

## Postprint: Research Advances in Biocultural Diversity

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### Abstract

Biocultural diversity encompasses biodiversity, cultural diversity, and the complex linkages between them, constituting the foundation for maintaining the health of both natural systems and human societies. Given its rich connotations, multidisciplinary nature, and broad research scope, identifying appropriate research objects and corresponding scales is particularly crucial in its study. Biodiversity and cultural diversity are intimately interconnected through various natural and social factors, manifesting as spatial congruence, shared evolutionary processes, and common threats. Co-conservation of biodiversity and cultural diversity represents an effective pathway for mitigating biodiversity loss and preserving traditional cultures. This review systematically examines relevant research across three primary dimensions: the relationship between biodiversity and cultural diversity, traditional ecological knowledge, and cultural landscapes, while delineating major development trends. Chinese scholars have made distinctive and valuable contributions to certain domains of biocultural diversity research; however, while sustaining the development of our nation's advantageous and characteristic fields, it is imperative to align with international hotspots and trends, and intensify research efforts in mechanistic and systematic analysis, environmental impacts of biocultural diversity, and conservation and management strategies.

### Full Text

### Progress in Biocultural Diversity Research

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## Abstract

Biocultural diversity includes biodiversity, cultural diversity, and the complex connections between them. It involves numerous disciplines and encompasses extensive research content. Clarifying the research object and corresponding scale is particularly important in biocultural diversity research, as it forms the foundation for maintaining the health of both nature and human society. Biodiversity and cultural diversity are closely linked through various natural and social factors, manifested as spatial overlap, co-evolutionary processes, and common threats. Joint protection of biodiversity and cultural diversity is an effective approach to slowing biodiversity loss and protecting traditional cultures. This paper reviews relevant research from three main aspects: the relationship between biodiversity and cultural diversity, traditional ecological knowledge, and cultural landscapes. Chinese scholars have conducted distinctive and valuable work in some areas of biocultural diversity research, but while maintaining these advantageous and characteristic fields, it is also necessary to keep pace with international hotspots and trends, strengthening research in mechanism and systematic analysis, environmental influences on biocultural diversity, and the conservation and management of biocultural diversity.

**Keywords:** biocultural diversity; ethnoecology; cultural landscape; traditional ecological knowledge

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## 1. Main Research Content of Biocultural Diversity

Although biocultural diversity has not been used as a complete concept in research and management for a long time, it involves natural and social sciences, resulting in a broad research scope. Traditional ethnoecology and ethnobotany research, which focuses on the connections between biodiversity and cultural diversity, can also be incorporated into biocultural diversity studies. This paper primarily discusses three major aspects: the relationship between biodiversity and cultural diversity, traditional ecological knowledge, and cultural landscapes. Due to the interdisciplinary nature of biocultural diversity research, methods from these fields are often applied, including field surveys and interviews from ethnoecology and ethnobotany [13-15], which are indispensable in traditional knowledge research. Landscape pattern analysis and disturbance intensity analysis can be applied to biocultural diversity research at the landscape scale [16-17], while literature investigation and analysis are also suitable methods [18].

**1.1 Relationship Between Biodiversity and Cultural Diversity** The natural environment is intimately connected with the origin and development of culture, providing the setting for cultural processes and belief systems [1]. Biodiversity and cultural diversity are tightly linked through four bridges: indigenous beliefs and worldviews, livelihoods and practices, language and knowledge systems, and norms and institutions [1]. Their relationship is manifested

through spatial overlap, co-evolutionary processes, and common threats.

