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## **World 'needs new wildlife body'**

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**The world needs a new global organisation dedicated to stemming the loss of plant and animal species.**

That is the argument put forward by a group of eminent academics in this week's edition of the journal *Nature*.

They call for the establishment of an Intergovernmental Panel on Biodiversity (IPB) to parallel the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC).

Recent studies show continuing loss of biodiversity, with the hippo and polar bear just added to the danger list.

The 2006 Red List of Threatened Species showed more than 16,000 plants and animals sliding towards their demise, including a third of amphibian species and a quarter of mammals.

"The international community is failing on its biodiversity targets," said Alfred Oteng-Yeboah from the Council for Scientific and Industrial Research (CSIR), the Ghanaian government's science advisory body.

*"It'll need significant investment - we're not sure exactly how much, but certainly more than anybody has given us"*

**Jeffrey McNeely, IUCN**

**Species slide to extinction**

## **Action needed on amphibians**

### **Squeeze on Earth's species**

"And we see [the new body] as a process to actually move the actions forward, to ensure that people get engaged in all kinds of activity that will actually halt the loss of biodiversity," he told the BBC News website from Accra.

Dr Oteng-Yeboah is one of the 19 signatories of the Nature letter, who also include former IPCC head Robert Watson from the World Bank, and the towering figure of Peter Raven, director of the Missouri Botanical Garden.

### **Slow progress**

The Convention on Biological Diversity, spawned by the Rio de Janeiro Earth Summit in 1992, commits governments to achieving at least a significant reduction in the rate of species and ecosystem loss by 2010.

But year after year, with the publication of successive Red Lists and numerous other authoritative scientific reports, it becomes clear that progress is not fast enough to meet that goal.

Equally clear is the knock-on impact on human livelihoods, particularly in developing nations.

As the Nature letter puts it: "Because biodiversity loss is essentially irreversible, it poses serious threats to sustainable development and the quality of life of future generations."

The Millennium Ecosystem Assessment, a vast four-year international research programme which began to report its findings last year, found that two-thirds of "ecosystem services" - the benefits which humans derive from the natural world - are being eroded.

Even when these services could be protected, they often are not, sometimes because policymakers are not acting on the available science.

"One of the most dramatic examples is mangroves," said Jeffrey McNeely, chief scientist with the World Conservation Union (IUCN).

"Scientists including economists have made it very clear that mangroves are incredibly valuable as mangroves, much more valuable

than they are as shrimp farms," he told the BBC News website.

"But because of political reasons, mangroves get converted into shrimp ponds which produce cheap shrimps for export at the cost of long-term environmental protection."

## **Many bodies**

Several global bodies with a remit to reduce biodiversity loss already exist, including the United Nations Environment Programme (Unep), the Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD), and IUCN, which publishes the Red Lists.

## **WHAT ARE THE THREATS?**

- Human activities threaten 99% of Red List species
- Habitat loss and degradation are the main threats, affecting more than 80% of listed birds, mammals and amphibians
- Climate change is increasingly recognised as a serious threat
- Other issues relating to human activity include introduction of alien species, over-exploitation and pollution

All involve a majority of the world's governments, and IUCN in particular is closely linked with conservation bodies in the academic and NGO spheres.

Initiatives to build a new global biodiversity alliance have been underway for a few years now, and were given a huge boost last year by the French president Jacques Chirac, who spoke approvingly of the concept at a conference in Paris.

Even by the standards of the jargon-laden conservation community, the name of the initiative - the Consultative Process Towards an International Mechanism Of Scientific Expertise on Biodiversity (Imoseb) - is a real mouthful.

Now, through the Nature letter, the concept has acquired a new name, the Intergovernmental Panel on Biodiversity (IPB).

Jeffrey McNeely, who was not a signatory on the letter in Nature, supports the idea.

He believes the key issue is to integrate science with policymaking, in a body that could co-ordinate and commission research with the full involvement of governments which would have to decide whether to implement its recommendations.

But, he said, it would need money and political commitment on a level which governments have not yet displayed on biodiversity if it is to

succeed. "We, the IUCN, would love to be able to play this role, but nobody funds us to play this role," he said.

## All silent down at the pond

### The value of the last



"So to be realistic, we're willing to be part of a larger group of institutions and governments who are willing to put in the necessary funds to make this happen.

"It's not going to be cheap; it'll need significant investment - we're not sure exactly how much, but certainly more than anybody has given us."

The proposed new body, Imoseb or IPB, may arise from the ongoing process of UN reform that could also re-write Unep's mandate.

In the end, the success of any international attempt to stem biodiversity loss will have less to do with internal structures and acronyms than with the will of funding and regulating governments.

The parallel of climate change leads to thoughts of the Kyoto Protocol, which attempts, among other things, to sanction governments that miss targets on greenhouse gas emissions.

Should, or could, a biodiversity agreement ever emerge with similar teeth? If it did, would those teeth slowly be pulled, as have those of Kyoto, when uncomfortable political realities became clear?

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