

Endangered to Extinct: America Turns Her Back on Biodiversity

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The Nations of the world have gathered in London for a UN Convention on Biodiversity and Climate Change. 2010 has been named the International Year of Biodiversity by the United Nations. An urgent call to action has been issued to all nations of the world to cooperate and collaborate as a global community to protect the biodiversity of Earth. What is biodiversity you ask? According to Dr. Eleanor Sterling, Director of the American Museum of Natural History's Center for Biodiversity and Conservation, "Biodiversity refers to the variety of life on Earth at all its levels, from genes to ecosystems, and the ecological and evolutionary processes that sustain it."

In a keynote address, Ahmed Djoghlaif, Secretary-General of the UN Convention on Biological Diversity expressed concern on the lack of international binding commitments and coordinated action to protect the Earth's biodiversity and to ameliorate climate change. We are losing biodiversity at an unprecedented rate due to habitat change, overexploitation, pollution, invasive alien species and climate change. The UN Global Biodiversity Outlook 3 states that there are multiple indications of biodiversity decline of genes, species and ecosystems. Nearly 25% of the world's plant species are threatened with extinction. Globally, amphibians are great risk of extinction. The populations of vertebrate species fell by 33 % between 1970 and 2006 with severe declines within freshwater ecosystems and in the tropics. Scientists estimate that 15% of mammal species and 11% of bird species are classified as threatened. Coral species are deteriorating with ocean warming and acidification. Natural habitats worldwide are declining in extent and integrity due to fragmentation, overdevelopment and climate change. The UN Environment Programme has issued an astonishing report, which states that: "150-200 species of plant, insect, bird and mammal become extinct every 24 hours." Secretary-General Djoghlaif says "The future of the planet now depends on governments taking action in the next few years."

Why should we care? UN Secretary-General BAN Ki-moon states that the reasons are ecological and economic. He outlines the ecosystem services that protect people and their infrastructure, like coastal wetlands minimizing the impact of storm surges, sadly realized too late when Hurricane Katrina devastated New Orleans or the cutting of the mangrove swamps for unsustainable shrimp farms and beach development and the tragic loss of life and property from tsunamis in South East Asia. Ecosystems protect infrastructure. New York City enjoys cheap and clean tap water because the city chose to protect the Catskills watershed, saving several billion dollars in the process. According to the Center for Biodiversity and Conservation, "Ecosystems provide services such as pollination, seed dispersal, climate regulation, water purification, nutrient cycling, and control of agricultural pests."

According to the Secretary, "A UN-backed study estimates the loss of natural capital due to deforestation and land degradation alone at between \$2 trillion and \$4.5 trillion each year." Environmental protection and economic protection are two sides of the same coin. He urged member states to invest in sustainable development, which will assist indigenous people to protect the biodiversity in developing countries and meet the Millennium Development Goals of food security, poverty eradication and world health and to build resilience to climate change. Biodiversity and climate change are mutually interdependent. Continued deforestation, over-fishing, industrial agriculture, and introduced invasive species will continue the high rate of extinctions and loss of habitats and exacerbate climate change impacts. Programs as the UNDP Equator Initiative, and the Global Environment Facility Small Grants Program have been put in place to provide assistance. Norway has pledged 500 million to prevent the deforestation of the rainforest for monoculture crops within rainforest settings. The Amazon forest will reach a tipping point if 20-30% of the forest is cut or burned creating savannas prone to drought cycles and fire. Today 17% of the Brazilian rainforest has been cut and burned. According to Veerle Vandeweerd, UNDP Environment and Energy Group, three quarters of the world's population rely on the natural environment for survival. 1.5 billion people live in dry lands and 1 billion people rely on sustenance fishing. There is a need for poverty reduction and biodiversity protection.

We need a new strategy that links climate change, biodiversity, and the Millennium Development Goals with concrete targets and implementation in cooperation with the developed and developing countries. According to Stas Burgiel in Convention on Biological Diversity: a progress report, "The UN Convention of Biological Diversity (CBD) is the single most important international agreement designed to protect the world's biodiversity, to encourage the sustainable use of biological resources, and to ensure the fair and equitable sharing of benefits derived from such use." The Convention was signed at the Rio de Janeiro, Brazil 1992 Conference on Environment and Development- known as the Earth Summit. The Cartagena Protocol on Biosafety was adopted on 11 September 2003. It establishes rules under which crops and other organisms, which have been genetically modified, can be transferred from one country to another. According to Stas Burgiel's Convention on Biological Diversity: a progress report- "The United States was perhaps foremost among developed countries in resisting potential restrictions on biotechnology and intellectual property rights. Indeed, President Bush (senior) refused to sign the CBD at the Earth Summit in Rio. Although President Clinton signed the Convention two years later, so far, the [United States](#) remains one of a small handful of countries that has not ratified the agreement, and so has refused to frame its own national laws in line with the CBD." Policies must be put in place to protect indigenous knowledge of medicines and cures from the extractive and exclusive corporate explorers who patent local knowledge without proper recompense.

The Fifth Meeting of the Conference of the Parties, (COP-10) and the Cartagena Protocol for Biosafety, (COP-MOP 5) will be held in Nagoya, Japan on 29 October 2010. Perhaps the cataclysmic loss of life within the coastal ecosystems of the Gulf of Mexico broadcast around the world will galvanize our President and members of Congress to act responsibly to represent the best interests of her people on this blue planet we share with all life in this time of crisis. The nations of the world must be united and just if we are to come to a common accord to exercise our collective Rights of Responsibility, to protect and restore Earth's biodiversity from potential extinctions and the effects of climate change. A welcome has been extended to the United States to join the Family of Nations in this Year of Biodiversity.

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