

National

The real butterfly effect: destroying nature will ruin economies and cultures, pleads UN

Biodiversity chief to push for more ambitious targets

Damage to natural world 'reaching tipping point'

John Vidal
Environment editor

Britain and other countries face a collapse of their economies and loss of culture if they do not protect the environment better, the world's leading champion of nature has warned.

"What we are seeing today is a total disaster," said Ahmed Djoghla, the secretary-general of the UN Convention on Biological Diversity. "No country has met its targets to protect nature. We are losing biodiversity at an unprecedented rate. If current levels [of destruction] go on we will reach a tipping point very soon. The future of the planet now depends on governments taking action in the next few years."

Industrialisation, population growth, the spread of cities and farms, and climate change are all now threatening the fundamentals of life itself, said Djoghla, in London before a UN meeting in which governments are expected to sign up to a more ambitious deal to protect nature.

"Many plans were developed in the 1990s to protect biodiversity but they are still sitting on the shelves of ministries. Countries were legally obliged to act, but only 140 have even submitted plans and only 16 have revised their plans since 1993. Governments must now put their houses in order," he said.

According to the UN Environment Programme, the Earth is in the middle of a mass extinction of life. Scientists estimate that 150-200 species of plant, insect, bird and mammal become extinct every 24 hours. This is nearly 1,000 times the "natural" or "background" rate and, claim many biologists, is greater than anything the world has experienced since the dinosaurs vanished nearly 65m years ago. Around 15% of mammal species and 11% of bird species are classified as threatened with extinction.

Djoghla warned Britain and other countries not to cut nature protection amid the

recession. In a reference to expected 40% cuts in Britain's Department of the Environment spending, he said: "You may well save a few pounds now but you will lose billions later. Biodiversity is your natural asset. The more you lose it, the more you lose your cultural assets too."

Djoghla said 300 million people who depended on forests and the more than 1 billion who lived off sea fishing were in immediate danger. "Cut your forests down, or over-fish, and these people will not survive. Destroying biodiversity only increases economic insecurity. The more you lose it, the more you lose the chance to grow." He added: "The loss of biodiversity compounds poverty. Biodiversity is fundamental to social life, education and aesthetics. It's a human right to live in a healthy environment."

Djoghla criticised countries for separating action on climate change from protecting biodiversity. "The loss of biodiversity exacerbates climate change.

15%

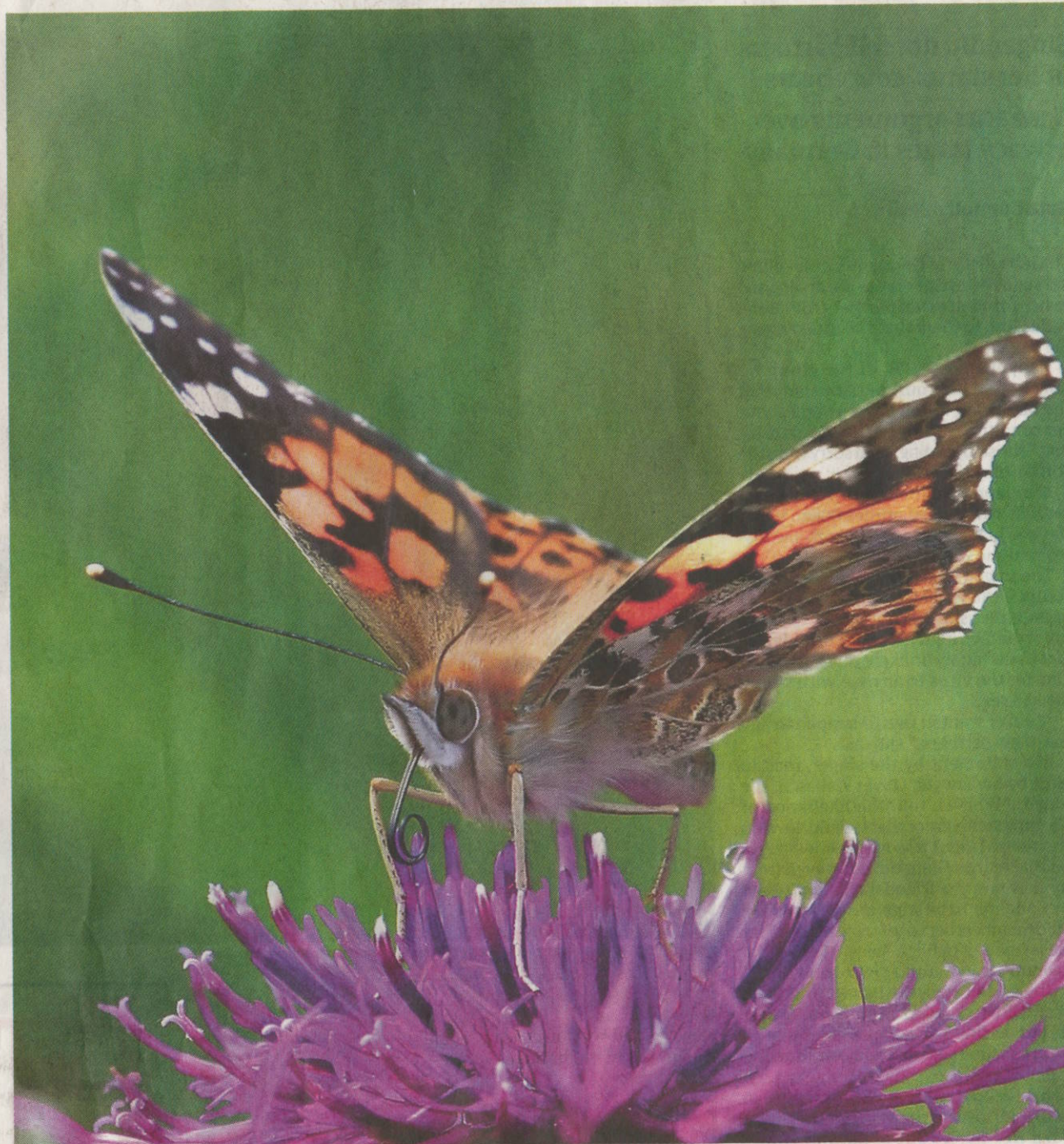
Proportion of mammal species now facing extinction. The present rate of disappearance is 1,000 times the natural rate

But it is handled by the poorest ministries in government, it has not been mainstreamed or prioritised by governments. Climate change cannot be solved without action on biodiversity, and vice versa."

The UN chief said that children were losing contact with nature. "In Algeria, children are growing up who have never seen olive trees. How can you protect nature if you do not know it?"

A UN report on the impact of biodiversity loss, out in October, is expected to say that the economic case for global action to stop species destruction is even more powerful than the argument for tackling climate change. It will say that saving biodiversity is cost-effective and the benefits from saving "natural goods and services", such as pollination, medicines, fertile soils, clean air and water, are between 10 and 100 times the cost of saving the habitats and species that provide them.

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A Painted Lady butterfly. A new UN report due out in October will argue that protecting the increasingly fragile natural world is as important to the global economy and human culture as the prevention of climate change. Photograph: Press Association