

The Challenge of Biodiversity Conservation in an Urbanizing Europe

Jan Verheeke, 8th September 2010

Dear Minister,
Dear Commissioner,
Distinguished guests,
Ladies and Gentlemen,

The title of this talk – *"the challenge of biodiversity conservation in an urbanizing Europe"* – is in itself a challenging title, and therefore I will begin by referring to an old legend.



As you all know very well, the legend of the city of Troy is one of the **founding stories** of Europe – and I thought this could be **meaningful** for our conference and for the theme of an urbanizing Europe.

Historically, I admit, Troy seems to have been only a town of about two hectares ... and moreover, it was in fact a place in Asia ... but still it

seems meaningful to me that **Europe's identity** originated in part from the story of the rise and fall of a city.

Troy was a city bordering to the sea and controlling the trade vessels passing by. What scholars have also derived from excavations and scriptures, is that Troy was a **at the crossroads** between the Hittite and the Greek world. It was **a place of trade** (and taxing of trade) and formed in that way a source of wealth and of conflict.

Consequently, it was destroyed and reconstructed several times.

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Now, when one takes a world-map and one tries to plot the **cities that have a high concentration** of advanced producer services ... and **connectivity** with similar services in other cities – as the think tank “Globalization and World Cities” (GaWC) has done – one gets an overview of the cities that have a high grade of integration into the world city network.



What you see here is **a first map** of this exercise. GaWC distinguishes between alpha, beta and gamma level cities, and here the alpha-cities are plotted **for the year 2000**.

I want to point to two things now, that bear some reminiscence to Troy. One is that most of these cities have originated along or **nearby the coast**. They form the destination point of important trade and shipping routes.

The second is that many of these cities are situated **within Europe**.

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The next map shows **a similar exercise for the year 2004**.



You will have perceived that changes have taken place. Some dots (rather in the West) have disappeared, and others (rather in the East) have appeared or have fattened. In these places, city boundaries have moved, people have immigrated and population densities are increasing. All this shows us – and this fits very well with the general title of this

conference – that we are dealing with a certain, **uncontestable, change in the world.**

I think the most plausible and interesting model for explaining this change is to be found is **World Systems Theory** – or variants thereof.

In a simplified way, a world system can be seen as a structured cloud of spatially unevenly distributed interactions. There are concentrations of monopolized – and therefore high-profit – production-activities in a number of **core-zones or -cities**. These concentrations are complemented by the movement of less profitable activities and/or of extraction activities to **semi-peripheral and peripheral zones**.

The elements of the system – the activities and interactions – reproduce themselves, or better: they are reproduced within the system.

Globalization is then the process by which more and more interactions, in more and more zones, are **incorporated** in this system.

It is a process where the **core-zones change place** according to where competitive advantages and monopolies can be found.

Instability is then a function of this dynamics.

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Another interesting parallel with the city of Troy is that we can discern a time-line of constant rise and fall, destruction and reconstruction ... Here, on the map for 2008, you see this very **dynamics** further at work.



The dots that represent world class cities have moved more Eastward. As **Europe** still forms clearly a concentration of these type of cities, its place in the global ranking seems **a bit weakened**. And in the shadow, not on this map, is the complementary fact that more and more cheap labour and materials are incorporated from outside into the system.

Of course, we cannot have anything else than **ambivalent feelings** towards this constellation. We are, as Europeans, part of the core-states and -cities, and are involved ourselves into this competitive dynamics. This engagement is part of our strategic policies, as expressed in **Europe 2020** – be it in an enlightened way.

