

Presentation ceremony in the 6th edition of the BBVA Foundation award

## Ursula Heise champions the power of storytelling to strengthen social awareness in the face of the global environmental crisis during her Biophilia Award lecture

- **The Chair of Literary Studies at the University of California, Los Angeles was recognized for demonstrating “how the humanities** can and should join forces with the natural sciences, social sciences, policy, law, and digital technologies to increase our abilities to understand and meet the major environmental challenges of our time,” in the words of the award committee
- **“Well-told stories have the power to foster environmental conservation,”** said Heise in her lecture. “A large number of storytellers and a range of different strategies are necessary to continue the work of figures like Félix Rodríguez de la Fuente and the many other narrators who helped catalyze modern environmentalist movements”
- **“Professor Heise’s outstanding career represents a marriage between science, culture, the arts and communication to a mass audience** that is indispensable if we are to preserve a viable planet for future generations,” said committee member Professor Rodolfo Dirzo, Professor in Environmental Science at Stanford University, in his encomium to the awardee
- **The Biophilia Award, funded with 100,000 euros,** recognizes the work of professionals and organizations in any country who have helped reframe humanity’s relationship with nature from the perspective of the humanities, communication or the social sciences

Ursula Heise spoke of the power of “well-told stories” to engage and mobilize society in the face of the global environmental crisis, during the presentation ceremony of the 6th Biophilia Award. The Chair of Literary Studies at the University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA) received the BBVA Foundation award for “pushing forward the formation and implementation of the field of

environmental humanities at a global scale,” in the words of the citation. After collecting her diploma at a ceremony held in the Palacio del Marqués de Salamanca – Madrid headquarters of the BBVA Foundation – Heise gave a lecture titled “Environmental Futures and the Challenges of Biophilia,” where she explored how the stories that come to us through books, films and other media can transform attitudes and behavior toward nature and all the species with which we share this planet.

“We scientists have not been trained to communicate our work so that it has broad social repercussions and resonates in the collective imaginary. That is why Professor Heise’s work in the environmental humanities field is so important,” said committee member Rodolfo Dirzo – Professor in Environmental Science at Stanford University and 2024 Frontiers of Knowledge Laureate in Ecology and Conservation Biology – in his opening encomium to the awardee. “To achieve a truly radical transformation in society’s thinking about the environment that allows us to protect what we have left of this planet, we need a humanistic vision that complements the work of science. The outstanding career of the Biophilia laureate represents a marriage of science, culture, the arts and communication to a mass audience that is indispensable if we are to preserve a viable planet for future generations.”

The BBVA Foundation Biophilia Award, funded with 100,000 euros, recognizes contributions from the realms of the humanities, social sciences and communication that help reframe humankind’s relationship with nature. Its aim is to distinguish narratives and interpretations which, while being reliant on or compatible with environmental science knowledge, contribute from these disciplines to shaping the perspectives, conceptual frameworks and values of society as a whole with regard to the environment.

### **Environmental degradation as “a problem of society, culture and values”**

Ursula Heise (Koblenz, Germany, 1960) has devoted much of her career to exploring how differing traditions of thought about nature in different languages and cultures influence ways of interpreting environmental challenges. Phenomena like climate change, biodiversity loss, deforestation or soil erosion, she says, “actually look very different when you take into account different languages, different historical memories and different cultural frameworks of understanding.” This is a central tenet of the environmental humanities, the multidisciplinary field that Heise has helped bring to global prominence in the last two decades and which is, she believes, of paramount importance at a time when the future of life on our planet hangs in the balance. For, as the awardee says, “we cannot approach environmental problems without considering them as problems of society, culture and values.”

In her book *Sense of Place, Sense of Planet* (2008), Heise put forward the concept of “ecocosmopolitanism” as a form of environmental ethics combining engagement with the protection of nature on a local scale with an awareness of the global interconnectedness of all species and ecosystems. Building on the “Think global, act local” approach proposed by the biologist and humanist René Dubos in the early 1970s, she contended that in the globally connected world of the 21st century environmental ethics had to be based on zooming from the local to the global, and vice versa: “It is not enough to have a sense of place, of the local, because that just means that your trash might go elsewhere or that your most polluting industries might be located outside of your own idyllic and beautiful place. That will not help the planet as a whole. For me, a sense of planet and a sense of how things hang together and are ecologically connected on a global basis seems just as crucial for an environmental ethics as a commitment to place.”

Heise is also known for her innovative analysis of the role of culture in biodiversity conservation, or – as she puts it – “the stories that get told about some species that are endangered and not others.” In another of her influential, thought-provoking titles, *Imagining Extinction: The Cultural Meanings of Endangered Species* (2016), she foregrounds what she calls “a very clear pattern”: the fact that it is vertebrate species that garner most of the attention, not just from the public and media but also from the scientific community. “Invertebrates,” she points out, “get much less attention, and plants especially get ignored.”

The Biophilia Award committee also singled out her lead role in the development of a broad worldwide network of environmental humanities scholars beyond the Anglo-American and European spheres, with multiple strands running through Asia and Latin America. Aided by her command of languages – she speaks German, English, French, Spanish and Japanese – Heise has involved herself in multiple publications and translations of works in the environmental humanities field, as well as helping to set up congresses, courses and seminars in countries like Argentina, Australia, Japan, South Korea, Taiwan and Vietnam. In this sense, the sum of her work, as the citation concludes, “has demonstrated how the humanities can and should join forces with the natural sciences, social sciences, policy, law, and digital technologies to increase our abilities to understand and meet the major environmental challenges of our time.”

