but in the disruption of interconnected ecological systems that sustain life on Earth. It is an interconnectedness often overlooked in the fervour of progress and development.

We posit that the consequences of this silent crisis risk remaining neglected or discreet until they reach a crescendo, at which point the repercussions for our environment, economies, and societies could be irreversible. The urgency of our investigation is accentuated by the alarming dearth of discourse on the subject, and we embarked on

this research endeavour with the objective of unravelling the complexities inherent in biodiversity loss through systemic design mapping, resulting in The Silent Crisis gigamap (Figure 1).

Literature Review

In the contemporary context, biodiversity loss emerges as an urgent and intricate challenge, demanding a thorough examination of recent research findings. This literature review aims to synthesise the current study, identify gaps, and navigate the intricate tapestry of biodiversity decline in the face of evolving environmental dynamics. By combining theoretical frameworks and real-world examples, we aim to develop strategies for harmonious coexistence between humans and environmental preservation.

The urgency of biodiversity loss: The "Global Assessment Report on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services" (IPBES, 2019) stands as a pivotal recent work, emphasising the pressing nature of biodiversity loss. This comprehensive report, supported by the most recent data, asserts that the accelerated decline in biodiversity poses a significant threat to global ecosystems, human well-being, and sustainable development.

Drivers of contemporary biodiversity loss: Building upon foundational works, Dirzo et al. (2014) in "Defaunation in the Anthropocene" provide recent insights into the drivers of biodiversity loss. Their research underscores the role of habitat transformation, climate change, and overexploitation as contemporary factors exacerbating species decline, emphasising the need for targeted conservation strategies.

Economic implications and valuation of ecosystem services: Recent research by Díaz et al. (2018) in "The IPBES Conceptual Framework — connecting nature and people" explores the economic implications of biodiversity loss. Their work extends beyond traditional economic valuations, emphasising the importance of integrating diverse knowledge systems to understand the full spectrum of ecosystem services and the economic consequences of their decline.

Sociocultural dynamics in biodiversity conservation: Taking a contemporary sociocultural perspective, Folke et al. (2016) in "Social-ecological systems and adaptive

governance of the commons" delve into the interactions between societies and ecosystems. Their research highlights the role of adaptive governance and community-based conservation in addressing the social dimensions of biodiversity loss, offering insights into effective strategies in the face of rapid environmental change.

Systems thinking for contemporary conservation strategies: Recent advancements in systems thinking are explored by Biggs et al. (2015) in "Toward principles for enhancing the resilience of ecosystem services." They advocate for an integrative approach that considers the dynamic and interconnected nature of ecosystems, emphasising the importance of resilience thinking in crafting effective strategies for contemporary biodiversity conservation.

Methodology

Research design: The undertaken research employed a mixed-methods approach to comprehensively explore the intricate dynamics associated with biodiversity decline. This strategy integrated qualitative and quantitative methods, ensuring a nuanced understanding of the multifaceted issues surrounding the topic.

Literature review: A rigorous literature review formed the foundation of the research, synthesising insights from recent scholarly articles, reports, and publications. This phase aimed to identify existing gaps, theoretical frameworks, and methodologies applied in similar studies, providing essential guidance for the subsequent research process.

Quantitative analysis: In the realm of quantitative analysis, existing global biodiversity databases and repositories were utilised for data collection. Quantitative data on species populations, habitat loss, and climatic variables were gathered. Additionally, satellite imagery and remote sensing data were employed to assess land-use changes and their impact on biodiversity. Statistical analyses, including regression models and spatial analyses, were conducted to quantify relationships between human activities, environmental variables, and biodiversity loss. Statistical tests were applied to identify significant trends, patterns, and correlations in the collected data.

Qualitative analysis: Qualitative insights were gathered through semi-structured interviews with biodiversity experts, conservationists, and policymakers. This approach aimed to delve into the social, economic, and policy dimensions of biodiversity loss.

Expert opinions on the effectiveness of current conservation strategies and potential barriers to implementation were explored. The research also included the development of in-depth case studies focusing on regions or ecosystems experiencing significant biodiversity loss. Qualitative data were analysed through thematic coding to extract patterns, challenges, and success stories related to biodiversity conservation efforts.

Systems thinking framework: A conceptual framework based on systems thinking principles was developed to analyse the interconnected components of biodiversity loss. This involved the identification of feedback loops, leverage points, and system dynamics influencing the trajectory of biodiversity decline. Stakeholder engagement played a crucial role, involving interactions with diverse stakeholders such as local communities, NGOs, and governmental agencies to incorporate their perspectives in understanding the complex socio-ecological systems.

