

Podcast

by Ilham Kadri

AND is the Future



EPISODE 4 | Business AND Biodiversity

with Margaret O’Gorman, president of the Wildlife Habitat Council



Topics:

- [Passion for nature](#)
- [Sixth extinction event](#)
- [Economic benefits of biodiversity preservation](#)
- [Building a culture of conservation](#)
- [Biodiversity: same level of urgency as climate](#)
- [Pandemics and link to biodiversity damage](#)
- [COP15 on biodiversity](#)
- [Importance of partnerships](#)
- [How do we measure progress?](#)
- [Best practices in biodiversity protection](#)
- [Favorite nature movies](#)

Ilham Kadri: I'm very happy to speak with Margaret O' Gorman, who is the president of the Wildlife Habitat Council. In that role, she works closely with multinational corporations like Solvay to develop and implement conservation projects that are good for biodiversity AND business alike. Margaret, thank you so much for being here today.

Margaret O'Gorman: It's my pleasure to be here and my pleasure to meet you.

Passion for nature

Ilham Kadri: So Margaret, your story is just fascinating and so interesting. You were born in Ireland, not far from here from Brussels, educated in Ireland and the UK. Then you immigrated to the United States of America. You are sitting in Washington, DC, as you told me before the podcast starts. And in the United States, you've worked for the most part of your career actually. You clearly have a great passion for nature and the outdoors. And when you are not working at Wildlife Habitat Council, you are an avid bike rider I heard and cycled most of the Danube from Germany to Serbia. And you recently rode from Venice to Roma, is that right?

Margaret O'Gorman: That's correct. That was our last bike trip before the pandemic was cycling from Venice to Rome.

Ilham Kadri: Unbelievable, and this sounds so amazing. So I was wondering if there was a specific moment in your life that really sparked that passion for nature and put you on the path of the great work you do today.

Margaret O'Gorman: Yeah, it's very interesting. When you work in the environmental community, you get asked that question a lot. And a lot of people answer it by saying an exposure to nature when they were children, but you know, most children love nature, most children are in awe of nature and have a relationship with nature. So I think what the most important kind of learning or question from that is how do you retain your passion for nature? And for me, it really is about education. I think when you learn about how a tiny egg can become a caterpillar and a butterfly, or how a bird, the size of a hamster can fly from the North Pole to the South Pole, and how frogs have antifreeze in their veins so that they don't freeze when they hibernate. And you know, the idea of a brown bulb becoming a luscious flower. All of these things, once you know the knowledge, it really is easy to keep that passion. So that's why I believe education about nature is so important because when people know how amazing it is, they can only really want to protect it.

Sixth extinction event

Ilham Kadri: Margaret, we're seeing some alarming numbers right now. The rates of which species are becoming extinct is an amazing thousand times higher than the natural rate. And 25% of species are threatened with extinction. How did this come, you know, to this level? And do you see enough action for companies and regulators to turn the tide?

Margaret O'Gorman: Yes, we are living in a very sad time on a variety of levels. But this, when we talk about nature and biodiversity, this is being called the sixth extinction event. So the other extinction events that are identified through the fossil record were large events caused by external factors and other factors. But this sixth extinction event is mostly caused by us, by humans and how we use the land. And yes, we're seeing a rate much higher than the normal background rate of extinctions and the Intergovernmental Panel on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services has said that about a million species could go extinct in the next 30 to 50 years. And that's very sad. And really how we've gotten here is how we use the planet, how us humans use the land, because really what it's about is the absence of space for species to thrive. And that absence of space has happened because of the way we have developed for agriculture, for living, for transportation. So habitat destruction and habitat fragmentation are the two leading causes of extinction. And we got there by having policies that allowed us to use the land in a way that didn't take nature into consideration. And what we're hoping in the future is that we will see a reversal of those policies, and that people, companies, governments will understand how to use the land in a way that would benefit nature as well as humankind.

Economic benefits of biodiversity preservation

Ilham Kadri: Absolutely. And Margaret, we know that we are living beyond the limits of the planets and that if everybody, for example, would live at the same level of standard, like in Belgium where I'm sitting, or maybe Washington DC, we need more than one planet, right? And the resources are limited. So we know protecting nature has always been crucial for businesses in a way, but lately it has become an imperative. Can you tell our listeners more about the urgency to act and what kind of data are you seeing on the economic benefits?