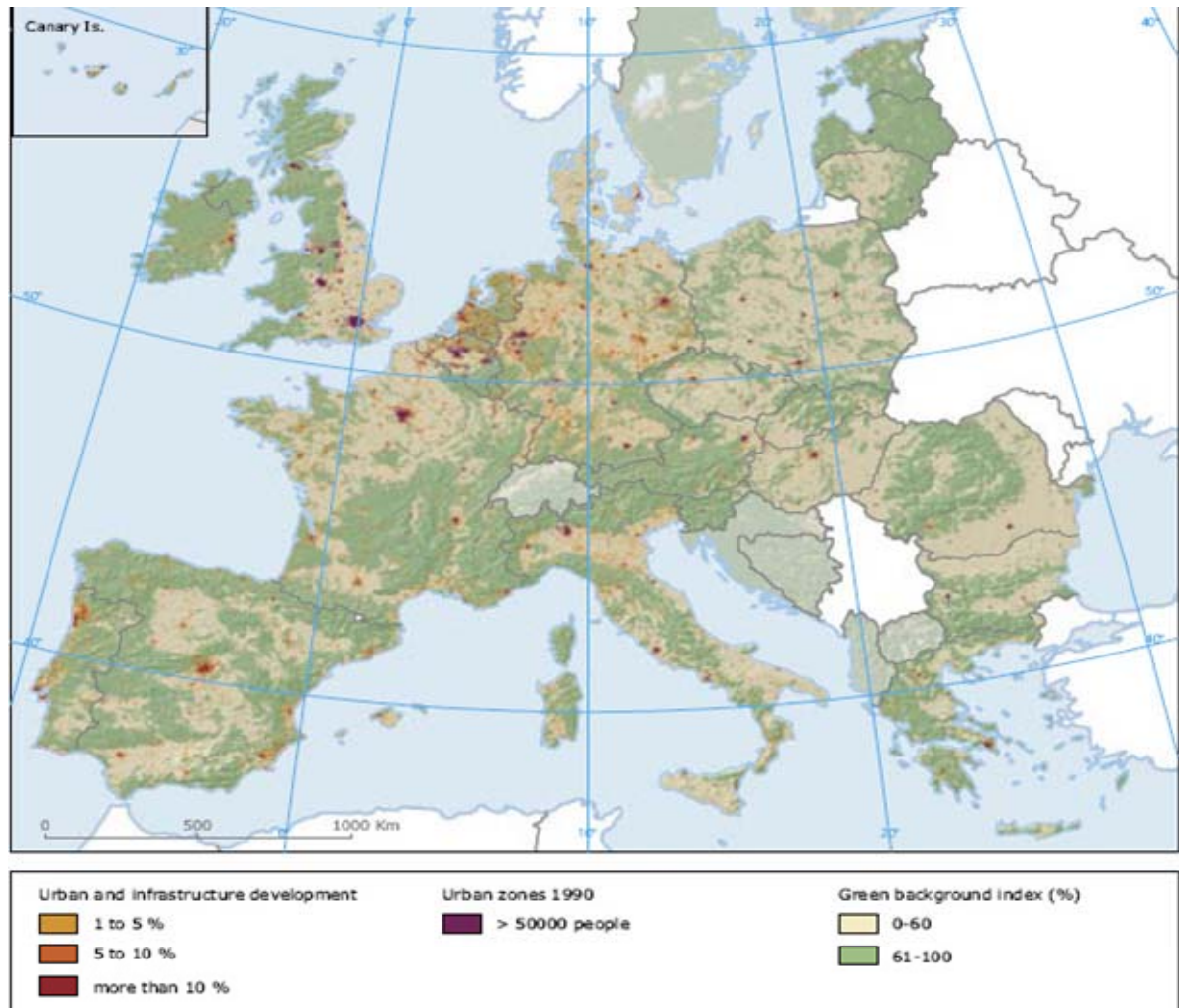
I think this systems dynamics is not only unmistakably there, but is **unavoidable** as well. We have to deal with the fact that we operate within this system, and try and steer it into a better direction.

That is why the theme this Conference is so relevant. It is not only about **biodiversity**, but also about **the changing world**. It's subthemes – biodiversity in urbanized regions, valuation of ecosystem services and setting targets for the long run – are themes that fit in with the

operations of the world system: **its nodes, its codes and its conduct.**

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Now, when we zoom in into the urbanized and urbanizing Europe, we see that **the core-periphery structure is replicated** within the continent and then within the different member states.



In the first place, we can note that in Europe, **more than three-quarters** of the population is **living in urban areas**. Not only are people immigrating into cities, there is also an opposing trend to “counter-urbanization” or outward emigration, leading to **urban sprawl**. As a result, in some areas – such as Flanders – one cannot find much rural area anymore.