Integration and synthesis: To construct a holistic understanding of biodiversity loss, findings from quantitative analyses, qualitative insights, and the systems thinking framework were integrated. This cross-methods integration aimed to identify converging and diverging patterns across different methodologies, thereby enhancing the overall robustness of the study. The synthesis process facilitated a comprehensive examination of the complex factors contributing to biodiversity decline and provided a foundation for informed recommendations and interventions.

Understanding from the Research

Environmental impact and conservation: Local food choices were identified as positive contributors to environmental well-being. Unfortunately, indigenous communities were often compelled to exploit natural resources due to external pressures. Moreover, the shifting dynamics of forest conservation policies were placing an increased burden on ecosystems. In addressing these challenges, interdepartmental coordination and heightened ecosystem awareness emerged as crucial components for effective conservation efforts.

Disruption and challenges in fishing communities: Within fishing communities, the reduction in fish density, coupled with drastic measures taken by fishermen, had detrimental effects on biodiversity. The absence of predator species was leading to

cascading impacts on the overall ecosystem. Additionally, toxic fishing practices were giving rise to significant healthcare issues within these communities.

Socio-economic challenges and marginalisation: Adivasis were facing not only economic challenges but also displacement issues, highlighting the socio-economic struggles within these communities. Furthermore, developmental practices were identified as contributors to the adverse effects on local livelihoods and financial security. The marginalisation of local populations, particularly in tourist areas, remained a prevalent and pressing issue.

Quality of life and sustainable practices: The subjectivity inherent in quality of life metrics called for a nuanced evaluation process. Similarly, a comprehensive assessment of sustainable practices was essential, considering not only their immediate benefits but also their true costs and broader impacts.

Policy development and decision-making: Effective policy development demanded a decentralised approach to ensure meaningful outcomes. Recognising the importance of incorporating social, cultural, and economic values into macro-level policies was crucial. Additionally, understanding the potential unforeseen outcomes of conservation policies and acknowledging the interconnectedness of developmental practices further refined decision-making processes.

Traditional wisdom and cultural preservation: Preserving traditional wisdom faced numerous challenges, including changing societal dynamics and external influences. The loss of awareness and a diminishing interest in safeguarding traditional knowledge added complexity to the task of cultural preservation.

Land and cultural identity: The attachment of tribal communities to their land emerged as a fundamental aspect of cultural identity. Displacement not only affected the community directly but also had far-reaching consequences on the land, livelihoods, security, and overall identity of the affected population.

Agriculture and food security: The commercialisation of agriculture has led to a notable loss of the human touch in farming practices. Simultaneously, recognizing food security as a global issue highlighted its impact on international relations and the need for coordinated efforts.

Biodiversity and conservation: Conservation policies, while aiming to protect biodiversity, were inadvertently leading to disruptions in livelihoods, migration, and displacement. Acknowledging the importance of protecting ecology for sustainable livelihoods was imperative. Additionally, the observed decline in awareness about Indian biodiversity raised concerns about its long-term conservation.

Freshwater biodiversity: Drastic changes in freshwater biodiversity signalled an urgent need for attention. Infrastructure developments, while serving various purposes, were disrupting ecological cycles and toxifying habitats, contributing to the ongoing challenges faced by freshwater biodiversity.

System Analysis

The system map of biodiversity loss at the centre of the gigamap (see factors, Figure 2) illuminates the intricate web of interconnected factors initiating ecological balance and the disruption of ecosystems due to anthropogenic activities. As human impact accelerates, biodiversity loss intensifies, leading to a cascade effect on ecosystem services. The degradation of these services, in turn, exacerbates socio-economic vulnerabilities, disproportionately impacting marginalised communities. The ensuing environmental decline perpetuates a cycle of diminished opportunities, reinforcing the disparities in access to resources and conservation efforts. Neglecting biodiversity has wide-ranging economic, social, and environmental repercussions, while conserving it offers long-term benefits. These benefits, such as ecosystem services, economic opportunities, and well-being, often surpass the costs of conservation. Prioritising proactive biodiversity conservation is crucial for a sustainable future.

Leverage Points

The path ahead identifies the actionable gaps to fill for positive change in biodiversity conservation. Identifying places within a complex system where a small intervention can lead to significant and lasting change and strategically targeting leverage points can be a powerful way to bring about meaningful and sustainable change in a system.

