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A third of 'protected' nature zones are quietly being ruined



The Niassa Reserve in Mozambique is supposedly a protected area

James Allan

By Andy Coghlan

Roads, farmers, loggers and house-builders are ruining at least one

third of the world's 200,000 protected areas, where nature is supposed to be flourishing.

The largest survey to date of human incursion into protected areas found that 32.8 per cent of protected land is under “intense human pressure”. The threatened protected areas cover 6 million square kilometres, an area twice that of Alaska.

“Governments are claiming these places are protected for the sake of nature, when in reality they aren't,” says lead author [James Watson](#) of the University of Queensland in St Lucia and the Wildlife Conservation Society. “It is a major reason why biodiversity is still in catastrophic decline, despite more and more land being ‘protected’.”

Under the “[Aichi targets](#)” set by the [Convention on Biological Diversity](#), launched at the Rio de Janeiro Earth Summit in 1992, countries must turn 17 per cent of their land surface into [protected areas](#) by 2020. However, of 111 nations claiming to have done this, Watson found 74 have not. Those countries had allowed their protected areas to be heavily degraded through human incursion.

“Once the actual condition of the protected area was considered, most nations don't come close,” says Watson.

Not treading lightly

Watson and his colleagues examined [the human “footprint” on each protected area](#). Their data divides protected areas into squares 1 kilometre on the side, and within each square measures eight ways humans affect nature, such as roads, intensive farming and street lighting. For each square, they calculate an overall human footprint.

On average, protected areas had a human footprint about half the global average, but their footprints have been getting worse since 1992. The protected areas under most assault are in western Europe, southern Asia and Africa.

On the plus side, 42 per cent of protected land is almost free of human interference.

Watson says some sites are role models. One is [Keo Seima Wildlife Sanctuary](#) in Cambodia, home to [gibbon colonies](#) and 25 species of carnivore.



Keo Seima Wildlife Sanctuary in Cambodia is a beacon of hope for biodiversity
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Another is [Madidi National Park in Bolivia](#), which teems with jaguars, pumas, pink dolphins and the Madidi titi monkey, [which was only described in 2006](#).

“They’re well resourced and have dedicated support from non-governmental organisations and government, but unfortunately, this is too rare a story,” says Watson.

“Establishing a new park is just the beginning,” says [William Laurance](#) of James Cook University in Cairns, Australia, who has studied the harm caused by [indiscriminate road-building](#). “We have no choice but to go ‘all in’ for protected areas, as they’re the absolute cornerstone of our efforts to save Earth’s biodiversity.”

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