Between the cities, there are **winner cities** – that can make an effective connection with the world economy, mostly by being part of a successful city region –, and **loser cities** – which are falling behind in the competition. In some of these cities, we can see a definite demographic decline.

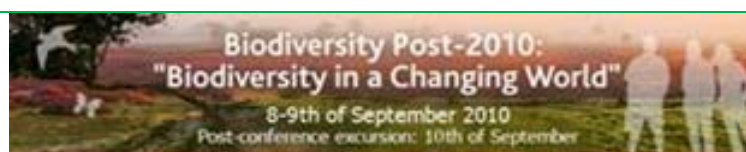
Outside city regions, there are **rural areas**. They are in connection with the urban regions, and are very much influenced by them. The profitability of agriculture is related not only to climatic and soil conditions, but also to the chances that are offered by nearby cities and networks as well. Where agriculture is less profitable, there is a trend towards **land abandonment**.

And also **within cities**, the structure of core and periphery is replicated. There are what could be called "**citadels**", or zones where business and government are concentrated and which are, by design, often insulated from the rest of the city. There are centrally located **industrial sites** and there are the **waterfronts** – which are still in use for trade and productive activities, or which can be re-used for service-oriented activities. There are the **gentrified neighborhoods**, or the residential locations in which the managers, professionals and technicians are living. And there are the **poorer parts** of the cities, in which often the people are situated that have not much chance left on the labor market.

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Now we come to the second part of my talk, the conservation part. This will be very short.

As I took Troy as a symbol for urbanization, I now take the princess Helena as a **symbol for the biodiversity**.





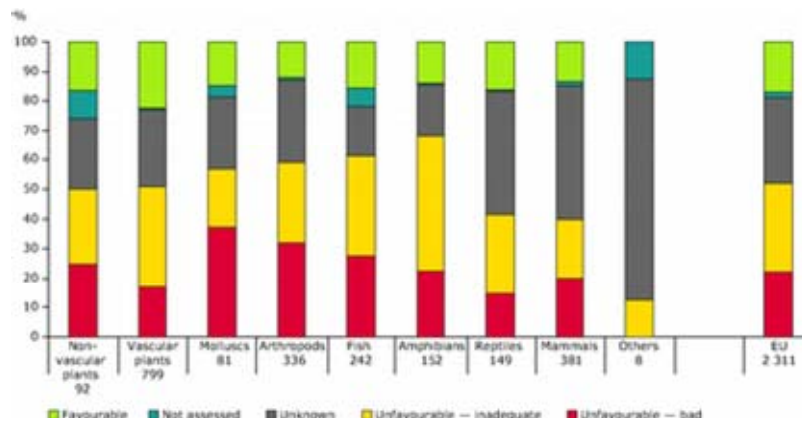
As the legend goes, she was beautiful, and she was elusive.

It is this biodiversity that has been captured by the urbanity we spoke of, and we have some feeling that this is not right and – in a heroic mood – we feel that something should be done about it.

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Well, other speakers will dwell more on that, the state of biodiversity within urbanized Europe is not so well. **The reports are clear.**

Around **half of the species of Community interest** have an unfavourable conservation status.



Up to **25% of European animal species**, including mammals, amphibians, reptiles, birds and butterflies face the risk of extinction.

Some types of **biodiversity-rich areas** – such as grasslands and wetlands – are still declining, and the capacity of our environment to deliver ecosystem services is diminishing.

For many species, recovery to a favourable conservation status **will take considerable time**.

Many **ecosystems** are losing their capacity to deliver the services we are used to harvest from them.

For me, there seems to be a **relation between these trends and the systemic urbanization** of Europe I described. Be it urban areas or rural areas: if left alone, the industrial, residential, infrastructure or land use processes that are linked with modern society are bound to create all kinds of pressures for biodiversity.

Now the European Union and its Member-States have a **considerable record of initiatives and regulations** in order to protect the biodiversity that should be protected. There is the Birds Directive of '79, the Habitats Directive of '92, and in 2001, the Union set itself the target to halt biodiversity loss in the EU by 2010. Efforts to tackle biodiversity loss were subsequently stepped up, and an EU Biodiversity Action Plan was

adopted by the Commission in 2006. Despite all the efforts, there are clear indications that the EU has **not achieved its target**.