**Spatial Overlap.** The relationship between biodiversity and cultural diversity is first reflected in their geographic coincidence. Many biodiversity hotspots are also cultural diversity core areas [21]. Early observers of this geographic connection were field researchers. In 1992, Chapin mapped forest cover and indigenous homelands in Central America [22]. Stevens applied this method globally to map geographic relationships and identify diversity hotspots [23]. Nabhan and Terralingua found that countries with high biodiversity also ranked in the top for language richness [9, 24-25]. Moore et al. [25] quantitatively analyzed the distribution of languages and vertebrates in sub-Saharan Africa, finding that environmental factors, particularly rainfall and maximum elevation, had joint effects on both diversities. Sutherland [26] found high language abundance often accompanied high bird and mammal abundance. These two diversity indicators are closely related to country area and highest altitude. In large-scale studies, birds and mammals (including species diversity, ecosystem diversity, and landscape diversity) are commonly used to measure biodiversity, while language is used to measure cultural diversity. Although these indicators cannot fully represent both diversities and some case studies show differences between language diversity and cultural diversity [23], their data are relatively easy to obtain and have advantages in quantitative research. Combining quantitative indicators of biodiversity and cultural diversity can characterize overall diversity. Loh and Harmon [6] used the arithmetic mean of biodiversity and cultural diversity as a biocultural diversity index, considering birds and plants in biodiversity and religion, language, and ethnicity in cultural diversity to evaluate overall diversity worldwide.

**Co-evolutionary Processes.** Biodiversity and cultural diversity share the same driving factors in their emergence. Different combinations of geographic and climatic conditions cultivate rich biodiversity while also causing geographic isolation of human populations, thereby promoting cultural diversification [3]. Biocultural diversity results from human-environment interactions. Different cultures formed as humans adapted to different natural conditions, which in turn affected local biological resources. Biodiversity is the foundation of cultural diversity. The types, distribution, and quantities of biological resources available to different populations vary, forming different environmental adaptation strategies and resource utilization methods that constitute the basic premise and natural background for human culture [27]. Culture also influences or shapes biodiversity. When humans selected and cultivated food and economic crops on a large scale, originally diverse landscapes gradually evolved into single-crop farmland, changing species diversity and landscape configuration. Some species were widely planted, affecting original landscape patterns. Sacred natural sites have important cultural significance and often harbor rich biodiversity, preserved through human intention. While biodiversity is the material foundation and environmental condition for cultural diversity, cultural diversity also profoundly influences biodiversity. There exists a relationship of interdependence, mutual promotion, and co-evolution between them.

**Common Threats.** Economic globalization, agricultural industrialization, and urbanization simultaneously affect biodiversity and cultural diversity. Resource extraction driven by economic incentives reduces biological resources and destroys the biological foundation of traditional cultures. Agricultural industrialization means shifting from diverse management to single-species cultivation, reducing within-field and between-field species diversity and decreasing species habitats. Traditional diets, crops, and the ecological knowledge, skills, and practices refined in this process also disappear. Urbanization and direct urban expansion cause habitat, species, and green space loss. Population migration separates local residents from their original cultural contexts, leading to traditional culture loss. Some studies compare extinction rates between the two diversities. Loh and Harmon [31] assessed language diversity extinction risk and compared it with global bird and mammal extinction risk. Sutherland [26] found that languages face even greater threats than birds or mammals. Although the direct threats differ—habitat destruction and overexploitation of biological resources are primary causes of biodiversity loss, especially in Asia [31], while assimilation by mainstream culture, colonization, and global trade are main causes of cultural diversity loss—these factors are interconnected, causing both diversities to face common threats. Biodiversity and cultural diversity continuously adjust and adapt through long-term interactions to form dynamic equilibrium. When either changes, the balance is disrupted and both diversities suffer damage. Any biodiversity conservation practice should be accompanied by understanding and protecting cultural diversity [1].

## 2. Traditional Ecological Knowledge

Traditional ecological knowledge (TEK) is the accumulated natural knowledge of local people, characterized by dynamism and adaptability [32-33]. It is the product of co-evolution between local culture and ecosystems, representing the intersection of biodiversity and cultural diversity. TEK includes folk ecological wisdom whose value and contribution to modern communities are no less than modern scientific and technological knowledge [39]. Its protection is considered an effective approach to joint biocultural diversity conservation. TEK can also serve as an indicator of regional biocultural diversity, particularly indigenous ethnobotanical knowledge. Berkes [38] defines TEK as a complex of knowledge, belief, and practice, including observations of local species and environmental phenomena, resource utilization practices, and beliefs related to human adaptation to ecosystem processes. It comprises four components: knowledge of ecosystem components and their functions, indigenous resource management systems and organizations, and worldviews guiding local ecological cognition and behavior.

