

American environmentalists are deeply invested in protecting endangered species in the U.S. That’s natural, and U.S biodiversity is worthy of protection. But focusing on the U.S. gives a misguided sense of the relative importance of U.S. biodiversity. But in the grand scheme of things, biodiversity in the global South is far, far more important.

A [recent study](#) shows that scientists have a similar problem. Of the ten thousand scientific papers on conservation published in 2014, about a thousand concerned conservation in the United States. Papua New Guinea, a rapidly deforesting country with thousands of animal species at risk, got only sixteen papers. By way of contrast, a single English species, the red squirrel, was the subject of six papers.

It’s hard to exaggerate the mismatch between the biodiversity problem and the way we allocate attention. Tropical forests contain amazing biodiversity. In a single twelve-hour period, an entomologist in Peru identified as many species of butterflies as live in the entire eastern United States (over five hundred.) Manú National Park in Peru contains one out of nine bird species on the planet and over a thousand species of trees. By contrast, all of Canada’s arboreal forests – over a billion acres – contain only twenty species of trees. About a third of the world’s bird species depend on tropical forests. Although they about the same area, the state of New York has about two hundred bird species, whereas Colombia has over 1500.

This is part of a general phenomenon: biodiversity is greater, the closer you are to the equator. Or to put it another way, the Amazon is to biodiversity as Saudi Arabia is to oil, whereas the United States and Canada are as poor in biodiversity as Japan is in oil. It’s a mistake to place too much of our emphasis on the American situation, which might be considered a sideshow in terms of global biodiversity.