And this brings me to the third part.

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The second part was about **something beautiful**, which is not in a good state, and which we wanted to recapture. It was Helena in the legend, but biodiversity in our present reality.

But we didn't succeed until now. With our designated sites, our nature reserves and our special protection areas, we have protected some fragments of nature, indeed. But we really remained more or less **outside the system of the urbanizing Europe**, by which I mean: we did not recapture the bulk of the nature that was therein entrapped.

So, the challenge is **to enter the system** of the urbanized world, or to effectively integrate biodiversity concerns in this system.



But this integrationist stand is altogether **much more difficult**. It is not

readily amenable to simple administrative processes. It requires serious planning, it requires investment in processes that at the surface of it seem useless, it requires lateral thinking and the crossing of borders. In short, it requires **a change in culture – in our culture as well.**

And that is why, really, biodiversity conservation in an urbanized Europe is a challenge.

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In the first place, “integration” itself remains **a relevant theme at all levels.** Given the character of the EU polity – which is “multi-level” – integrated policy making seems to be desirable but very difficult.



At the **European level**, integration of biodiversity concerns has been the topic of budgetary discussion and of assessment procedures – and with mixed success. In relation to biodiversity, I think that the theme of Sustainable Land Use should be more prominent. It should be part of a next Sustainability Strategy.

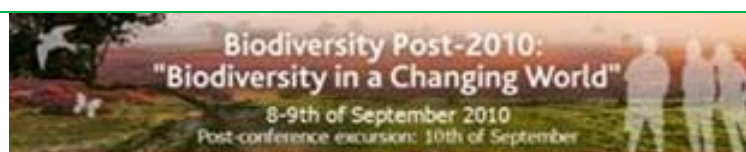
The **national** (or, in cases, the regional) level is also very important for integration. What is needed, really, are nationally based strategies for sustainable rural and urban development, set in a broader framework of reforms of European agricultural, fisheries, regional and social policies. The Member-states must be prepared to make the integration effective.

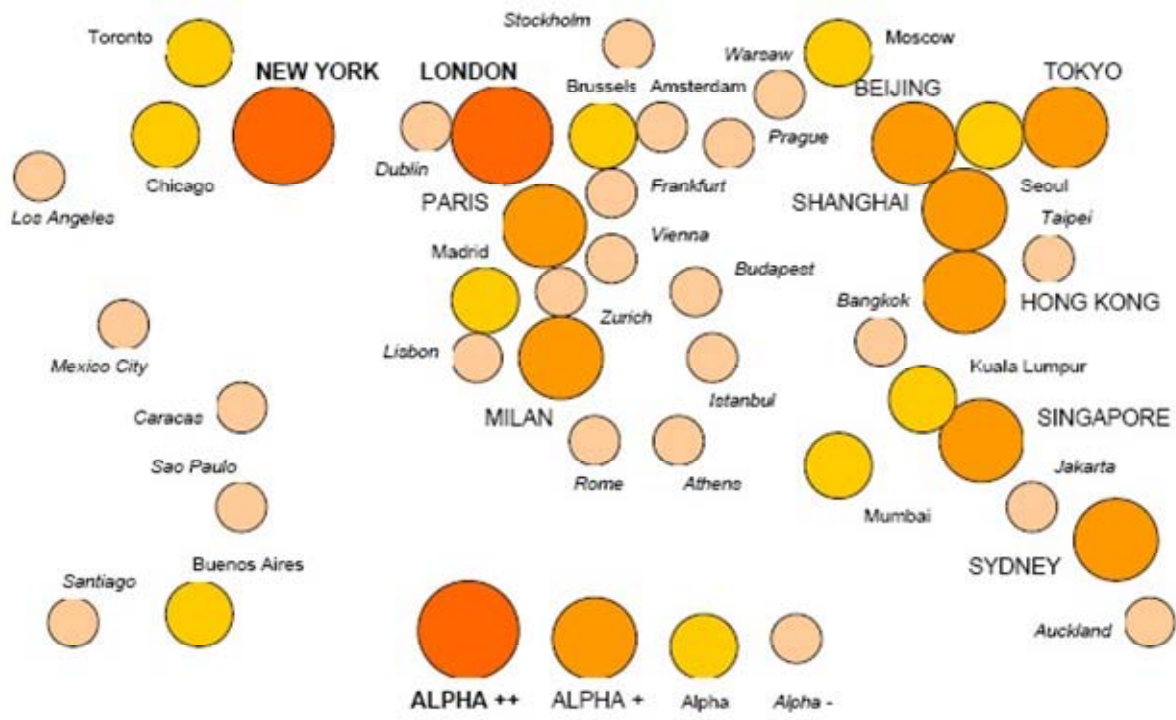
Local integration of biodiversity concerns – mirror-wise supported by national policies – is needed to contain urban sprawl, that has become very apparent across much of Europe. This local integration should find its way into spatial planning or zoning, into local environmental and water policies, into infrastructure decisions etc. as a standalone issue.

