

# Human destruction of nature is 'senseless and suicidal', warns UN chief

## UN report offers bedrock for hope for broken planet, says António Guterres



A sign protesting against investments in fossil fuels. The UN report says trillions of dollars of 'perverse' subsidies must be diverted to green energy. Photograph: Saul Loeb/AFP via Getty

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Humanity is waging a “senseless and suicidal” war on nature that is causing human suffering and enormous economic losses while accelerating the destruction of life on Earth, the UN secretary-general, António Guterres, has said.

Guterres’s starkest warning to date came at the launch of a **UN report** setting out the triple emergency the world is in: the climate crisis, the devastation of wildlife and nature, and the pollution that causes many millions of early deaths every year.

Making peace with nature was the defining task of the coming decades, he said, and the key to a prosperous and sustainable future for all people. The report combines **recent major UN assessments** with the latest research and the solutions available, representing an authoritative scientific blueprint of how to repair the planet.

The report says societies and economies must be transformed by policies such as replacing GDP as an economic measure with one that reflects the true value of nature, as recommended this month by a **study commissioned by the UK Treasury**.

Carbon emissions **need to be taxed**, and trillions of dollars of “**perverse**” **subsidies for fossil fuels** and **destructive farming** must be diverted to green energy and food production, the report says. As well as systemic changes, people in rich nations can act too, it says, by **cutting meat consumption** and wasting less energy and water.



'Put a big fat price on carbon': OECD chief bows out with climate rally cry

“Humanity is waging war on nature. This is senseless and suicidal,” said Guterres. “The consequences of our recklessness are already apparent in human

suffering, towering economic losses, and the accelerating erosion of life on Earth.”

The triple emergency threatened our viability as a species, he said. But ending the war would not mean poorer living standards or an end to poverty reduction. “On the contrary, making peace with nature, securing its health and building on the critical and undervalued benefits that it provides are key to a prosperous and sustainable future for all.”

“This report provides the bedrock for hope,” he said. “It makes clear our war on nature has left the planet broken. But it also guides us to a safer place by providing a peace plan and a postwar rebuilding programme.”

Inger Andersen, the head of the UN Environment Programme (Unep), said: “We need to look no further than the global pandemic caused by Covid-19, a disease transmitted from animals to humans, to know that the finely tuned system of the natural world has been disrupted.” Unep and the World Health Organization have said the root cause of pandemics is **the destruction of the natural world**, with **worse outbreaks** to come unless action is taken.

The report says the fivefold growth of the global economy in the last 50 years was largely fuelled by a huge increase in the extraction of fossil fuels and other resources, and has come at massive cost to the environment. The world population has doubled since 1970 and while average prosperity has also doubled, 1.3 billion people remain in poverty and 700 million are hungry.

It says current measures to tackle the environmental crises are far short of what is needed: the world remains **on track** for catastrophic warming of 3C above pre-industrial levels, a **million species face extinction** and **90% of people live with dirty air**.



Humans just 0.01% of all life but have destroyed 83% of wild mammals – study

“We use three-quarters of the land and two-thirds of the oceans – we are completely dominating the Earth,” said Ivar Baste of the Norwegian Environment Agency, a lead author of the report.

Prof Sir Robert Watson, who has led UN scientific assessments on climate and biodiversity and is the other lead author of the report, said: “We have got a triple emergency and these three issues are all interrelated and have to be dealt with together. They’re no longer just environmental issues – they are economic issues, development issues, security issues, social, moral and ethical issues.

“Of all the things we have to do, we have to really rethink our economic and financial systems. Fundamentally, GDP doesn’t take nature into account. We need to get rid of these perverse subsidies, they are \$5-7tn a year. If you could move some of these **towards low-carbon technology** and investing in nature, then the money is there.”

This meant taking on companies and countries with vested interests in fossil fuels, he said: “There are a lot of people that really like these perverse subsidies. They love the status quo. So governments have to have the guts to act”.

Financial institutions could play a huge role, Watson said, by ending funding for fossil fuels, the razing of forests and large-scale monoculture agriculture. Companies should act too, he said: “Proactive companies see that if they can be sustainable, they can be first movers and make a profit. But in some cases, regulation will almost certainly be needed for those companies that don’t care.”

Pollution was included in the report because despite improvements in some wealthy nations, toxic air, water, soils and workplaces cause **at least 9 million deaths a year**, one in six of all deaths. “This is still a huge issue,” said Baste.

The world’s nations will gather at two crucial UN summits in 2021 on the **climate** and **biodiversity** crises. “We know we failed miserably on the **biodiversity targets** [set in 2010],” said Watson. “I’ll be very disappointed if at these summits all they talk about is targets and goals. They’ve got to talk about actions – that’s really what’s crucial.”