Margaret O'Gorman: Yes. It's been a really interesting evolution, especially over the last five years. I would say in terms of companies' engagement with biodiversity, I think the corporate sector embraced climate change faster, perhaps because it's easier to measure a ton of carbon than it is to measure the impact of biodiversity. But the last five years, for example, the World Economic

Forum has listed biodiversity loss in its global risk report as a top five or top seven in terms of likelihood and impact on the economy. So when you're seeing, and that global risk report is informed by people like you, by CEOs and leaders in the private sector, as well as in the non-governmental sector. So we're seeing businesses understand that biodiversity is at risk and that that risk is not just a risk to nature, but also a risk to the economy. And I'm very bad at remembering numbers and data, but one of the data points that I always remember from this risk is our pollinators. So one in three bites of food that we eat is pollinated, is created by pollinators and the economic impact of pollinators to the global economy is equivalent to that of the three largest auto manufacturing companies. So if pollinators were to disappear tomorrow, it would be the similar economic impact if Ford, Stellantis, and Toyota were to disappear tomorrow with the ripple effect outwards in the economy. And I think you know, when you think about a bee, that's what we're talking about. We're talking about our pollinators and that is the impact that those very small, but very important creatures have.

Ilham Kadri: Wow. Thank you for making that connection. I think that image is more powerful than the numbers. So, and that was actually the main focus of your wonderful book. I have it with me here called Strategic Corporate Conservation Planning. It really lays out the business case for biodiversity protection and provides concrete steps businesses can take to move from an idea to really impact. Can you tell our listeners, Margaret, more about the book?

Margaret O'Gorman: Yeah, sure. I wrote the book as a way to engage more companies and more NGOs in conversations that were positive about conservation. So we have this paradigm of environmental NGOs viewing companies as either the enemy, because they have created damage or as deep pocketed philanthropists who can support their work. But there's a huge middle in that. And that's the middle where Wildlife Habitat Council has been working for three decades and that's actually working in partnership with companies to make change happen on their grounds, on their lands. And what I want to do is to really encourage companies and nonprofits to think about that big middle, because to reach our goals of a nature positive future, we need corporate lands, we need private sector lands, and we need to figure out a way to live and work in harmony with nature. So by helping to show what a conversation with a company is, that's beyond philanthropy and actually about partnership, that was really the reason that I wrote that book is to help change the mindsets of people who might have a very strict mindset with respect to how you work with the private sector.

Building a culture of conservation

Ilham Kadri: Yeah, and I love that Margaret. As you say, there is this dialogue and there is a sense of urgency. By the way, my favorite chapter was on building the corporate culture of conservation, I think, which is of course what we are trying to do at our scale at Solvay. Can you tell us what you think it takes to really build a strong culture within a company around biodiversity matters?

Margaret O'Gorman: Yeah, it never ceases to amaze me how much joy people get from engaging with nature in their workplace or as part of their daily jobs, even if it's a volunteer activity. And just to meet people, get joy from nature anyway, but we spend a lot of time talking to ordinary employees and companies about their projects that they're doing on the corporate lands and without fail, they are proud of what they've done, they're prouder of that than they are probably anything else because they see what happens when you engage with nature. So I really believe that creating culture of nature starts at the top, the distance that you have from somebody working in one of your operations is a vast distance and helping by starting at the top, but then making sure there are communications that go through what we call the clay layer of management

Ilham Kadri: Yeah.

Margaret O'Gorman: which managers in your company might say- Oh my gosh, we're not a clay layer, but we do find that, you know, managers are protective of their regions, they're protective of their operations. They're protective of their budgets. So finding ways to send those messages through the clay layer of management into the operations is as critical to creating that culture. And what we found is a couple of things really help that and recognition and competition, friendly competition are two things that help to create those cultures by you know, joining those dots basically from the C-suite to the factory floor.

Biodiversity: same level of urgency as climate

Ilham Kadri: Yeah, by the way, Margaret, you had a very interesting chapter on the strong link between the biodiversity and the climate. Can you talk a little bit more about that and is there a same sense of urgency on biodiversity as we see on the climate recently?