Now, we must say that, legally, the **regulations and impact assessments** that are needed to come to integration are in place. Without them, integration would often not be a topic. So, I think we are halfway the road to integration. It is when the mind – or the purse – come into the picture, that difficulties arise. That is why the other topics on urbanity – investment in green infrastructure, citizens and participation, are so important.

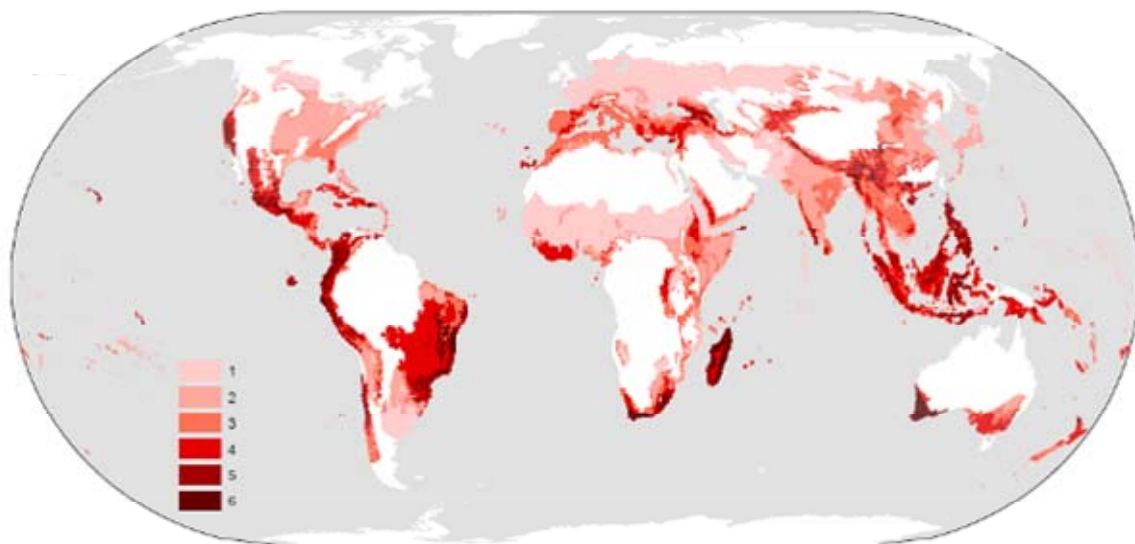
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Now, before dwelling on that, I must say that integration has an international and intergenerational aspect as well – and I come back to the map of the world class cities, but now presented in a different form.





On the other hand I show you a map of the biodiversity hot spots in the world.



There is almost no overlap. Does this mean that there is no relation?

Well, the observation is that urban regions tend to have **a very large ecological footprint**. – and this is the relationship between both maps.

For instance, the footprint of the City of London is 120 times larger than the area of the city itself. Thus cities are by no means self-contained entities and their problems and solutions can severely affect non-urban areas, elsewhere in the world.

The conclusion is that it is not sufficient to strive for integration within our states and within and around our cities. It is necessary to strive for an integration that is **relevant for the rest of the World as well**. We must not forget we are operating in a world system, and that this conference is meant as a kind of **preparation for Nagoya**.