### **Narrative strategies that “catalyze” movements in defense of nature**

After collecting her Biophilia Award, Heise began her talk referring to the hypothesis put forward by biologist Edward O. Wilson that gave its name to the BBVA Foundation program; the idea that biophilia, i.e., interest in and affinity for the natural world, is “an innate human

tendency.” Yet this “instinctive” love for nature, as Heise remarks, “has not prevented large-scale environmental degradation, as we continue to confront alarming rates of environmental degradation and biodiversity loss in the twenty-first century.” What this is clearly telling us is that people’s affection for nature is not enough in itself to combat the environmental crisis, but needs to be brought together with “an analysis of social, cultural, and political structures so as to catalyze the changes that might still prevent if not environmental crises themselves, then at least their most dangerous consequences for both humans and nonhumans.” It is here precisely that the humanities and social sciences come into their own, offering a perspective whereby “biophilia turns into a goal which we need to work toward collectively, rather than an assumption that we can take for granted.”

Heise’s research over the last twenty-five years has focused on the cross-cultural study of environmental storytelling, that is, “the way in which environmental crises that look similar or identical from a scientific point of view are narrated differently in different regions and languages.” The UCLA professor explained in her talk that ideas of what nature is, how it relates to humans, what is beneficial or harmful about it and how it should look in the future “vary widely between cultures and change over the course of history. Knowing what these stories are and how they shape public attitudes is a crucial ingredient of successful environmental advocacy.”

As an example of the power of environmental storytelling, Heise referred to Félix Rodríguez de la Fuente and the impact achieved by his documentaries in 1970s Spain, filming the lives of threatened species like the Iberian wolf from the standpoint of the animal. In one episode, for example, he lent his voice to the struggles of a female wolf, “a dedicated, tender, and highly intelligent mother who puts her own life at risk by luring approaching hunters away from her den so as to protect her offspring.” From the same period she singles out the work of the American novelist Ursula K. Le Guin, who published short stories from the point of view of a rodent or a tree, highlighting human beings’ ill-treatment of these species in an appeal to our fellow feeling for other forms of life.

“These experiments in using viewers’ and readers’ immersion into a narrative world so as to encourage alternative attitudes toward nonhuman species have since been used in fictional and nonfictional approaches to nature across a wide variety of regions, languages, and cultures,” the awardee continued. “Some of the more hopeful of these stories open up ecological visions of what the American novelist Kim Stanley Robinson has called ‘optopia’: not the perfect societies envisioned by utopian projects, but improved societies whose cultures,

laws, and institutions work toward increased social justice in a continuous, dynamic, and contentious process.”

Other narratives of the natural world that Heise sees as having successfully "catalyzed modern environmental movements" were *Silent Spring*, Rachel Carson's book on the effects of pollution in the United States, David Attenborough's wildlife documentaries, which have reached a huge worldwide audience, and *An Inconvenient Truth*, the film by Davis Guggenheim and Al Gore that turned a spotlight on climate change. All bring proof, she believes, that "well-told stories have the power to generate biophilia and foster environmental conservation."

Heise ended her talk reflecting on the vital role that the environmental humanities are called on to play in the face of the dual challenge of climate change and the biodiversity crisis. "In the fractured media landscape of the twenty-first century, in which the multiple narratives of social media play a crucial role, a large number of storytellers and a wide diversity of strategies are needed to continue this work for a variety of audiences and languages. Environmental humanists around the world seek to develop narrative templates and train the next generation of storytellers to tell more-than-human stories and generate visions of biophilic futures."

### About the BBVA Foundation and the Biophilia Award

For two decades now, the protection of our planet has numbered among the BBVA Foundation's key focus areas, translating as support for scientific research, the funding of projects to conserve species, habitats and ecosystems, the promotion of an environmental culture in society at large, and the recognition of communication professionals who have contributed decisively to inform individual and collective engagement with the ecological issues of our time.

In 2004, it created the BBVA Foundation Awards for Biodiversity Conservation, distinguishing projects in defense of nature in Spain and worldwide along with achievements in communication and knowledge dissemination on environmental matters.

The BBVA Foundation Frontiers of Knowledge Awards, established in 2008, recognize scientific excellence in two environmental categories – Climate Change and Ecology and Conservation Biology – which take their place alongside the other fields of research and cultural creation addressed by these international prizes: basic sciences, biomedicine, information technologies, economics, humanities, social sciences and music.

In 2019 the BBVA Foundation launched its Biophilia Award with the aim of distinguishing the efforts of professionals and organizations in any country that have contributed exceptionally to

improving public understanding and awareness of environmental issues.

The name of the award alludes to the biophilia hypothesis proposed by naturalist Edward O. Wilson, 2010 Frontiers of Knowledge laureate in Ecology and Conservation Biology, to denote the deep connection that we as humans instinctively feel with nature and all forms of life.

The 6th edition of the Biophilia Award expanded its conceptual perimeter by expressly and preferentially including contributions from the realms of the humanities and social sciences that help reframe humankind's relationship with nature.

### Evaluation committee

The committee in this edition was chaired by **Silvia Churruga**, Director of the BBVA Foundation's Department of Communications and Institutional Relations, with members **Pilar Andrade Boue**, Associate Professor in the Department of Romance Languages (French section), at the Complutense University of Madrid (UCM); **Rodolfo Dirzo**, Bing Professor in Environmental Science and Senior Fellow at the Stanford Woods Institute for the Environment of Stanford University (United States) and Frontiers of Knowledge Award in Ecology and Conservation Biology (16<sup>th</sup> edition); **Pablo Jáuregui Narvaez**, Head of Scientific and Environmental Communication at the BBVA Foundation; **Richard Kerridge**, Coordinator of Graduate Studies and Research Management in the School of Writing, Publishing and the Humanities at Bath Spa University (United Kingdom); and **María Isabel Pérez Ramos**, a Ramón y Cajal research fellow in the Department of English, French and German Studies at the University of Oviedo.

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