



Briefing for MPs: The scale of global biodiversity loss – a summary of WWF’s Living Planet Report 2020

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- New global study by WWF reveals a shocking 68 % decline in the size of wildlife populations.
- However, state-of-the-art modelling demonstrates that we *can* reverse the trend through concerted efforts and substantial political will.
- As the Environment, Agriculture, Trade and Fisheries Bills all return to Parliament, UK MPs have a once-in-a-generation opportunity to legislate to halt and reverse our contribution to the destruction of nature – at home and abroad, on land and at sea.

Introduction

The [Living Planet Report](#) is a flagship publication released every two years by WWF, providing a comprehensive scientific study of global biodiversity trends and the health of our planet. This year’s findings reveal **an average 68 % decline in the size of wildlife populations between 1970 and 2016** and demonstrate beyond any doubt that **unsustainable human activity is overshooting the planet’s capacity for regeneration and has pushed the natural systems which support life to the brink of collapse.**

While these findings understandably provoke great sadness and a real sense of loss, they must also serve as a catalyst for urgent and coordinated action. Pioneering modelling included in this year’s report provides the first proof of concept that **we can halt and reverse the trend of terrestrial biodiversity loss, but only through significant concerted efforts, which will require substantial political will and leadership but will see nature on the road to recovery by 2030.**

The scale of global biodiversity loss

- The Living Planet Report 2020 presents an updated ‘Living Planet Index’. Trends in almost 21,000 populations of over 4,000 species of mammals, birds, fish, reptiles and amphibians are brought together in this index to calculate the average percentage change in population sizes since 1970 (see [full report](#) for complete methodology).
- **The 2020 update of the Living Planet Index reveals an average 68 % fall in the size of monitored populations between 1970 and 2016.** Although no single figure can capture the complexity of the changes in the natural environment, average population decline is a key metric because, as a measure of abundance, it strongly reflects the overall health of natural systems.
- Variations across the dataset also highlight areas requiring particular attention. For example, index data shows that the health of freshwater systems is deteriorating even faster than oceans or forests. Freshwater species populations have seen a steep decline of 84% on average with, for example, the critically endangered Chinese sturgeon population of the Yangtze river down by 97%.



Causes and consequences of global biodiversity loss

The key driver of terrestrial biodiversity loss in recent decades has been land use change and degradation, primarily the conversion of natural systems into agricultural systems, while for marine biodiversity the major threat has been overfishing. Climate change to date has not been the primary driver of biodiversity loss, but it is projected to become so, with up to one fifth of wild species at risk of extinction this century due to climate change alone. All drivers considered, we are destroying nature at unprecedented and unsustainable rates, with the 'ecological footprint' of humanity significantly overshooting the Earth's rate of regeneration and leading to the on-going degradation of planetary health.

The loss of nature and biodiversity is not only an inherent tragedy or an environmental issue, but also a development, economic, global security, ethical and moral concern. Nature is essential for human existence and quality of life, providing food, fibre, energy and medicines, and sustaining the air, freshwater and soils on which we all depend as well as providing inspiration and cultural value to us all. It also regulates the climate, provides pollination and pest control, reduces the impact of natural hazards and can build resilience against climate change. Nature also underpins all dimensions of human health, with the destruction of natural habitats known to be a key cause of pandemics such as Covid-19.

Economic growth and development have led to extraordinary gains in human health and wellbeing and these must absolutely be celebrated. However, the overexploitation of plants and animals for economic purposes has also come at a huge cost to nature and the stability of the Earth's operating systems that sustain us. **We have stretched our safety net to breaking point, to the extent where it increasingly threatens to undermine and reverse the development and wellbeing progress made.**

The Covid-19 pandemic has visibly highlighted how interlinked human health is with nature, and that as we seek to rebuild our economies, the Government should ensure all recovery spending helps us meet our climate and nature ambitions. Indeed, a prosperous, safe and resilient future is dependent upon it.

Can biodiversity loss be halted or even reversed?

In 2017, the Bending the Curve Initiative (a consortium of WWF and more than 40 universities, conservation organisations and intergovernmental organisations) began to model potential pathways to 'bend the curve' of biodiversity loss - that is, to halt and then start reversing it. **The Living Planet Report 2020 presents the results of this state-of-the-art modelling, which provides the first 'proof of concept' that we could indeed halt and reverse terrestrial biodiversity loss from land-use change.**

Different 'what-if' scenarios were developed: a reference scenario which assumes a business-as-usual future, with alternatives designed to explore the potential consequences of various actions which could be taken to stem the tide of biodiversity loss. These interventions included: 1) increased conservation efforts; 2) more sustainable production; and 3) more sustainable consumption. These were explored individually and then in combination.



Results showed that, under a business-as-usual scenario, global biodiversity decline would continue throughout the 21st century. The pathway which was most successful, and quickest, in reversing species decline trends was the ‘integrated action portfolio’ where all interventions were pursued simultaneously. **These findings provide a very clear roadmap for action: with an unprecedented and immediate focus on both conservation (including landscape restoration) and a transformation of our food system, we can both restore biodiversity and feed a growing human population.**

The role of UK parliamentarians in ‘bending the curve’ of biodiversity loss

A series of recent catastrophic events, from wildfires to locust plagues to the Covid-19 pandemic, have demonstrated more than ever before that we must conserve biodiversity not only for its inherent value but also as **a non-negotiable strategic investment to preserve our health, wealth and security**. The development of extensive new domestic legislation (in the form of Environment, Trade, Agriculture and Fisheries Bills) as well as upcoming major international conferences on climate, biodiversity and sustainable development, provides a once in a generation opportunity for the UK to shape the required roadmap for action, focussing in particular on conservation measures and transforming our food system.

As a UK MP you can:

- 1) Contact WWF to find out more about global biodiversity issues and what you can do to speak up for our planet in Parliament. We welcome your support raising these issues in parliamentary debates and questions and urging colleagues, Ministers and the Prime Minister to prioritise action to reverse biodiversity loss across our domestic and international policy agenda.**
- 2) Ensure that a strong Environment Bill (and devolved equivalents where appropriate) returns in the Autumn and includes an ambitious due diligence obligation on businesses and financial institutions to eliminate negative environmental and social impacts from the UK’s global supply chains.**
- 3) Support amendments to the Agriculture and Trade Bill which safeguard import standards and require robust scrutiny of new trade deals and alignment of trade agreements with climate and environmental goals.**
- 4) Call on the UK Government to show international leadership by:**
 - a. Going to the COP15 UN biodiversity conference next year with ambitious world-leading policies to set nature on the path to recovery by 2030.**
 - b. Putting forward by December 2020 at the latest an ambitious UK NDC that includes a significant contribution to nature-based solutions and are worthy of their Presidency of the COP26 UN climate conference.**
 - c. Investing in nature and climate – make sure all future government spending helps us meet our climate and nature ambitions. By adopting a ‘net zero test’ we can create a more resilient and sustainable future.**



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Note on the Environment Bill

The Environment Bill will provide a crucial legislative underpinning to set nature on the path to recovery. However, the Bill as currently drafted does not achieve the promised gold standard legislation to show global leadership for responding to the environmental crisis both at home and abroad. A major weakness is that it is currently silent on the UK's global environmental footprint (that is, the destruction of nature associated with UK consumption of imported goods). When the Bill returns to Parliament, it must be strengthened to include a target for the UK's global footprint and a legal due diligence obligation for UK businesses to assess and report the impact of their supply chains and to mitigate for those impacts.

Contact

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