Margaret O'Gorman: That is a great question. And it's one that I spend a lot of time thinking about. There was an academic paper published about three years ago that was called Our House is on Fire. And it was an assessment of the difference between the coverage of climate in the media and the coverage of biodiversity. And it showed the climate, even though climate was still not getting

enough media attention, the climate gets eight times more media attention than the biodiversity crisis. So while both are existential to the planet and both are not being treated equally. Now we've seen recent efforts by certainly at IPCC at the last climate COP for biodiversity to be part of that. And I think that is happening that the two planetary environmental crises are coming together. But climate change itself is having an impact on biodiversity. Changing temperatures are changing the ranges of species, species live within very well-defined ranges of temperature and other aspects of life. So those changes in temperature are maybe causing species to flower earlier. But the pollinators that depend on those flowers are not arriving until later. So there's a lot of kind of systems becoming out of sync. And then on the other side of the climate resilience and adaptation, where we're seeing increased storms, increased fires, et cetera, et cetera, they are also having an impact on species we've seen in Australia where the iconic koala is as being almost going to be listed soon because of the fires happening there. The same have happened west in the US where the fires are impacting species because they don't have anywhere to go. Again, back to that use of land where we need, we really need to supply corridors. So the two are very much linked. They're not equal in terms of the amount of investments being given to them, the amount of coverage being given to them. But the one thing I would say about the biodiversity crisis is extinction is forever. Once we lose a species that is gone, we can engineer our way out of climate, probably not equitably or fairly, but once a species has gone, it's gone forever.

Ilham Kadri: It's gone. So what you're saying is there is even, there's a sense of urgency and even more so we need to take care of biodiversity as much as climate.

Pandemics and link to biodiversity damage

Ilham Kadri: By the way, Margaret, the pandemic as well, right, pandemics in general are due to loss of biodiversity. And we know that the pandemics have their origin in diverse microbes, viruses, carried by animal reservoirs, but their emergence is entirely driven by human activities and the loss of biodiversity and if there is one proof, proof point it's the COVID-19 pandemic, which took us by surprise and put biodiversity in the spotlight. Do you think these fact has helped to mobilize people more to act due to COVID-19 pandemic? Have you seen that?

Margaret O'Gorman: You know, I feel like the opposite can happen. I am a great fan of bats. I love bats. Bats are one of my favorite animals, but just because they're such an interesting evolution and adaptation. So when I read stories in the media that it was bats that were, you know, at fault, the way it's framed is it's

the bat's fault. And that is not true. You know it was the human interaction with wildlife and I feel like some of the framing has created a situation and you know I think it was in Hong Kong recently where they're killing every hamster or something, because I mean, that's not wildlife. But we feel that okay, we can just eradicate entire species of mink farms, where you know, minks were euthanized because they were carrying COVID. So we don't euthanize people, we shouldn't be euthanizing animals. And I think somewhere along the line, the animal as the blame for this became a narrative that if we're not careful, we could end up in a very sad situation because bats are vital for our ecosystem. They eat tons of mosquitoes, tons of bad insects, they're pollinators. So we really need to be careful as to how we frame that discussion of you know, animal-human interaction with respect to diseases, because it really was the human aspect of that interaction, not the animals.

COP15 on biodiversity

Ilham Kadri: Obviously, so insightful what you are saying. So when this podcast comes out, we will have already had phase two of the COP15 convention on biodiversity, Margaret. What's your expectations for COP15 and, you know, are you disappointed by the COPs, right? Or are you hopeful? And what do you hope will be accomplished? And then we shall see, we shall monitor. But I'm keen to understand what are your hopes and ambitions for this new COP15.

Margaret O'Gorman: Yeah. It's a real challenge. I'm sure at phase two of COP15, we won't see the celebrities that showed up at the climate COP, it won't get the same coverage and that's okay as long as the work gets done. And I think the convention of biological diversity has a lot of ambitious goals for the post 2020 agenda, which it needs to have. Because none of the 2020 agenda goals for biodiversity were met, not a single goal that was set was met. So they need to have very ambitious goals. But the problem is in the structure I think of how we manage nature in the governance way. And I was at a panel or a conference, sometime during the pandemic where Tony Juniper, he's the head of English nature, talked about how governments, in governments, we have wildlife professionals. And those wildlife professionals or biodiversity professionals are all the ones who have created the successes for biodiversity, the recovery of the species. But the destruction of nature happens in the other government agencies, The Department of Economic Development, The Department of Transportation, and all of those. So he made a suggestion that we really need to put the wildlife, the biodiversity experts into the other departments to try and help them to think about it. So when we continue to see biodiversity as being sidelined as a specialty in government, we're always going to have that

bifurcation of responsibility. So I think that would be something really good to see come out of the phase two of COP15 is understanding how international and national and subnational governments could actually make a change to their structures to allow for nature to have a place at the table. I think we should have a Minister for Nature in every country. You know, that's my opinion. We have, you know, a special invoice for climate, which should have the same for nature, so that's what I'd like to see. But I also see coming out from that, there's a growing attention to how subsidies have this impact, this negative impact on nature and really understanding how those subsidies are having those impacts - where those subsidies are coming from, where they're going to and thinking about those in the longer term sense of their impacts on nature. I think that's going to be a very interesting thing that comes out of the post 2020 agenda.

