

When biodiversity science speaks to business, who speaks for the forest and the sea?

The IPBES Business and Biodiversity Assessment is a landmark document. But its governance architecture quietly places the communities that generate biodiversity knowledge outside the room where decisions are made



A Soliga woman who has just harvested coffee beans. Photo: Deepanjana Saha

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Published on:

17 Apr 2026, 2:06 pm

Two landscapes. One document. A single, quietly important question.

In the buffer zone of Biligiri Rangaswamy Temple Tiger Reserve in Karnataka, Soliga adivasi farmers grow ragi (finger millet) in polyculture systems that have shaped this landscape for generations. These fields sustain documented populations of native pollinators, soil microbial communities that regulate crop disease, and owl-mediated pest suppression: services that ecologists increasingly recognise as foundational to landscape resilience.

Along the coastlines of the Bay of Bengal, artisanal fishing communities, many of them holding detailed, place-specific knowledge of seasonal fish movements, coral reef health, and mangrove regeneration cycles, have managed coastal biodiversity for centuries. Their practices are woven into what ecologists would now call regulating and non-material nature contributions: the kind of knowledge the IPBES assessment itself acknowledges is systematically underrepresented.

Neither set of practices appears in a corporate sustainability report. Neither will, without fundamental

changes to how biodiversity knowledge enters the frameworks now being promoted globally.

The Intergovernmental Science-Policy Platform on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services recently convened a global stakeholder dialogue on its Business and Biodiversity Assessment Report. The meeting brought together businesses, financial institutions, civil society, research institutions, and indigenous peoples and local communities. The agenda: how to use IPBES findings in private-sector decision-making.

We want to approach this carefully, because the assessment itself is a serious and, in many respects, admirable document. It synthesises evidence across ten key messages on how businesses depend on and impact biodiversity, so financial actors should price nature-related risks, and an enabling environment might align private incentives with public biodiversity goals. Several of its findings are important and should be read widely. Among them are that less than one per cent of publicly reporting companies currently mention their impacts on biodiversity; that \$7.3 trillion in public and private finance annually drives direct harm to nature, against only \$220 billion directed toward conservation; and that business impacts fall disproportionately on indigenous peoples and local communities, who are least able to absorb those costs (IPBES, KM2, C3).

These are uncomfortable findings. They deserve the widest possible audience.

And yet we find ourselves troubled by a quieter problem: not in the science, but in the governance architecture through which the science is meant to travel into practice.

Recognition is not the same as authority

The IPBES work program includes, under objective 3(c), a commitment to enhancing the recognition of indigenous and local knowledge in its assessments. The Business and Biodiversity Assessment takes this seriously. Key Message 8 acknowledges that indigenous peoples and local communities are inadequately represented in research and decision-making. Section C7 notes that most measurement approaches are built on anthropocentric and instrumental values rather than the biocentric or pluricentric worldviews that underpin most ILK systems. These are candid admissions, and they matter.

But there is a specific distinction the assessment does not fully make and that we think is the critical one. There is a difference between recognising ILK in an assessment report and building decision-making processes that can accommodate what ILK actually says about biodiversity management. The first is achievable within current institutional structures. IPBES has largely achieved it. The second requires

changing who controls how assessment findings are translated into practice. That change has not happened. The stakeholder dialogue convened to advance uptake of IPBES products brings together businesses, financial institutions, and civil society. Indigenous and local communities participate as stakeholders in that process, not as co-designers of it. The categories are not equivalent.

In the buffer zone of BRT Tiger Reserve, Karnataka, Soliga adivasi farming communities manage ragi polyculture systems that sustain measurable agrobiodiversity: pollinators, soil biota, and pest-regulation services documented through ongoing fieldwork. These systems are legible to ecological science. They are not legible to the financial disclosure frameworks the IPBES report is designed to inform. The TNFD categories that corporations are now expected to use for biodiversity disclosure are calibrated to what remote sensing and standardised surveys can capture at portfolio and corporate scales. The below-ground microbial networks of a ragi field, the traditional seed selection practices that maintain landrace diversity, and the spatial mosaic of cultivated and forest patches that sustains pollinator movement: none of these appear in a disclosure report. Not because the science is wrong, but because the translation architecture was not designed with these systems in mind.

