

Alarm grows over ‘disturbing’ lack of progress to save nature at Cop16

Fears raised that biodiversity summit not addressing countries’ failure to meet a single target to stem destruction of natural world

Patrick Greenfield *in Cali*

Thu 31 Oct 2024 06.00 GMT



The Colombian president, Gustavo Petro (centre, in white), and UN secretary general António Guterres (on his right), join delegates at Cop16 in Cali, Colombia. Photograph: Luis Acosta/AFP/Getty Images

Governments risk another decade of failure on biodiversity loss, due to the slow implementation of an international agreement to halt the destruction of Earth’s ecosystems, experts have warned.

Less than two years ago, the world reached a historic agreement at the Cop15 summit in Montreal to stop the human-caused destruction of life on our planet. The deal included targets to protect 30% of the planet for nature by the end of the decade (30x30), reform \$500bn (then £410bn) of environmentally damaging subsidies, and begin restoring 30% of the planet’s degraded ecosystems.

The world needs \$700bn a year to restore nature. But where is the money coming from?

[Read more](#)

But as country representatives dig into their second week of negotiations at Cop16 in Cali, Colombia – their first meeting since Montreal – alarm is growing at the lack of concrete progress on any of the major targets they agreed upon. An increasing number of indicators show that governments are not on track. They still need to protect an area of land equivalent to the combined size of Brazil and Australia, and an expanse of sea larger than the Indian Ocean to meet the headline 30x30 target, according to [a new UN report](#).

[Weak progress on funding for nature and almost no progress on subsidy reform](#) have also frustrated observers. At the time of publication, 158 countries are yet to submit formal plans on how they are going to meet the targets, [according to Carbon Brief](#), missing their deadline this month ahead of the biodiversity summit in Cali, where governments are not likely to set a new deadline.

“Progress has been too slow. I think political prioritisation of nature is still too low. This is reflected by progress on the targets. Several target are very easy to measure: 30x30 has metrics on area and quality, finance has a dollar figure. We have new data on both that show we’re not on pace,” said Brian O’Donnell, director of the Campaign for Nature.

“This is a moment to demonstrate seriousness and build trust. On finance especially, it’s been disturbing at times to go to parties to ask for their path forward for finance and be treated as if we are asking for something new or unrealistic, as opposed to what they just agreed two years ago. To me, that is a reflection of not a true commitment to this,” he said.



Inger Andersen, UN environment head, said there were signs of progress, but agreed more needed to be done. Photograph: Mike Muzurakis/ENB/IISD

The world has never met a target to stem the destruction of wildlife and life-sustaining ecosystems. Amid growing scientific warnings about the state of life on Earth, there has been a major push to make sure this decade is different, and that governments comply with targets designed to prevent wildlife extinctions, such as cuts to pesticides use and pollution.

Leading figures in conservation and science have raised concerns about the progress governments are making towards the targets in Cali. Martin Harper, CEO of Birdlife International, said meaningful action on commitments was vital.

“We cannot accept inaction as the new normal. This means more action to bolster efforts to recover threatened species, to protect and restore more land, fresh water and sea, and to transform our food, energy and industrial systems. We have five years to raise hundreds of billions of dollars. If we don’t see it materialise, I dread to think where we will be in 2030,” he said.

Inger Andersen, the UN environment head, said it was too early to say whether governments were not doing enough to meet the targets, underscoring that many were working hard. She said there had been signs of progress, but acknowledged more needed to be done.

“The world is working on it. Will we meet every single target by 2030? I hope. If we don’t, is that a catastrophe? No, but did we make a promise to each other that we are going to stretch and do the very best that we can,” she said. “We still have six years to go.”

Scientists at the nature summit in Cali said that the political pace was not matching the scale of the challenge. Nathalie Seddon, professor of biodiversity at University of Oxford, said much more was needed by the end of the decade.

“The biodiversity goals’ 2030 deadline exists for a reason: biodiverse, resilient ecosystems are the foundation of our economies and wellbeing. A bad outcome here isn’t just bad news for wildlife; it undermines food security, water quality, disaster resilience and economic stability. It worsens climate impacts of record-breaking heat, wildfires, floods and droughts,” she said.

Yadvinder Malhi, a professor of ecosystem science at the University of Oxford, said: “The very limited progress we’ve seen so far in the negotiations at Cop16 is insufficient to address the very real implications of getting this wrong. Biodiversity is continuing to decline at an alarming rate. I really hope

that the crunch discussions this week yield those commitments, for the sake of a flourishing future for people and for our planet.”

