

Destroying the Web of Life: The Destruction of Earth's Biodiversity Is Accelerating

Homo sapiens is a part of the web of life. And we are ruthlessly destroying that web.

By [Robert J. Burrowes](#)

Theme: [Environment](#)

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In August 2010, the secretary-general of the UN Convention on Biological Diversity, Ahmed Djoghlaif, warned that 'We are losing biodiversity at an unprecedented rate.' According to the UN Environment Program, 'the Earth is in the midst of a mass extinction of life' with scientists estimating that '150-200 species of plant, insect, bird and mammal become extinct every 24 hours' which is nearly 1,000 times the 'natural' or 'background' rate. Moreover, it 'is greater than anything the world has experienced since the vanishing of the dinosaurs nearly 65m years ago.'

See ['Protect nature for world economic security, warns UN biodiversity chief'](#).

Two months later, at the tenth meeting of the Conference of the Parties to the Convention on Biological Diversity, held from 18 to 29 October 2010, in Nagoya, Aichi Prefecture in Japan, a revised and updated Strategic Plan for Biodiversity, including the Aichi Biodiversity Targets, for the 2011-2020 period was adopted.

See ['Strategic Plan for Biodiversity 2011-2020, including Aichi Biodiversity Targets'](#).

You can read the 20 [Aichi Biodiversity Targets](#) on the Convention's website. They were ambitious but represented a realistic assessment of what needed to be achieved by 2020 if national governments were to achieve the longer term goal of 'Living in Harmony with Nature' by 2050. The 2050 Vision for Biodiversity required 'a significant shift away from "business as usual" across a broad range of human activities.'

See ['Global Biodiversity Outlook 5'](#).

So how have we done in the past ten years?

In 2015, distinguished conservationists Professor Gerardo Ceballos, Anne H. Ehrlich and Professor Paul R. Ehrlich published their book titled [The Annihilation of Nature: Human Extinction of Birds and Mammals](#) which tells the story of humanity's 'massive and escalating assault on all living things on this planet' precipitating what is now Earth's sixth great mass extinction: 'a time of darkness for our planet's birds and mammals'.

Noting that the roots of this destruction 'run deep through time' with human hunting and other activities responsible for pushing populations of animals to extinction long before the agricultural revolution (which began about 10,000 years ago), they observe that the current collective assault on animals, plants and microbes has reached a level so horrendous that 'any alarm call we might sound will be too faint to match the tragedy that is unfolding'. But

while the decimation of life that is currently underway is being caused by Homo sapiens, the consequences of this decimation will also have impact on humanity itself because the life-forms being annihilated are 'working parts of life-support systems on which civilization depends'.

Despite the impressive statistics that record the demise of life on Earth and the fundamental threat this extinction crisis poses, Ceballos and the Ehrlichs are well aware that the public and politicians generally are not reacting emotionally to this crisis as do those who are 'deeply familiar with the impoverishment of nature'. They hope we can relate to the fate of the last Spix's macaw, a male that searched fruitlessly for a mate until it disappeared from the savannah of northeastern Brazil in 2000.

And did you know that even the iconic African lion may be facing extinction in the wild? In 2015, as a result of decades of hunting, disease and habitat loss, only 23,000 lions remained in Africa's vast savannahs: less than 10% of what roamed there in 1950. There are fewer lions today.

But separately from species extinctions, Earth continues to experience 'a huge episode of population declines and extirpations, which will have negative cascading consequences on ecosystem functioning and services vital to sustaining civilization'. In a 2017 report, Professor Ceballos and his coauthors describe what they label 'a "biological annihilation" to highlight the current magnitude of Earth's ongoing sixth major extinction event.' Moreover, local population extinctions 'are orders of magnitude more frequent than species extinctions. Population extinctions, however, are a prelude to species extinctions, so Earth's sixth mass extinction episode has proceeded further than most assume.'

See ['Biological annihilation via the ongoing sixth mass extinction signaled by vertebrate population losses and declines'](#).

Beyond even this, however, many additional species are now trapped in a feedback loop that will inevitably precipitate their extinction as well because of the way in which 'co-extinctions', 'localized extinctions' and 'extinction cascades' work once initiated and as has already occurred in almost all ecosystem contexts. See the (so far) six-part series ['Our Vanishing World'](#).