- Macro-level policies contribute to displacement, resulting in the loss of identity, livelihoods, and connection to the land.

- Agricultural commercialization intensifies pesticide and fertiliser use, impacting human health and biodiversity.
- Communication gaps among policymakers lead to inadequate policies, contributing to biodiversity degradation.
- The disconnect between consumers and producers fosters unsustainable production and consumption practices.
- Lack of awareness about consumption choices and opaque supply chains worsen the ecological impact.
- Rehabilitation processes lack accountability, hindering efforts to address losses experienced by affected communities.
- Indigenous adaptation to urban settings leads to cultural erosion and a diminished quality of life.
- Insufficient financial planning in rural areas contributes to economic vulnerability, leading to debt traps.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the silent crisis is understanding the costs of negligence, development & conservation of biodiversity on social, economic, political & emotional dimensions.

Cost of Negligence: What is the cost we pay on individual and community levels for our actions and neglecting its impact on biodiversity loss, taking into account the various social, cultural, ecological, emotional, and economic associated values?

Cost of Conservation: How can we assess the effort and cost required to make effective policy decisions, translate them into on-ground actions, and measure their impact?

Cost of Conservation Policies: How can we understand and evaluate the opportunity costs, potential failures, and benefits associated with conservation measures?

The systemic analysis has illuminated the multifaceted relationships among ecological components, human activities, and the socio-economic structures that influence the delicate balance of our planet's biodiversity.

Systems thinking allowed us to transcend reductionist perspectives and appreciate the nuanced interdependencies that drive the complex phenomenon of biodiversity loss. By acknowledging the intricate feedback loops, leverage points, and non-linear interactions within ecosystems, we gained insights into the root causes and consequences of declining biodiversity.

The research highlighted the urgency of addressing the visible symptoms and the systemic drivers that perpetuate the silent crisis of biodiversity loss. We identified strategic interventions that spanned from challenging ingrained paradigms to regulating material flows and empowering stakeholders with information. These leverage points provide a roadmap for transformative change, emphasising the need for a holistic approach that integrates ecological, economic, and socio-cultural considerations.

This research underscores the imperative for immediate and concerted efforts as we stand at this critical juncture in biodiversity conservation. The complexities unveiled by our systems thinking approach call for a paradigm shift in societal values and policies. Sustainable coexistence with the natural world necessitates a change in individual behaviours but also systemic reforms that address the structural inequalities, exploitation, and unsustainable practices driving biodiversity loss.

From policymakers to local communities, conservationists to industries, a collective commitment is indispensable for navigating the challenges ahead. By collaborative efforts, we can cultivate a more resilient, equitable, and sustainable future that preserves life for generations to come.

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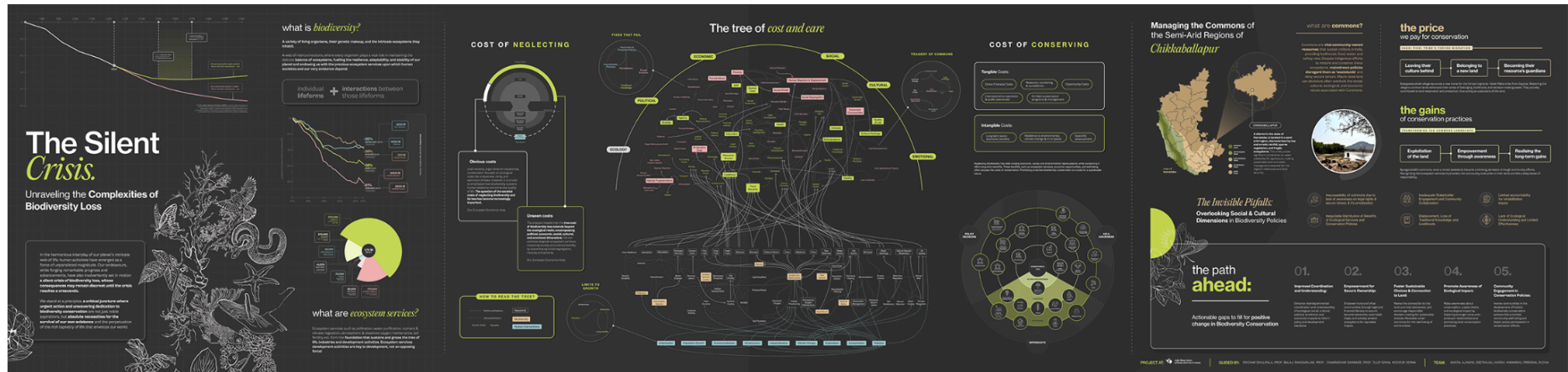


Figure 1: The Silent Crisis gigamap.