Researchers often focus on TEK and biodiversity conservation, traditional medicinal knowledge, TEK and environmental behavior, and TEK protection and utilization. Ethnoecology and ethnobotany provide effective theoretical and methodological support. Ethnoecology studies the complex relationships be-

tween people and their environment in past and present [40], while ethnobotany examines direct interactions between people and plants [41]. Plant knowledge itself is an important component of TEK and can represent TEK [32]. Community-based biological resource management is a key TEK element, exemplified by the rotational agriculture of Hani and Yi peoples, the swidden agriculture of Miao and Lisu peoples, and grassland agriculture in Tibetan communities [42]. These management methods based on long-term production practice ensure future natural resource security for communities with targeting and effectiveness unmatched by macro-level policy management. In resource management systems, customs and even compensation mechanisms can regulate community behavior [44-46]. Beliefs arise from human responsibility toward nature and conservation ethics [47]. Many traditional belief systems contain attitudes of respect, gratitude, and shame regarding waste [48], which guide behavior and form the basis of local conservation actions. Creation stories in communities reflect ancestors' reverence for nature and subtly regulate behavior. While different groups understand human-nature relationships differently—most traditional communities view humans as interdependent components of nature while modern communities tend to see humans as nature's rulers—the actual situation generally lies somewhere between these extremes [5, 49].

TEK plays an important role in biodiversity conservation, especially where national policies are ineffective [50-53]. Although not all traditional practices are worth emulating, traditional knowledge systems should supplement modern knowledge systems in biocultural diversity conservation [54-56]. Traditional communities are also participants in the global economy, and TEK loss within communities is severe. It is unfair to require them to continue using traditional, low-impact survival strategies. Protecting and exploring TEK and applying it to community development and regional sustainable development deserve widespread attention.

### 3. Cultural Landscapes

Cultural landscapes are patterns of human activity superimposed on natural landscapes and represent the product of biodiversity-culture interactions [57]. They reflect natural and cultural changes and embody indigenous TEK. Terraced fields, as important agricultural cultural landscapes, are carriers of farming civilization and have close connections with biodiversity and cultural diversity. Some historically significant landscapes have important research value for ecosystem services and human well-being. However, global urbanization and the new technology revolution have caused landscape features to change temporally and spatially. Abandonment of cultivation leads to terraced landscape degradation [58].

Rural areas are important venues for biocultural diversity interactions. Long-term agroforestry activities introduce multiple species and management mechanisms to meet specific economic, social, and environmental needs, eventually forming rich patches and high heterogeneity—common characteristics of rural

landscapes. Rural landscapes are the result of traditional practices found worldwide. Baiamonte et al. [16] analyzed the relationship between landscape naturalness, rare and endangered species, and found significant interactions between structure and biodiversity, making them good examples for understanding biocultural diversity outcomes [12]. Marull et al. [17] analyzed Mallorca's cultural landscapes since the 1850s, verifying the intermediate disturbance hypothesis and finding that either enhancing or eliminating human disturbance can reduce species and landscape diversity. The former may destroy the dynamic balance established through long-term practice, while reverting agricultural practices to "natural" states may be counterproductive.

Although current research focuses on rural areas, exploring urban biocultural diversity is also meaningful in the context of widespread urbanization. Urban landscape-level biocultural diversity research concentrates on two scales of urban green space: networks and point green spaces. Vierikko et al. [61] constructed a research framework for urban biocultural diversity, suggesting it should include relationships between biodiversity and cultural diversity in urban green spaces, cultural mechanisms affecting both diversities, and diversity promotion methods. Elands et al. [62] studied 20 European cities and found biocultural diversity is generally missing from urban planning.

Ethnic communities, with ethnic minorities as the main residents, are special community types whose unique ethnicity, culture, and regionality have become research foci [63]. Ethnic community research is closer to sociology, focusing on primitive societies, rural ethnic communities, urban ethnic communities, and their development, protection, and perceptions [63].