Have you seen a flock of birds of any size recently? A butterfly?

What is Driving the Sixth Mass Extinction?

Homo sapiens. And the key tool is always destruction of habitat, whether on land or in the ocean.

Of course, particular human behaviours have a huge impact. Fighting wars (or even just wasting resources to manufacture weapons and other military infrastructure) is one (particularly given that the perpetual war in which the US is engaged is to secure resources and markets), destroying the climate is another and deploying 5G is yet another. But there are many other destructive human behaviours too.

Consider the forests. Just last year, 6.5 million hectares of pristine forest were cut or burnt down for purposes such as clearing land to establish cattle farms so that many people can eat cheap hamburgers, mining (much of it illegal) for a variety of minerals (such as gold, silver, copper, coltan, cassiterite and diamonds) and logging to produce woodchips so that

some people can buy cheap paper (including cheap toilet paper).

See [‘Our Vanishing World: Rainforests’](#).

One outcome of this destruction is that 40,000 tropical tree species are now threatened with extinction. In addition, rainforest destruction is also the primary cause of species extinctions globally given the number of species that live in rainforests.

See [‘Global Assessment Report on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services’](#).

Another outcome is that ‘the precious Amazon is teetering on the edge of functional destruction and, with it, so are we’.

See [‘Amazon Tipping Point: Last Chance for Action’](#).

And in relation to another major habitat that is being destroyed, consider the world’s oceans. In summary, the oceans are warming, acidifying and deoxygenating; being contaminated with nuclear radiation, by offshore oil and gas drilling as well as oil spills; being damaged by deep sea mining; being polluted by industrial (including chemical) and farming wastes while being damaged in a myriad other ways and being overfished.

In short: the oceans are under siege on a vast range of fronts and are effectively ‘dying’. For a comprehensive 18-point summary,

see [‘Our Vanishing World: Oceans’](#).

If you like, you can read comprehensive summaries of the fate of Earth’s birds and insects too.

See [‘Our Vanishing World: Birds’](#) and [‘Our Vanishing World: Insects’](#).

What is the State of Play in early 2021?

In a report published by the Intergovernmental Science-Policy Platform on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services (IPBES) in May 2020, the authors observe that ‘Nature is declining globally at rates unprecedented in human history – and the rate of species extinctions is accelerating, with grave impacts on people around the world now likely.’ With a total estimated number of animal and plant species on Earth of 8 million (of which 5.5 million are insect species), an accelerating daily extinction rate combined with an ongoing decline in ecosystem health, the report concludes that 1,000,000 species of life on Earth are threatened with extinction.

See [‘Nature’s Dangerous Decline “Unprecedented”; Species Extinction Rates “Accelerating”’](#) and [‘A million threatened species? Thirteen questions and answers’](#).

And the latest edition of the Convention on Biological Diversity’s flagship publication [‘Global Biodiversity Outlook 5’](#) was published on 18 August 2020. It reports that ‘Humanity stands at a crossroads with regard to the legacy it leaves to future generations. Biodiversity is declining at an unprecedented rate, and the pressures driving this decline are intensifying. None of the Aichi Biodiversity Targets will be fully met.’

But this is an understatement, to put it politely.

In their commentary on this predicament in November 2020, scholars Ruchi Shroff and Carla Ramos Cortés note that ‘Despite wide-spread international calls to curb the sixth mass extinction, no single goal of the Convention of Biological Diversity’s Aichi Biodiversity Targets, for the second consecutive decade, have been met. In some cases, biodiversity loss has been made worse as no action has been taken to curb pesticide use, pollution, fossil fuels and plastics.’

See [‘The Biodiversity Paradigm: Building Resilience for Human and Environmental Health’](#).

But the destruction is far worse than suggested by this. Given, as already noted above, the ongoing destruction of rainforests and oceans, not to mention other habitats ranging from wetlands to deserts, the annihilation of life on Earth continues to accelerate with no indicators signaling that this destruction is being slowed in any way.

Therefore, destruction of biodiversity remains one of the four primary paths to human extinction (along with nuclear war, the deployment of 5G and the climate catastrophe).

Is it too late to do anything?

