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IT'S ALL CONNECTED

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What Amount of Change is Normal?

What is normal in the natural world? Defining what is "normal" becomes increasingly complex when viewed through the lens of constant change. Both humans and ecosystems are in a perpetual state of flux, evolving, growing, and adapting. Historical conditions may have been influenced by human activity, climatic shifts, ecological succession, disease outbreaks, or natural events such as floods. These factors complicate the idea of a fixed "normal" state.

Examining the past through photographs, journals, or oral histories provides valuable glimpses of previous ecosystems, offering a sense of how plant and animal populations once thrived and how ecosystems functioned. However, these snapshots do not necessarily represent a universal or unchanging normal. Instead, they reflect moments in time that can inform an understanding of sustainability and productivity.

Shifting Baseline Syndrome (SBS) serves as a framework for mapping these historical snapshots without anchoring them to a static sense of normalcy. Shifting Baseline Syndrome is a concept introduced in 1995 by marine biologist Daniel Pauly to explain the gradual resetting of ecological reference points over time. As environmental changes occur, perceptions of what is "normal" shift in response, often without conscious awareness.

Each generation unknowingly adjusts its baseline. They view the state of the environment during their lifetime as normal, forgetting or not being aware of previous conditions. This mindset leads to a cumulative effect where changes become more pronounced across generations. Over time, environmental declines, such as reduced biodiversity, smaller fish populations, or less pristine ecosystems, become accepted as normal. Listen to, ["We Live in a 10% World."](#) for a lively discussion on this topic.

Historically, what one generation considered "normal" might differ greatly from the experiences of the next. In the past, stopping every few hours during a car trip to clean insect splatter from windshields or seeing a flurry of insects around streetlights might have been commonplace. For earlier generations, abundance might have been illustrated by salmon populations so vast that a one-pound can of salmon cost just 10 cents during the Great Depression—a price equivalent to under \$1.75 in today's terms. Salmon, during that era, was even regarded as a staple food for the poor.



Rather than striving to define what is normal, SBS emphasizes using the past as a reference point for comparison and understanding. These historical insights remain essential for countering misconceptions about conservation progress. For example, they challenge arguments that recovering species no longer require protection by highlighting that current populations may still fall far short of their historical abundance, since people may not realize how much has been lost.

Understanding SBS also helps address the limitations of subjective impressions about the natural world, which may not align with

ecological reality. Awareness of how baselines shift allows for more informed decision-making in conservation and sustainability efforts helping us to set ambitious goals for restoration and conservation based on historical baselines rather than degraded ones.

For further exploration of this topic, the [discussion between Dr. Loren McClenachan and Nature's Archive](#) offers valuable insights into Shifting Baselines and historical ecology, shedding light on how the past informs the present and future of environmental stewardship.

Less is Not Always More

Waiting until plant and animal populations are close to extinction is not a good way to protect our more than human neighbors. In fact, dwindling animal populations have the potential to upend ecosystems, according to Paul Ehrlich, Stanford professor emeritus and founder of the Center for Conservation Biology at Stanford, and author of several books including the (in)famous "The Population Bomb." Dr.

Ehrlich is known to be outspoken, and is a passionate advocate for rewilding and conservation. In this episode of [Rewilding](#), he emphasizes the dire need for us to raise awareness and take action, because biodiversity is nature's life support system and we are killing it, and doing so is dooming us as well.



Quick Connections

Books, websites, documentaries, podcasts, events, quotes, and more



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Quote we're pondering

"The reality of climate change will eventually reach everyone." - **Michael Hawk**



NASA and the US Forest Service offer this [interactive near-real-time map of wildfires across the USA and Canada](#). It's fascinating to look at, and gives a stark view of the scope of the Canadian wildfires.



We all love beautiful pictures, so please enjoy the [2024 photo contest winners from the National Wildlife Federation](#).

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