On the substance, this creates an enormous responsibility for **politicians and city managers**, to organize the reduction of the ecological footprint of the urban world they stand for. **Green procurement and fair trade** seem to be a central topics in this challenge.

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Now, the integration theme and green procurement brings me to **investment into green infrastructure**. Urban systems depend heavily upon biodiversity for a range of ecosystem services. At the same time, cities can host a lot of biodiversity and ecosystem services. The chapter of *The Economics of Ecosystems and Biodiversity*, that will be launched within two hours or so, is dedicated to local administrators in order to show the economic lifelines between biodiversity and urban areas. I think the message will be that green infrastructure is worth investing in.

Yesterday, in the pre-conference, **the city of Ghent** presented what it is doing on green infrastructure.





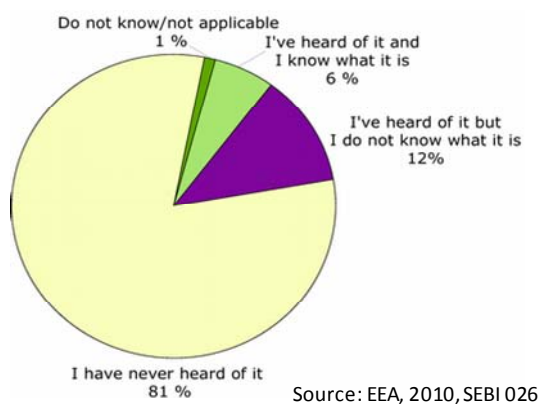
It is trying to preserve the forests and nature parcels it still has, it is developing green nodes, and it is investing more and more in district and in street parks. Where appropriate, the city of Ghent strives for multifunctional greenery, which is accessible and which creates playing grounds for children, in order to give it a social function. The city has clear goals and tries to integrate what it is doing into the relevant policy fields. In short, Ghent has a real policy on **green infrastructure as a public good and is prepared to invest in it**. I trust that comparable examples will be exhibited in the following days.

Nevertheless , we must not forget that green infrastructure is **also a theme for the rural areas**. Legally, article 10 of the Habitat Directive points to the need for connectivity between sites with nature of community importance. With climate change having more and more real impact, the relevance of green infrastructure is growing. However, it will not always be easy to implement the idea of a **green infrastructure as a public good** into the rural areas – as has been proved the Flemish experience.

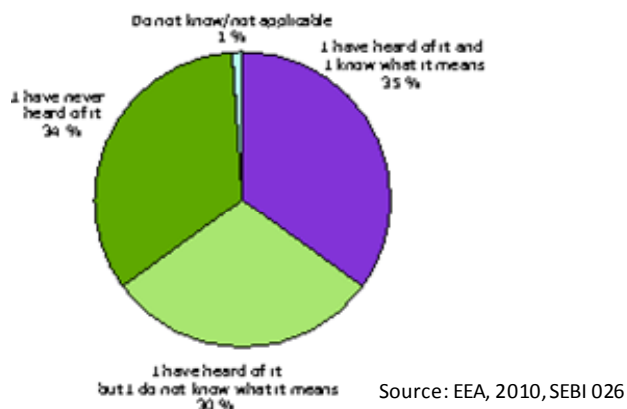
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Investments in public goods need finance. Public finance needs political decisions. And politics for biodiversity needs **support of the citizens**. Moreover, everyday individual consumer decisions can be an very important factor in contributing to the improvement of the status of biodiversity.

Now, most EU citizens have never heard of the Natura 2000 network (80 %).

