

ENVIRONMENT

One million species at risk of extinction, UN report warns

A landmark global assessment warns that the window is closing to safeguard biodiversity and a healthy planet. Yet solutions are in sight.

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The bonds that hold nature together may be at risk of unraveling from deforestation, overfishing, development, and other human activities, a landmark United Nations report warns. Thanks to human pressures, one million species may be pushed to extinction in the next few years, with serious consequences for human beings as well as the rest of life on Earth.

“The evidence is crystal clear: Nature is in trouble. Therefore we are in trouble,” said Sandra Díaz, one of the co-chairs of the Global Assessment Report on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services. A 40-page “Summary for Policy Makers” of the forthcoming full report (expected to exceed 1,500 pages) was released May 6 in Paris.

Based on a review of about 15,000 scientific and government sources and compiled by 145 expert authors from 50 countries, the global report is the first comprehensive look in 15 years at the state of the planet’s biodiversity. This report includes, for the first time, indigenous and local knowledge as well as scientific studies. The authors say they found overwhelming evidence that human activities are behind nature’s decline. They ranked the major drivers of species decline as land conversion, including deforestation; overfishing; bush meat hunting and poaching; climate change; pollution; and invasive alien species.

The tremendous variety of living species—at least 8.7 million, but possibly many more—that make up our “life-supporting safety net” provide our food, clean water, air, energy, and more, said Díaz, an ecologist at the National University of Cordoba in Argentina, in an interview. “Not only is our safety net shrinking, it’s becoming more threadbare and holes are appearing.”

A world of green slime?

In parts of the ocean, little life remains but green slime. Some remote tropical forests are nearly silent as insects have vanished, and grasslands are increasingly becoming deserts. Human activity has resulted in the severe alteration of more than 75 percent of Earth’s land areas, the Global Assessment found. And 66 percent of the oceans, which cover most of our blue planet, have suffered significant human impacts. This includes more than 400 dead zones—where scant life can survive—that collectively would cover the state of Oregon or Wyoming.

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