It might be. As mentioned above: Because many species are now trapped in a feedback loop that will inevitably precipitate their extinction because of the way in which ‘co-extinctions’, ‘localized extinctions’ and ‘extinction cascades’ work once initiated, many further extinctions are now inevitable.

However, we can take action to save those individuals and species not yet trapped in a feedback loop and that might yet be saved. But if you wait for governments or corporations to act responsibly, you will wait in vain as the last 20 years has demonstrated.

So you have some powerful options to consider. The first, and most important, is to consider the ways in which you can reduce your own consumption. The planetary environment is only being destroyed so that governments and corporations can respond to consumer demand. Everything from military spending and war to the extraction and burning of fossil fuels are fundamentally driven by what you buy. And each and every item that you buy has a negative environmental impact. There are no exceptions.

If you reduce your own consumption and increase your self-reliance, you will reduce the burden that extraction, transport, manufacture and distribution of resources imposes on the natural environment resulting in the destruction of habitat and the annihilation of biodiversity.

One option to consider is [‘The Flame Tree Project to Save Life on Earth’](#) which outlines a graduated series of steps for reducing consumption and increasing self-reliance.

If you want to better understand why so many human beings are addicted to endless consumption, see [‘Love Denied: The Psychology of Materialism, Violence and War’](#). There is more detail on the origins of this behaviour in [‘Why Violence?’](#) and [‘Fearless Psychology and Fearful Psychology: Principles and Practice’](#).

If you are inclined to campaign to defend biodiversity in one context or another, whether by campaigning to end war, halt the climate catastrophe, stop the deployment of 5G or end wildlife trafficking for example, consider doing so strategically.

See [‘Nonviolent Campaign Strategy’](#).

You might also consider signing the online pledge of [‘The People’s Charter to Create a Nonviolent World’](#).

Conclusion

One species – Homo sapiens – is annihilating life on Earth, driving at least 200 species to extinction each day. In the time it took you to read this article, another species of life on Earth vanished into the fossil record.

This annihilation of life is driven by our over-consumption. As Mahatma Gandhi, already wearing his own homespun cloth, noted more than 100 years ago: ‘Earth provides enough for every person’s need but not for every person’s greed.’

Of course, many people around the world are not responsible for over-consuming; they live life on its margins, with barely enough to eat let alone thrive. And this reflects inequities built into a global economic system that prioritizes profit for the few, not resources for living for all.

So that means that the burden for reducing consumption must fall on those in industrialized societies who benefit from the maldistribution of planetary resources.

Ralph Waldo Emerson once noted that ‘The end of the human race will be that it will eventually die of civilization.’

If we are to prove him wrong, we do not have much time left.

This is because Homo sapiens is a part of the web of life. And we are ruthlessly destroying that web.

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Robert J. Burrowes has a lifetime commitment to understanding and ending human violence. He has done extensive research since 1966 in an effort to understand why human beings are violent and has been a nonviolent activist since 1981. He is the author of [‘Why Violence?’](#) His email address is flametree@riseup.net and his website is [here](#). He is a frequent contributor to ‘Global Research’.

The Earth Pledge

Out of love for the Earth and all of its creatures, and my respect for their needs, from this day onwards I pledge that:

1. I will listen deeply to children. See [‘Nisteling: The Art of Deep Listening’](#).
2. I will not travel by plane
3. I will not travel by car
4. I will not eat meat and fish

5. I will only eat organically/biodynamically grown food
6. I will minimize the amount of fresh water I use, including by minimizing my ownership and use of electronic devices
7. I will not own or use a mobile (cell) phone
8. I will not buy rainforest timber
9. I will not buy or use single-use plastic, such as bags, bottles, containers, cups and straws
10. I will not use banks, superannuation (pension) funds or insurance companies that provide any service to corporations involved in fossil fuels, nuclear power and/or weapons
11. I will not accept employment from, or invest in, any organization that supports or participates in the exploitation of fellow human beings or profits from killing and/or destruction of the biosphere
12. I will not get news from the corporate media (mainstream newspapers, television, radio, Google, Facebook, Twitter...)
13. I will make the effort to learn a skill, such as food gardening or sewing, that makes me more self-reliant
14. I will gently encourage my family and friends to consider signing this pledge.

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