That gap is not incidental. It is structural. And it is reproduced, not resolved, when ILK holders are invited into dialogues about how IPBES products should inform business practice, without being given authority over the terms of that translation.

What would genuine integration look like?

We want to be clear that we are not arguing against the business and biodiversity assessment or against the instruments it promotes. Mandatory disclosure, biodiversity credit integrity, and nature-related financial risk: these are necessary conversations, and IPBES has done important work in making them rigorous.

We are asking a more limited, and we hope more practical, question: What would it take for this dialogue, and the processes it is designed to advance, to move beyond the consultation model that currently defines how indigenous and local communities engage with IPBES products?

The assessment itself offers some directions. It calls for “co-creating actions based on methods and knowledge built with participatory approaches involving Indigenous Peoples and local communities” (KM9e). It notes that community-based monitoring approaches that interweave indigenous and local knowledge with scientific methods exist and have been validated, but that uptake by businesses remains low (A7). For coastal systems specifically,

where intergovernmental bodies have worked for decades on community-based fisheries governance, there are documented models of knowledge co-production that predate IPBES by many years. These do not need to be invented. They need to be structurally recognised.

In the Indian context, the Forest Rights Act (2006) and, more partially, the Biological Diversity Act (2002) create legal frameworks that recognise community rights over biodiversity, frameworks that any business operating in these landscapes is, in principle, obligated to engage with. The IPBES assessment, calibrated as it is to global corporate audiences, does not engage substantively with these national legal architectures. That is understandable given its scope, but it means that any Indian uptake pathway will need to bridge between IPBES-level instruments and the existing, if imperfectly implemented, community rights frameworks that Indian law already provides.

A modest proposal

We are, we should say, genuinely uncertain about what the right answers are here. This piece is not a policy prescription. We are researchers: one working on ecosystem services and community land use in a forest-farm gradient in southern India and one working on fisheries governance and marine legal frameworks in the Bay of Bengal. The clearest thing our combined fieldwork has taught us is that local

situations are more complicated and more interesting than global frameworks can fully accommodate.

What we would suggest, with humility, is this: the dialogue would be strengthened, and the IPBES work program's own Objective 3(c) would be better served if the communities whose knowledge and landscapes the assessment draws upon were not just invited as participants but given structural authority over at least one substantive question, namely, how their knowledge should be used and on what terms as IPBES findings are translated into business practice.

This is not an abstract demand. It has practical precedents in how community forest governance and small-scale fisheries governance have operated in South and Southeast Asia. It would require IPBES to engage more directly with the national legal and governance frameworks on community resource rights, access and benefit sharing, and free prior and informed consent that already exist in many of the biodiversity-rich countries whose landscapes feature prominently in the assessment's evidence base.

The Business and Biodiversity Assessment makes a compelling case that business-as-usual is not sustainable. That case is well-made and important. What remains to be made, and what this dialogue has an opportunity to begin, is the equally important case that science-as-usual, channelled through governance-as-usual, is also not enough.

The Soliga farmers of BRT and the fishing communities of the Bay of Bengal did not wait for IPBES to tell them that their landscapes matter. The question is whether, when global science finally agrees with them, the processes built to act on that science will make room for their voices: not as acknowledgement but as authority.

Reference: IPBES (2026). Summary for Policymakers of the Methodological Assessment Report on the Impact and Dependence of Business on Biodiversity and Nature's Contributions to People. Jones M., Polasky S., Rueda X. et al. (eds.). IPBES Secretariat, Bonn, Germany. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.15369060>

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