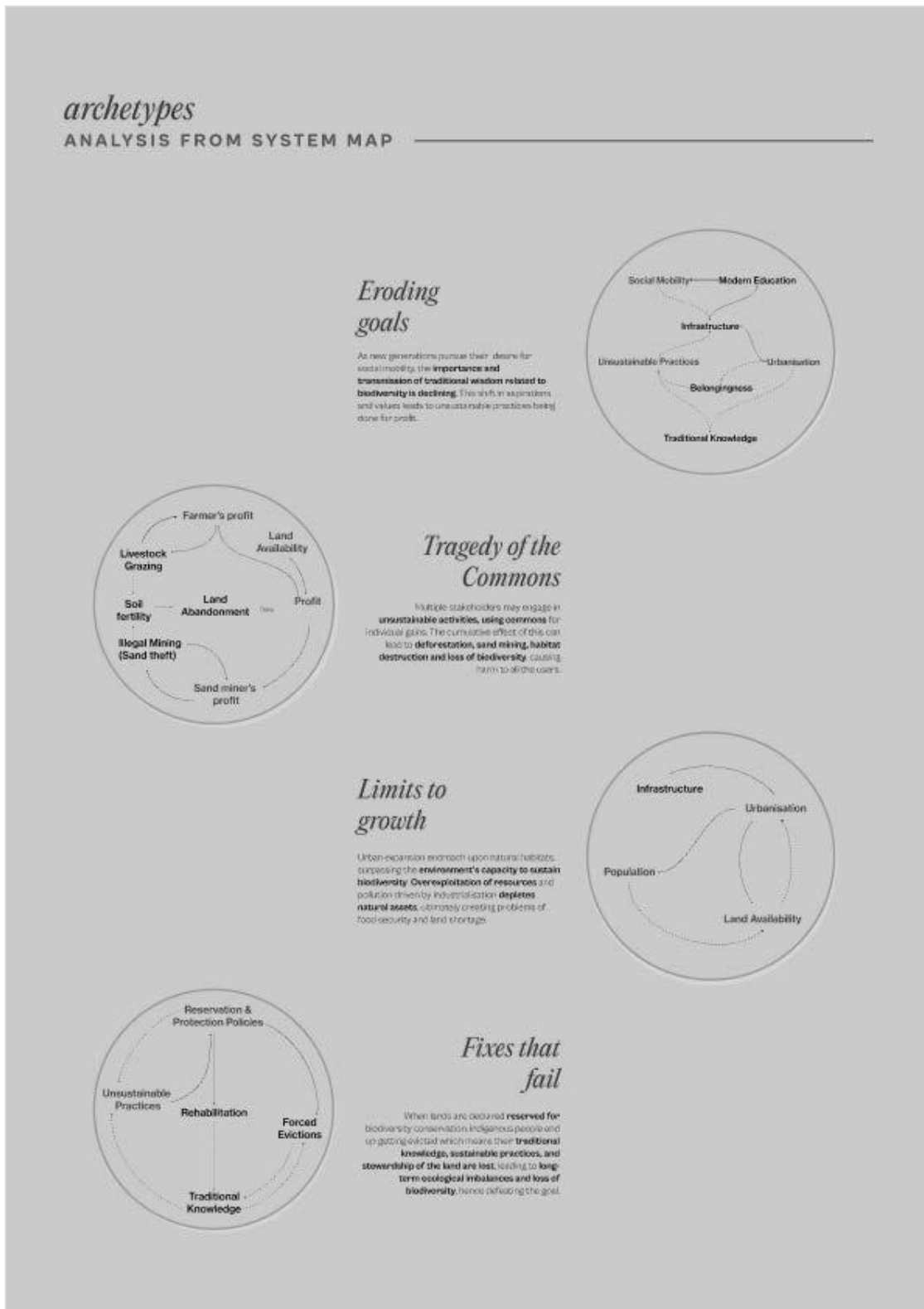


Figure 2: Factors contributing to the system map of biodiversity loss at the centre of the gigamap.