# UN: Huge changes in society needed to keep nature, Earth OK

BY SETH BORENSTEIN AP



FILE - In this Monday, Feb. 1, 2021 file photo, emissions from a coal-fired power plant are silhouetted against the setting sun in Independence, Mo. A United Nations report released on Thursday, Feb. 18, 2021 says humans are making Earth a broken and increasingly unlivable planet through climate change, biodiversity loss and pollution. So the world must make dramatic changes to society, economics and daily life. (AP Photo/Charlie Riedel)

Humans are making Earth a broken and increasingly unlivable planet through climate change, biodiversity loss and pollution. So the world must make dramatic changes to society, economics and daily life, a new United Nations report says.



FILE - In this Friday, Jan. 22, 2021 file photo, plastic bottles and other garbage floats in the Potpecko lake near Priboj, in southwest Serbia. A United Nations report released on Thursday, Feb. 18, 2021 says humans are making Earth a broken and increasingly unlivable planet through climate change, biodiversity loss and pollution. So the world must make dramatic changes to society, economics and daily life. (AP Photo/Darko Vojinovic)



FILE - In this Wednesday, Feb. 17, 2021 file photo, the lakebed of Suesca lagoon sits dry and cracked, in Suesca, Colombia, after years of very little rainfall. A United Nations report released on Thursday, Feb. 18, 2021 says humans are making Earth a broken and increasingly unlivable planet through climate change, biodiversity loss and pollution. So the world must make dramatic changes to society, economics and daily life. (AP Photo/Fernando Vergara)

Unlike past U.N. reports that focused on one issue and avoided telling leaders actions to take, [Thursday's report](#) combines three intertwined environment crises and tells the world what's got to change. It calls for changing what governments tax, how nations value economic output, how power is generated, the way people get around, fish and farm, as well as what they eat.

<https://wedocs.unep.org/xmlui/bitstream/handle/20.500.11822/34948/MPN.pdf>

“Without nature’s help, we will not thrive or even survive,” Secretary-General Antonio Guterres said. “For too long, we have been waging a



senseless and suicidal war on nature. The result is three interlinked environmental crises.”

Thus the 168-page report title is blunt: “Making Peace With Nature.”

“Our children and their children will inherit a world of extreme weather events, sea level rise, a drastic loss of plants and animals, food and water insecurity and increasing likelihood of future pandemics,” said report lead author [Sir Robert Watson](#), who has chaired past UN science reports on [climate change](#) and [biodiversity loss](#).

“The emergency is in fact more profound than we thought only a few years ago,” said Watson, who has been a top level scientist in the U.S. and British governments.



This year “is a make-it or break-it year indeed because the risk of things becoming irreversible is gaining ground every year,” Guterres said. “We are close to the point of no return.”

The report highlighted what report co-author [Rachel Warren](#) of the University of East Anglia called “a litany of frightening statistics that hasn’t really been brought together:”

- Earth is on the way to an additional 3.5 degrees warming from now (1.9 degrees Celsius), far more than the international agreed upon goals in the Paris accord.
- About 9 million people a year die from pollution.
- About 1 million of Earth's 8 million species of plants and animals are threatened with extinction.
- Up to 400 million tons of heavy metals, toxic sludge and other industrial waste are dumped into the world's waters every year.
- More than 3 billion people are affected by land degradation, and only 15% of Earth's wetlands remain intact.
- About 60% of fish stocks are fished at the maximum levels. There are more than 400 oxygen-depleted "dead zones" and marine plastics pollution has increased tenfold since 1980.

"In the end it will hit us," said biologist Thomas Lovejoy, who was a scientific advisor to the report. "It's not what's happening to elephants. It's not what's happening to climate or sea level rise. It's all going to impact us."

The planet's problems are so interconnected that they must be worked on together to be fixed right, Warren said. And many of the solutions, such as eliminating fossil fuel use, combat multiple problems including climate change and pollution, she said.

The report "makes it clear that there is no time for linear thinking or tackling problems one at a time," said University of Michigan environment professor Rosina Bierbaum, who wasn't part of the work.

In another break, this report gives specific solutions that it says must be taken.

This report uses the word "must" 56 times and "should" 37 times. There should be 100 more because action is so crucial, said former U.N. climate chief Christiana Figueres, who wasn't part of the report.

“Time has totally ran out. That’s why the word ‘must’ is in there,” Figueres said.

The report calls for an end to fossil fuel use and says governments should not tax labor or production, but rather use of resources that damages nature.

“Governments are still playing more to exploit nature than to protect it,” Guterres said. “Globally, countries spend some 4 to 6 trillion dollars a year on subsidies that damage the environment.”

Scientists should inform leaders about environmental risks “but their endorsement of specific public policies threatens to undermine the credibility of their science,” said former Republican Rep. Bob Inglis, who founded the free market climate think tank [RepublicEn.org](https://www.RepublicEn.org).

The report also tells nations to value nature in addition to the gross domestic product when calculating how an economy is doing.

Getting there means changes by individuals, governments and business, but it doesn’t have to involve sacrifice, said [UN Environment Programme Director Inger Andersen](#).

“There’s a country that has been on that path for 25 years: Costa Rica,” Andersen said. “Yes, these are difficult times, but more and leaders are stepping in.”

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