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Much of nature is near collapse and that means society is too



Actually, there aren't plenty of fish left in the sea
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By **Andy Coghlan**

Biodiversity will collapse everywhere on Earth if humans carry on as we are, according to 550 scientists from 100 countries. The biggest victims will be people, because we are so reliant on the natural world.

A major assessment of Earth's biodiversity concludes that exploitable fish stocks along Asia-Pacific coastlines will completely collapse by 2048. Meanwhile, half of all Africa's mammals and birds face extinction by 2100, as do 37 per cent of Europe's freshwater fish.

These grim outcomes are predicted by the Intergovernmental Platform on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services (IPBES), the biodiversity counterpart of the Intergovernmental

Panel on Climate Change (IPCC). Today in Medellin, Colombia, IPBES launched four reports assessing biodiversity in four key regions: the Americas, Africa, Asia-Pacific, and Europe and Central Asia.

The reports emphasise that human survival could itself be jeopardised in each region. Nature provides services that are worth trillions of dollars worldwide, such as food, shelter, water, weather and clean air. Unless these “ecosystem services” are safeguarded, we will lose them.

Stop the destruction

The findings reinforce earlier warnings that, by failing to conserve biodiversity, the human race is sleepwalking towards disaster.

“Failure to prioritise policies and actions to stop and reverse biodiversity loss, and the continued degradation of nature’s contributions to people, seriously jeopardises the chances of any region, and almost every country, meeting their global development targets,” says Anne Larigauderie, the executive secretary of IPBES.

Reversing all the declines will be difficult, but if we do not take action, humans will suffer alongside the rest of the natural world, the reports say.

“Biodiversity is the living fabric of our planet, the source of our present and our future,” says Erik Solheim, executive director of the UN Environment Programme.

Continent by continent

Possibly the most shocking example is the predicted fate of fisheries stocks along the coastlines of the Asia-Pacific region. “If current fishing practices continue, there will be no exploitable fish stocks in the region by 2048,” warns the report.

It also predicts that 90 per cent of corals in the region will suffer severe degradation by 2050, even under mild climate change scenarios.

In the Americas, climate change is tipped to overtake habitat loss by 2050 as the key driver of biodiversity loss. Today, the average populations of species in an area are 31 per cent smaller than they were when Europeans settled in the Americas. By 2050, the losses could reach 40 per cent, compounded by the growing effects of climate change, such as severe heatwaves.

Since the arrival of Europeans, says the report, humans have eradicated 95 per cent of North American tall grass prairies, 17 per cent of Amazon rainforest and 88 per cent of Atlantic tropical forest. The amount of renewable fresh water available per person has fallen 50 per cent since the 1960s.

Vulnerable societies

Africans stand to lose the most by failing to safeguard biodiversity. 62 per cent of the continent’s rural population depends directly on what nature provides, more than anywhere else.

Yet the report says 500,000 hectares have been sterilised by a mix of deforestation, unsustainable agriculture, overgrazing, uncontrolled mining, invasive species and climate change – which have led to soil erosion, salinisation of soil, pollution and loss of vegetation. By 2100, climate change could wipe out half of Africa’s bird and mammal

species, and deplete the bounty available from African lakes by 30 per cent.

In Europe and central Asia, 42 per cent of land animals and plants have become less numerous just in the past decade. Some 26 per cent of marine fish have declining populations, due to unsustainable fishing and factors such as climate change. 37 per cent of freshwater fish face potential extinction.

“Human-made threats are pushing more and more of our animals, and their habitats, to the very brink of extinction,” says Philip Mansbridge, UK regional director of the International Fund for Animal Welfare. “With so many species at a tipping point, we must all act now to protect our land and marine environment and the vast array of animal and plant life, which are vital to healthy biodiversity and all our futures.”

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