



Opinion: IPCC Climate Change and Land report

The cost of inaction keeps rising, but so do the benefits of action

Dr Cristiana Paşca Palmer,
Executive Secretary, Convention on Biological Diversity, UN Assistant Secretary-General

In 1992, at the landmark Rio Earth Summit, the international community, in its wisdom, created three interrelated conventions to safeguard the future of the planet, all peoples, and indeed all life on earth: the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC), the United Nations Convention to Combat Desertification (UNCCD), and the United Nations Convention on Biological Diversity (UNCBD).

Already back then, scientists understood the critical interlinkages between climate, land and biodiversity — interlinkages that have only been strengthened by the recently released Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) Special Report on Climate Change and Land (SRCLL). This report, which collectively addresses climate change, desertification, land degradation, sustainable land management (SLM), food security and greenhouse gas (GHG) fluxes in terrestrial ecosystems, paints a clear and convincing case of the urgent crisis we face as a global community.

Following on the heels of the comprehensive Global Assessment issued by the Intergovernmental Science-Policy Platform on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services (IPBES) in May 2019, which showed that nearly one million species are on the brink of extinction, and IPCC's Special Report on Global Warming of 1.5°C (SR15) issued in October 2018, which demonstrated the critical importance of keeping climate change within manageable boundaries, IPCC's Land Report demonstrates the need for transformative change in major areas of society, including the economy, as well as the beliefs, values, and incentives that we — as a global society, as individual countries, and as individual citizens — use in structuring choices for the future.

The good news is that the interrelated nature of the crisis also provides dynamic solutions that are available to us, if only we demonstrate the necessary political will. The way we treat land can either dramatically help or harm the climate, biodiversity, and so many other critical areas of concern for people across the world, including human health and well-being, clean air, water and food security, and sustainable development.

However, in our current business-as-usual scenario, humans are severely damaging the natural world — both on land and in oceans alike. On land, they are driving deforestation, placing systemic and severe harm on animal, insect, plant and microbial life, and speeding up the current climate breakdown. Indeed, the current industrial and agricultural food sectors are almost as big of a driver of climate change as fossil fuels.



Unsustainable land management, meanwhile, weakens entire ecosystems, exposing them to critical losses in ecosystem services, homogenization, invasive alien species, and ultimately the breakdown both of the natural world and of humans' ability to derive value from land.

Nevertheless, just as we can scientifically document the harms we are currently causing as a global society, we also increasingly know how we can pave the way for a better future. Nature-based solutions alone, including more sustainable land management practices, can account for up to 30 per cent of the climate solutions, as well as deliver important progress on other critical global goals.

By halting deforestation and restoring damaged ecosystems, by adopting farming practices that work with nature rather than utilize unsustainable production with chemical fertilizers, by eliminating food waste and eating a balanced diet, and by respecting the land, we can pave the way toward a better future for both the planet and its peoples alike.

Indeed, better land management can help end hunger and improve nutrition, reduce inequalities and increase equity, and ultimately improve the sustainability and security of our societies and the natural world.

Our window for transformative change is narrowing, but it is still open. The choices we make now will define the health of the planet, not just for the next generation but for many generations to come. The remainder of 2019, together with the biodiversity "Super Year" that is emerging in 2020, offers a unique cascading series of events and decisions that we must collectively use to chart a new course. This September, the Secretary-General of the United Nations is holding his inaugural Climate Summit, which will lead into the 2019 United Nations Climate Change Conference, also known as COP25, in Santiago, Chile in December.

Meanwhile, the Parties to the Convention on Biological Diversity are in intense preparations to pave the way for the adoption of a new global biodiversity framework for the post-2020 era at our 15th meeting of the Conference of the Parties (COP 15) in Kunming, China in October 2020. In between, a series of events at the G7 in France, at the United Nations General Assembly in New York, at the World Economic Forum in Davos, and at the IUCN World Conservation Congress in Marseille, among others, offers us an opportunity to build greater momentum and engagement with diverse stakeholders, including the private sector, civil society, the scientific community, indigenous peoples and local communities, women, youth and all individuals.

This series of events comes at a time of not just growing scientific consensus, but by the growing public awareness and activism, particularly driven by global youth. The need for transformative change is, moreover, borne out by economic studies. According to the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development's (OECD) *Biodiversity: Finance and the Economic and Business Case for Action* report, around \$125 trillion has been generated by ecosystems services, much of it land-based, in just the 13 years from 1997 to 2011. This amounts to one-and-a-half times the size of global GDP. Yet, in those same 13 years, an estimated \$6–11 trillion and \$4–20 trillion was lost per year respectively due to land degradation and ecosystem services losses attributable to land cover change.

The cost of inaction keeps rising, but so do the benefits of action. And so, let us use this latest report as another clarion call for co-designing and co-creating the sustainable future we all need and want.
