

How media mismanage reporting on biodiversity



By [lssa Sikiti da Silva](#)

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Journalists worldwide stand accused of creating hype by focusing too much on attention-seeking issues, and in the process marginalising “less glamorous” topics such as biodiversity, that are critical to secure livelihoods - a vital foundation in which humanity is built.

“Apart from a handful of journalists, the media rarely tells the story of biodiversity loss in depth,” Mike Shanahan, spokesperson for the UK-based International Institute for Environment and Development (IIED), said earlier this week.

“Journalists could do much to improve their coverage, to hold politicians to account on the promises they have made, and to empower people to make better-informed choices about their lives,” he added.

Where a fair amount of reporting has been done, the account has been mostly flat and one-sided, he pointed out.

The untold side of the story needs to be told

He said: “Stories often describe a promise such as researchers ‘bioprospecting’ for potential drugs from rainforest plants, or a threat such as ‘biopiracy’, when researchers misappropriate biological resources and, or traditional knowledge for commercial gain.

“But only rarely do the media present a balanced appraisal of two competing claims. In both of the dominant narratives, the negative and the positive, there is often another, untold side to the story.”

South Africa is one of the most biodiversity-rich countries in the world, according to Endangered Wildlife Trust (EWT), which laments that SA's biodiversity is under great pressure, says loss of natural habitat is one of the major causes of the country's biodiversity loss.

Yet, some observers believe very little reporting has been done in this regard to highlight the problem.

Subjects rarely covered in depth

Others argue that biodiversity reporting in SA is concise and outward and often lacks human nature - a trend blamed on lack of interest and inadequate skills and resources to undertake a deep investigative report.

Shanahan said: “Reports of biodiversity loss rarely ask hard questions about how much we can afford to lose. They tend

not to mention that some biodiversity loss may be essential to sustain and improve human livelihoods.

“Journalists rarely cover these talks in depth, but this is perhaps unsurprising. The positive stories rarely analyse whether conservation initiatives or apparently biodiversity-friendly products are fair or truly sustainable, and who stands to gain from them.

“A story of how humanity depends on nature but is driving its destruction needs to be told in a more sophisticated way.

“While warnings about the current extinction crisis do hit the headlines, they tend to melt away from the media agenda. What is often missing is the human angle, and this serves to distance the problem from people's minds.

“There are plenty of opportunities to tell stories with strong human angles that demonstrate directly the benefits the natural world brings to local people's lives. These stories also need to tell people what is at stake if the destruction of nature goes unchecked.”

Biodiversity is much more than just wildlife and wild places...

He also said that reporting mostly on climate change and the plight of rare charismatic species such as tigers, or on threats to tropical forests and coral reefs is not enough.

“Looking at the media now, it would be easy to assume that climate change is the sole global environmental challenge.

“Biodiversity means more than just wildlife or wild places. It encompasses the full variety of genes, species and ecosystems on the planet.

“It includes the crops we eat and the insects that pollinate them, the plants we use for both traditional medicines and improve human livelihoods.

“Nor do they (journalists) point out that many landscapes are rich in species or habitats precisely because humans have modified the environment.

“The media also tends not to air voices and views of those most dependent on nature, such as indigenous people and rural communities in developing countries.

Experts need to communicate better

“These people are often custodians of biodiversity and have a wealth of relevant traditional knowledge, but they have little say in deciding what is important to save, and how to conserve and make best use of it.

If putting the blame solely on journalists seemed unfair, Shanahan also slammed experts for contributing ‘in one way or another’ to the mismanagement of biodiversity reporting.

He said: “Experts, who journalists rely on for information, have often failed to communicate these issues in a meaningful way.

“They will need to do more to describe the importance of nature to human wellbeing and explain the real costs of its loss.

To conclude, he advised the media to avoid jargon - including the word ‘biodiversity’, which he said is often and poorly understood and not easy to describe.

Issa Sikiti da Silva is a winner of the 2010 SADC Media Awards (print category). He freelances for various media outlets, local and foreign, and has travelled extensively across Africa. His work has been published both in French and English. He used to contribute to Bizcommunity.com as a senior news writer.

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