Biodiversity declining even faster in ‘protected’ areas, scientists warn Cop16

Just designating key areas will not meet 30x30 target on nature loss, study says, pointing to oil drilling in parks

Phoebe Weston *in Cali*

Thu 24 Oct 2024 06.00 BST



A protest against oil and gas extraction at the Cop16 summit in Cali, Colombia. At least 250,000 sq km of ‘protected’ areas also allow oil and gas exploration. Photograph: Ernesto Guzman/EPA

Biodiversity is declining more quickly within key protected areas than outside them, according to research that scientists say is a “wake-up call” to global leaders discussing how to stop nature loss at the UN’s Cop16 talks in Colombia.

Protecting 30% of land and water for nature by 2030 was one of the key targets settled on by world leaders in a [landmark 2022 agreement to save nature](#) – and this month leaders are gathering again at a summit in the Colombian city of Cali to measure progress and negotiate new agreements to stop biodiversity loss.

However, simply designating more areas as protected “will not automatically result in better outcomes for biodiversity”, researchers warn, in the latest study to challenge the effectiveness of conservation practices.

Nearly a quarter of the world’s most biodiversity-rich land is within protected areas, but the quality of these areas is declining faster than it is outside protected areas, according to the analysis by the Natural History Museum (NHM).



Cop16 at a glance: the big issues that will define talks at Colombia’s UN summit

Researchers looked at a Biodiversity Intactness Index, which scores biodiversity health as a percentage in response to human pressures. The report found the index declined by 1.88 percentage points globally between 2000 and 2020. It then focused on the critical biodiversity areas that provide 90% of nature’s contributions to humanity, 22% of which is protected.

The study found that within those critical areas that were not protected, biodiversity had declined by an average of 1.9 percentage points between 2000 and 2020, and within the areas that were protected it had declined by 2.1 percentage points.

The authors say there are a few reasons why this might be the case. A lot of protected areas are not designed to preserve the whole ecosystem, but rather

certain species that are of interest, which means total “biodiversity intactness” is not a priority.

Another reason is that these landscapes could have already been suffering degradation, which is why they were protected in the first place. Researchers say specific local analysis is key to working out why each one is failing.

Dr Gareth Thomas, head of research innovation at NHM, said: “The 30x30 target has received so much attention – as it should do – and has become a key target people talk about at UN biodiversity talks, but we wanted to understand if it was really fit for purpose.

“I think if you asked most people they would assume an area designated as ‘protected’ would at the very least do exactly that: protect nature. But this research showed that wasn’t the case.”

The amount of land protected for nature stands at 17.5% of land and 8.4% of marine areas – an increase of about half a percentage point each since Cop15 in 2022. This will need to increase substantially by 2030 to meet the target.



Upemba national park, in the DRC, after it was burnt by bushfires in July. The climate crisis is a growing threat to protected areas. Photograph: Hugh Kinsella Cunningham/The Guardian

But for many of those areas, the “protections in place are not stringent enough”, said Thomas.

“Countries need to continue their focus on 30x30, that shouldn’t waver. They just need to bring more into it, and pay more attention to actually conserving the land which provides those ecosystem services,” he said.

Oil, gas and mining concessions threaten key areas for biodiversity, as well as Indigenous territories. For example Conkouati-Douli national park is one of the most biodiverse protected areas in the Republic of the Congo – yet more than 65% of the park is covered by oil and gas concessions, according to a new report by Earth Insight.

In the Amazon, Congo basin and south-east Asia, at least 254,000 sq km (98,000 sq miles) of protected areas are threatened by oil and gas exploration. More than 300,000 sq km of Indigenous territories in the Amazon overlap with oil and gas concessions, the report has found.

Recent research from the University of New South Wales in Sydney looked at forested land in 300,000 of the world’s protected areas and found the policy was almost “completely ineffective” in many biodiversity-rich countries, including Indonesia, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Bolivia, Venezuela and Madagascar.

Corruption, political instability and a lack of resources were key reasons why conservation laws were not implemented.

Protected areas are also being threatened by the effects of the climate crisis: wildfires and droughts do not respect their boundaries. Australia, for example, used to have a strong record of protecting nature in its national parks but in 2019, many were destroyed by fire.

Emma Woods, director of policy at the Natural History Museum, said: “We urgently need to move beyond the current approach of simply designating more protected areas to 30x30. Our analysis reinforces the view that this will not automatically result in better outcomes for biodiversity and ecosystems.”



A Colombian warlord became the Amazon rainforest's most unlikely protector. Now he is cutting it down

Thomas said he hoped the study's findings would be "a wake-up call" to policymakers and enforcers of the legislation that it was not enough just to designate an area as protected. "The ministers and policymakers need to know it is not about just hitting a number," he said.

Ben Groom, professor of biodiversity economics at Exeter University, who was not involved in the research, said it was "extremely positive" that there was support for 30x30 but "there was always a chance that this would manifest in shallow policy implementation in the form of cost-minimising attainment of the 30x30 target, rather than focusing on quality."