

# Habitat loss threatens all our futures, world leaders warned

Biodiversity experts say mass extinction of wildlife is as big a danger as climate change

**Jonathan Watts**

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The Sumatran orangutan is one of thousands of critically endangered species. Photograph: Anup Shah/Nature PL

As a UN conference convenes to work out a new deal for protecting the planet's biodiversity, the focus falls on the nations that are not attending.

Amid the worst loss of life on Earth since the demise of the dinosaurs, the agenda at the **Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD)** in the Egyptian resort of Sharm el-Sheikh **could hardly be more important**, but the spirit of international collaboration appears to be as much at risk of extinction as the world's endangered wildlife. The United States has never signed up and Brazil is among a growing group of countries where new nationalist leaders are **shifting away** from global cooperation.

The two-week meeting of the CBD is its first in two years. It has always been the neglected sibling of its twin, the **United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change**. The two organisations were conceived amid great hope at the **Rio Earth summit in 1992** but while the energy transition has attracted heads of state interested in billion-dollar renewable projects, the **effort to save the natural world** has been left to weak environment ministries, conservation NGOs and underfunded scientists.

Media research suggests there is only one news story about UN biodiversity talks for every 20 about UN climate negotiations. Coverage tends to focus on a few totemic species, such as lions, chimpanzees and pandas, rather than the collapsing ecosystems on which we depend. Yet there is growing evidence that the crisis of the natural world has become as much of a threat to humankind and is amplifying the chaos in the world's weather systems.

Since 1970 humanity has wiped out 60% of mammals, birds, fish and reptiles, according to the latest **Living Planet report by WWF**, which warned that the loss of wildlife was now an emergency that is threatening our civilisation. This followed a report earlier this year that **one in eight bird species** is threatened with global extinction. Recent studies have also tracked calamitous declines of pollinating insects in the US, Costa Rica and Germany, promoting warnings of ecological Armageddon.

Cristiana Paşca Palmer, the head of the CBD, says we must stem the loss of biodiversity or face the prospect of our own extinction. But the global mechanics to do that are missing.

Part of the reason for the low level of interest is that the last two major biodiversity agreements – in 2002 and 2010 – have been ineffectual. At Nagoya in Japan eight years ago, the 196 signatory nations to the CBD signed up to the **Aichi biodiversity targets**: to at least halve the loss of natural habitats, ensure sustainable fishing in all waters, and expand nature reserves from 10% to 17% of the world's land by 2020.

With two years left in the Aichi plan, the conference this year will show that many of the 20 targets have been missed. And even apparent progress in the creation of new protected areas is misleading because governments from Brazil to China have done little to police these “paper reserves”.

Mike Barrett, executive director of science and conservation at WWF, said the starting point should be a recognition that the international response until now has been a failure. Instead of the old approach of vague targets and a reliance on weak environment ministries to designate more protected areas, he stressed the need for more ambitious efforts across all levels from companies and individuals to farms and finance ministries.

More important still, he said, was to consider trade and investment because it is no use wealthy countries donating a few hundred million dollars for conservation programmes in Africa, Asia and Latin America if they continue to promote trillion-dollar trades in commodities that accelerate the loss of habitats. As an example, he said the UK contributes money to efforts to protect the Cerrado savannah in Brazil yet at the same time **imports vast quantities** of the soya beans that are the biggest cause of deforestation in that region.

“It's completely incoherent,” said Barrett, who was a delegate for the UK at the Nagoya conference. “We must tackle the drivers of biodiversity loss or we will be in same place in 10 years' time.”

He wants a pledge by countries, companies and consumers to reduce their global footprints. Following the approach of the Paris climate talks, these bottom-up commitments would be tallied together in a registry and revisited every few years to measure whether the world is on track or in need of a further ratcheting up of ambition.

**Izabella Teixeira**, who led the Brazilian negotiating team in Nagoya, blamed the failure of the 2010 goals on the inability of conservationists to build ties with other sectors of government and business.

'The most intellectual creature to ever walk Earth is destroying its only home'

*Jane Goodall*

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“There is no comprehensive political and economic constituency for this agenda as there is with the climate and now water,” she said. “We have to build a new policy bringing together science, environment and innovation. Industry is important for this. We need clearer rules for investing in biotechnology, and use of protected areas and infrastructure and logistics to enable business and research.”

Over the next two weeks, delegates will start work on a framework for new targets, which they hope will be finalised by state leaders in China in 2020. The objective is to have an accord with the same level of political commitment as the Paris climate treaty and to recognise that the two issues are linked.

In the current political climate, that will be difficult. Even climate talks have struggled to make sufficient progress. Conservationists say an intermeshing of the two threats is essential if they are to get global attention.

“Many of the things we need to do to address biodiversity loss are exactly what we need to solve the climate problem,” said Matt Walpole of Flora and Fauna International. “We haven’t succeeded in getting across how important biodiversity is. It’s not just about a few endangered species. It is absolutely clear that what is happening to our ecosystems has an impact on humanity.”