Importance of partnerships

Ilham Kadri: Yeah, I love Margaret your call for Ministry of Nature. I'm sure you will get a lot of phone calls, so let's pick it up. Margaret, I mean, in all these themes we cannot do it alone, right? So you need partnership, the value chain is important, we've seen it in climate, with scope three right or circularity, I guess the same is you know is true for biodiversity. What would you say companies can achieve through partnership that they can't achieve alone? And what about the value chain, is it important to have a holistic approach rather than myopic focused approach in our own, you know, box? And how will you invite companies to collaborate more with each other?

Margaret O'Gorman: Yeah. I feel that one of the things that the biodiversity community needs to learn from climate is the scope three approach, company after company has been allowed to say that biodiversity is not a materiality for years now. But that's because the way we've defined materiality for biodiversity is different to how we've defined it for climate. So we need a scope three approach for biodiversity, we need to look at the value chain, we need to look at all of those things that are encompassed by scope three in climate. And then I think partnerships, your question about partnerships, they're absolutely vital, they're so vital from the ground up. So to protect nature, to restore nature, you need to be acting in a place. Nature is a place-based entity, you can't take action for nature from the top story of a skyscraper in Manhattan. You can make policies and you can talk about it, but you need to be on the ground. And to be on the ground. You need to know what you're trying to do. And local partners are critical for that because they really understand their place, the conservation context in which they live, much better than anybody else. And I think we need to value local knowledge and local partnership, whether it's in an urban area or a wild area, the

local people really understand and local entities really understand. So those partnerships are critical and then partnerships out the value chain are also critical because change can be driven significant and systematic change can be driven when you know, partners along the supply chain can all start to take action for nature.

How do we measure progress?

Ilham Kadri: Yeah, and I love it the way you stated it is we need scope three for biodiversity and we need suppliers, our customers, right, the whole value chain, right to support us. By the way, Solvay is working with the Wildlife Habitat Council to analyze the results from the integrated assessments from biodiversity assessment to methodology assessment developed by the United Nations. Could you in simple words, to a non-professional maybe, audience why such assessments are essential for progress and what is the best way to measure progress?

Margaret O'Gorman: Well, if I knew the best way to measure progress, I'd be the first Minister for Nature. You know, measuring biodiversity is one of the most challenging things out there because it's such a multifaceted, it's a system, it's not a ton of carbon. The IBAT tool has been trying to create a way for companies to understand where they sit with respect to nature, create a baseline for nature and move from there. But these assessments are so critical because we do need to know what our baseline is so that we can show that we are making an improvement. At WHC because we have the certification program, we talked for many years about what does it mean to make improvements for nature? How do we get companies...and it's not saying like to solvay corporate, it's saying to you know, the location in Brazil, or the location in somewhere else it's saying to them, what is your impact on nature? So it's a whole different story. It's thinking locally and thinking about the resources that are there. So we really tried to get people to first off understand where they are, what their conservation context is, and then looking at that, what is the global or regional conservation goal for that area and how to join the dots between what the operation is trying to do and say what the local, you know, what the Natura 2000 goal is, in the US, it's the State Wildlife Action Plan in various different countries. So linking those two together are very important. So we really think about intent and action rather than outcome, because most conservation projects don't have complete control over their outcomes, you know, attributability is very difficult. And also whether there's so many things. So if you know what you're trying to do, and you're doing it in the right way, that's 90% of the way, the next 10% is luck that the weather will work

fine and things like that. But the assessment of where you are is absolutely critical.

Ilham Kadri: Yeah. And I love what you said about the criticality of being local because, you know, and that's what we are trying to do at Solvay as chapter two of our Solvay One Planet. But now we realize that we need to go to the site level, right? Because you cannot just dictate it from Brussels, you need the site leader to own it. And the community in the plants, in the office around, you know our sites to really own it. So I really love what you said.

Best practices in biodiversity protection

Ilham Kadri: You work with so many companies, right, Margaret? And must have so many interesting conservation projects or you know, is there a project or company that you say- Wow, this is really exemplary in their efforts in the way they've done it. And best examples of biodiversity protection efforts that you have seen.

