

# Toktok Talkie

By Joh Henschel



## “The Lord in His wisdom made the fly, and then forgot to tell us why”

Ogden Nash was not the first or last person to have puzzled about the value of the fly, not only because flies have on occasion been considered a nuisance, but because biodiversity in general is a puzzle. Nash’s question can also be interpreted as going to the heart of conservation: why should we care that there are so many different species?

As every Namib toktokkie knows, beetles come in many different shapes, sizes, diets and natural histories. Our Toktok-Talkie icon, *Zophosis moralesi*, is just one of over a hundred other toktokkie species in the central Namib. A beetle is not just a beetle, every species has its particulars. And so do all species in the world. In total, there are about 1.5 million known species on earth, but it is estimated that the actual number is 5-10 million. Among such enormous variety, why should any single species (other than *Homo sapiens*) matter?

Well, lets see what values can be put to biodiversity. Immediately we think of commodity values, how we use organisms, and what we can sell them for, or their products. That may hold for quite a number of species, but it renders Nash’s fly pretty worthless, and even our Toktokkie does not really feature in terms of money. Amenity values can, however, increase the perceived worth and appreciation of a species. We enjoy observing nature or showing others, and can even make some money through tourism that way. However, the hard monetary value of biodiversity is arbitrary and fickle as fads come and go and economics peak and plummet. If we pin biodiversity value to money, rapid extinction is guaranteed for many species, even if they have other kinds of values.

What about the services that species deliver to us, or more general, to earth? That’s better. There is a large number of these, too many to list, but think about clean air, fertile soil, clean water, waste decomposition, medicine, pollination, erosion prevention, ... you name it! Even Nash’s fly features: it pollinates flowers, speeds up decomposition, and some fly maggots clean wounds. And our Toktokkie recycles the desert’s precious nutrients, among many other things it does. Without these services, earth would end up being unliveable for us. Now that’s worth something!

But there’s more! There is a lot we can learn from nature. Among many different kinds of moral lessons, there is the responsibility we have for them. Each species is irreplaceable, extinction forever. Species are so tightly interconnected in biotic communities that the extinction of one may cascade to others. We learn to be cautious, as we don’t know what we don’t know about the values of each species and its interrelationships; in future any particular species or community of species may reveal how invaluable it really is.

To Ogden Nash Toktokkie has this to say:  
The fly knows why it should exist,  
to annoy or destroy delusions that persist.

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