#### 4. Domestic Research Progress

China faces tremendous pressure from rapid economic growth, biodiversity loss, and traditional culture erosion. Integrating traditional knowledge and values into conservation policies is essential for joint biocultural diversity protection [64]. Since 1949, Chinese biocultural diversity research has been fruitful, focusing on ecological anthropology, ethnobotany, and ethnoecology, with substantial work on cultural landscapes like sacred natural sites [27, 66-67]. Research on the relationship between the two diversities is rich, with distinctive and influential studies on TEK, particularly minority biodiversity conservation practices [68-71]. Xu et al. [64] discussed impacts of recent development on traditional knowledge and practices, emphasizing the important role of traditional knowledge, especially among southwestern minorities, in forest conservation. Xue and Guo introduced TEK concepts in international conventions and classified TEK related to biological resource conservation and sustainable use [72]. Cheng et al. proposed a three-dimensional ethnoecological analysis model for TEK [40], while Yin introduced and evaluated eco-museums and ethnic cultural villages in China [73]. Cultural landscape research focuses on sacred natural sites or typical agricultural landscapes [70, 74-75], with terraced landscape research representing foundational biocultural diversity studies [58, 76].

Although Chinese scholars have conducted effective work, biocultural diversity research has not been systematically integrated. Content-wise, it concentrates on TEK, especially minority biodiversity conservation practices, and landscape research focuses on specific ethnic cultural landscape formation, ecological functions, and management practices. Methodologically, while quantitative methods are well-applied in ethnobotany [77], quantitative methods and spatial analysis are still lacking in biocultural diversity research.

## 5. Future Development Directions

Reviewing major research content and progress in biocultural diversity, trends include: moving from qualitative to quantitative approaches, with developing indicators at different scales facilitating quantitative research; diverse research scales, where comprehensive multi-scale analysis helps explore mechanisms; and increasingly rich methodologies, from traditional field surveys and interviews to introducing more relevant disciplinary techniques and methods. Modern mapping technology has greatly developed traditional mapping and promoted landscape and regional-scale analysis, while modern biotechnology and pharmaceutical technology also play significant roles in ethnobotany applications. Based on these three points, biocultural diversity research has gradually evolved from initial documentation and descriptive work to exploring mechanisms and complex system resilience. Ecological development greatly influences and promotes biocultural diversity research, with current studies increasingly focusing on global change, ecosystem services, and sustainable development.

China has unique advantages in biocultural diversity research with abundant species resources, topographic environments, and minority cultures. Although Chinese scholars have made distinctive contributions in some fields, particularly following the ethnic identification movement [78] which provided materials and foundations for cultural diversity research, future research remains a formidable task. While maintaining advantageous and characteristic fields, China must keep pace with international hotspots and trends, strengthening research in mechanism and systematic analysis, environmental influences on biocultural diversity, and biocultural diversity conservation and management. Attention should also be paid to integrating global change, ecosystem services, and other hotspots, emphasizing disciplinary integration and cooperation between different research teams. China should fully utilize its rich biological, geographic, and cultural diversity to conduct systematic research at larger and multiple scales, broaden understanding of biocultural diversity meanings, develop suitable indicators for China's biocultural diversity characterization, expand multi-scale analysis, and produce more influential results through greater consensus and deeper research, promoting win-win outcomes for regional development and biocultural diversity conservation.

## 6. Conclusion

Biocultural diversity includes both biological and cultural diversity. Biocultural diversity is an important concept representing the inseparable connections between biodiversity and cultural diversity that face common threats. It has gradually gained researcher and manager attention, forming the biocultural perspective and biocultural approach. China has unique advantages in biocultural diversity research with abundant species resources, topographic environments, and minority cultures. Although Chinese scholars have conducted distinctive work in some areas, future research remains a formidable task. While maintaining advantageous and characteristic fields, China must keep pace with international hotspots and trends, strengthening research in mechanism and systematic analysis, environmental influences on biocultural diversity, and biocultural diversity conservation and management. We hope domestic biocultural diversity research will form greater consensus, conduct deeper studies, and provide scientific and technological support for regional development and biocultural diversity conservation.

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