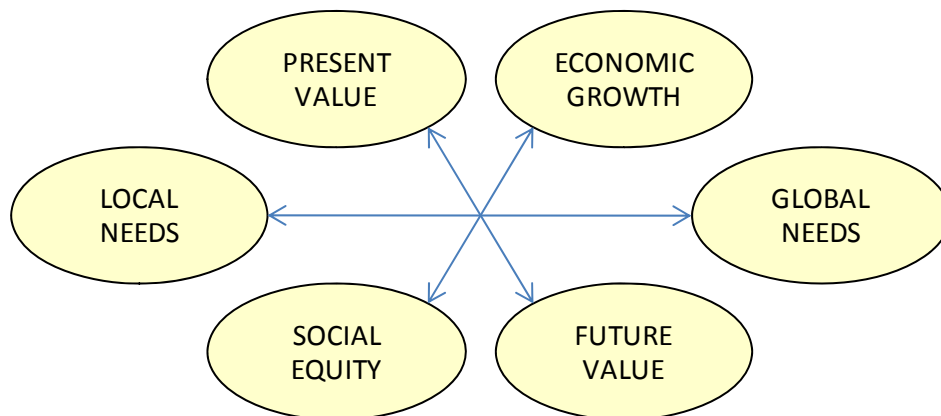


That is not per definition scary, as it is a policy concept. But two-thirds of EU citizens **do not know the meaning of the word 'biodiversity'**, let alone understand what the threats and challenges to its conservation are. Only one third feels informed to very well informed about biodiversity loss.

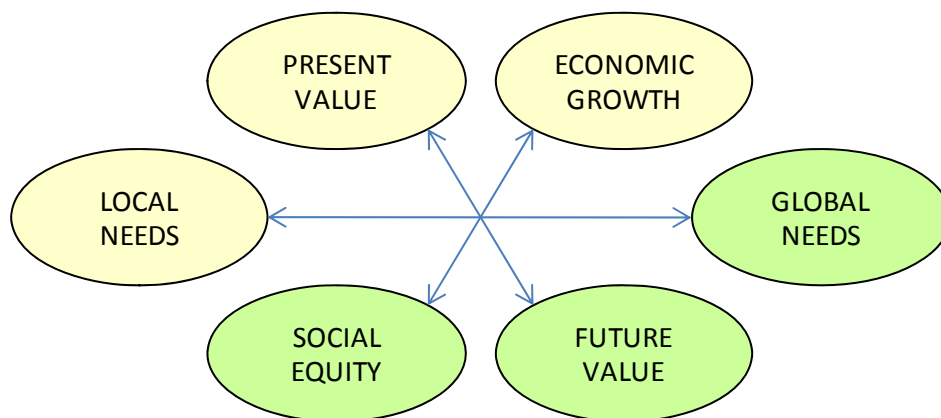


The good news is that over two-thirds of EU citizens report personally making efforts to help preserve nature.

The problem with the concept “biodiversity”– as all terms that have to do with sustainable development – could be that it is caught in a **balancing of needs**.



A balancing between the local and the global, between the present and the future, and between economic prosperity and social equity. And an effective understanding of “biodiversity” is more dependent upon an **interest in** global needs, future values and social equity.



The question is how that interest could be developed. There we come to a fundamental truth, i.e. that participation is useless if it does not imply some sharing of power. Participation must be “interesting”.



I think that it is relevant, then, to look again at the well-known **ladder of citizen participation**. The lower steps are "*manipulation*" and, sometimes, "*therapy*" – they are sometimes necessary steps, but they risk to be unfair ways of interacting with citizens.