Margaret O'Gorman: We have over 600 certified programs and then we work with companies that are not seeking certification. So there's so many stories and we have a conference every year, where about 400 people who are working on corporate conservation come together. And I hear these stories constantly. And as I said, people are, so I said earlier, so joyful in telling their story. But the ones that resonate with me are those that are surprising juxtapositions of nature and industry. You know, we can talk about preservation in wild places or conservation in wild places. But one of my favorite ones is Cleveland Cliffs is a steel company in the US and they have a steel mill on the shores of Lake Michigan. And years ago, one of the steel workers decided to reclaim 40 acres of land. It had, um, slag heaps from the steelmaking industry and contractors, huts and things. And he decided to reclaim that land and to restore it for nature. And today that land is, it's in the migratory path of the Piping Plover, which is a federally endangered bird in the US. So today that land which sits right next to a national park is actually better Piping Plover habitat because it doesn't have people making human disturbance there that would allow the birds to actually have a healthy breeding season. And what fascinates me about it is that you can stand looking out over lake Michigan onto this beautifully restored land while they're behind you is a steel mill that looks like every steel mill of your imagination doing its steel stuff, making steel for the auto industry, but in front of you, you have this beautifully restored ecosystem. And I just love that juxtaposition of the steel industry and a tiny little bird. And you know, it's just such a cool thing. So that's one of my favorite projects.

Ilham Kadri: I really love it. And I'm sure many of our Solvay colleagues who will be listening to you will love it because that's about, you know, the industry is not an enemy, you can do both. And this is the regeneration of the land and the biodiversity. So I really love it.

Favorite nature movies

Ilham Kadri: I know you are an avid movie goer, right? And I was wondering, what would you say is the film or movie that has the most spectacular view of nature and although you are a traveler and a rider, and what is your all-time favorite movie, Margaret?

Margaret O'Gorman: Okay, oh gosh. For nature. I think there's two movies that I love. One is the Secret Garden, which is really the book is what I love, because it's all about finding joy in nature as young people. And there's this beautiful character in it who just speaks to nature as a young boy. And how this young girl just discovers this garden. It's so beautiful. But I think the most amazing nature movie really is Avatar and how you know, I mean, it's not based in any real life, but the is very obvious that this is about nature and this is about really you know understanding how nature can speak back to people. I think it was one of the first movies I ever saw an IMAX and I was blown away by it. So I always think about that. That's such great movie. But my all-time favorite movie is a really weird movie. It's actually about the aggregates industry. It's a movie called Locke, L O C K E. And it follows the journey of a man in a car driving to a cement pour as his life falls apart. It sounds really awful, but it's actually a really wonderful movie.

Ilham Kadri: I will look it up. I hope I can find it. Yeah. But I share with you this Avatar, I mean, including the music, by the way, Margaret, it's just all-time favorite music for me, movie music. Well, thank you so much Margaret for joining me today. Your passion for nature is just so inspiring. You are a true leader who is driving changes and important ones in business around you and making a better world. So I know again you are an avid bike rider, so if you come back to Europe, stop by Brussels. We have a famous bike rider, Eddie Merckx and we love it. Here, it's really flat, so you can come any time and we would love to welcome you and thank you again for the great work and for speaking with me today.

Margaret O'Gorman: Oh thank you so much. It has been a real pleasure. And I have to say it's a real pleasure to work with Solvay across the board. Everybody that we have connected with has been so good and enthusiastic. So thank you for that opportunity as well.

Ilham Kadri: Thank you, Margaret.



ABOUT THE GUEST

Margaret O’Gorman is the president of the Wildlife Habitat Council. In that role, she works closely with multinational corporations to develop and implement conservation projects that are good for biodiversity AND business alike. She is the author of [Strategic Corporate Conservation Planning: A Guide to Meaningful Engagement](#), which helps companies create a culture of conservation.



ABOUT THE HOST

Ilham Kadri is a purpose-driven business leader, scientist, optimist and world citizen who is passionate about making businesses sustainable AND profitable, science-based AND human, daring AND caring. [Full bio](#)

ABOUT THE PODCAST

AND is the future is a podcast hosted by Solvay CEO Ilham Kadri that brings together great minds to address the opportunities and challenges of making businesses both sustainable AND profitable. The podcast will gather thought leaders across the globe to discuss how businesses can profitably reach carbon neutrality and sustainability goals, ensure that innovation is at the service of humanity and its progress, protect biodiversity, transform the value chain, unleash peoples’ full potential through diversity, equity and inclusion, and much more! Find more on [solvay.com](https://www.solvay.com).