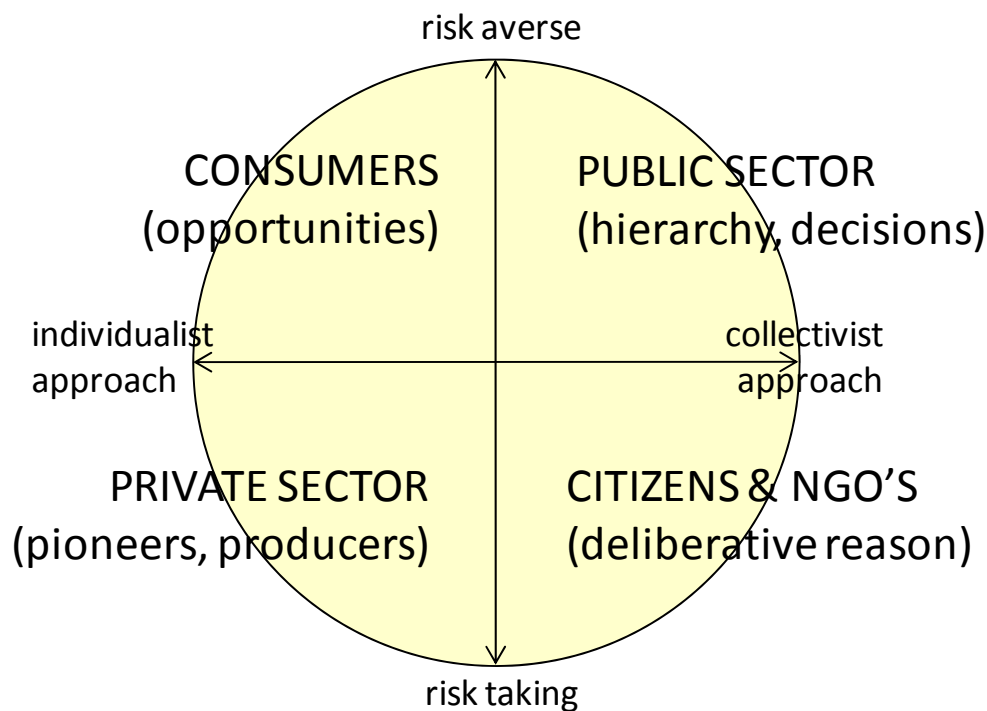
"*Informing*" and "*consultation*" are fairer ways of dealing with citizens, as they can themselves try and decide which is the connection between their own perspective and the wider biodiversity topic.

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After these steps on the ladder, we come to the last, **highest steps** on the ladder of participation. The building of "*partnerships*" is the next one, and even more radical are the steps "*delegation of power*" and "*citizen control*". These last steps seem radical, but in fact local government is nothing else but that.

Now, various **forms of partnerships** are possible, and it is good to recapitulate the **different types of partners or stakeholders** that can be involved. I do this by combining the dimension "individualist" / "collectivist" versus the dimension "risk-averse" / "risk-taker". These two

dimensions combined deliver.



- **NGO's and informed citizens** (they find it important to work on the basis of deliberative reason);
- **The public sector** (they focus on decision making, and power and hierarchy are their final modes of communication);
- **The private sector** (they are the people that like to pioneer and to manage, in order to produce and to make profit);
- And **the consumers** (they are maybe passive, but when the chance is given to have a nice experience or to improve their living conditions, they will happily take the opportunity).

In general, I think the themes of partnerships and **citizens-involvement** are closely intertwined: without partnership, there is no interest and then no understanding – and the other way round as well. But partnerships are also crucial in mobilizing **funds** and support for

investments in green infrastructure. Finally, they are the basis to get to **more integration**, and to get to it **smoothly**.

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Ladies and gentlemen,

I want to conclude. This talk was built on the thought that,



in an urbanizing Europe biodiversity conservation is a challenge.

At the same time I must admit that **I have misled you** in two ways.

For one thing, there is **a inconsistency** in my story, as the image of the Trojan horse points to the destruction of the city that is being entered – and we are not going to destroy the system we want to enter. We would rather wish to integrate into the system, in order to change it.

The second thing is that the legend of Troy is **not really the founding myth** of Europe, as the specific texts of that history – most of them were part of the so-called “Epic Cycle” – have disappeared ... we only know a synopsis of these stories, conveyed to us by authors of the classic era.

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What really has come to us, are the two remaining parts of this so-called “Epic Cycle”: the **Ilias** and the **Odyssee**. They are **the two real founding myths of Europe**, and they express, and represent, two attitudes.



The **Ilias**, on the one hand, is the story of the fury, or rage, of Achilles. In the story, this rage is considered equivalent to bravery and courage. But it leads to more violence, misunderstandings, killings, sorrow, and, finally, to the death of Achilles himself.

The hero of the **Odyssee** is much more subtle. He is clever, deceitful and wise, firm and harsh when necessary, but generally adaptive and friendly. Be it out of need or out of wisdom: when he sees partners, he co-operates. In the end, he realises his aims and finds a more or less happy fulfilment.

I think this is the true model for the biodiversity protection of the future.

I wish you all a conference in that spirit, and hope we can proceed with biodiversity conservation along this line.

Thank you.

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