

So here is the existential crisis that no one is talking about | Column

The decline in biodiversity caused by human action creates dangers to humanity equal to those of global warming.



Fish swim in a reef at Pearl and Hermes Atoll in the Northwestern Hawaiian Islands. A decade-long effort by the world to save the world's disappearing species and declining ecosystems has mostly failed so far, with fragile ecosystems like coral reefs and tropical forests in even more trouble than ever, according to a United Nations biodiversity report released in 2020. (Jacob Asher/NOAA via AP) [JACOB ASHER | AP]

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Natural historian David Attenborough recently warned that “the actions (on climate change) we choose or choose not to take in the next 10 years will determine the fate of the planet for the next thousand.” To address this existential crisis over 20,000 delegates from nearly every country in the world will soon meet in Glasgow, Scotland, to discuss how to mitigate the negative impact of climate change. We are running out of time to protect the planet from the catastrophic consequences of our unrestrained emissions of carbon into the atmosphere.

President Joe Biden hopes that his \$150 billion clean electricity program (currently imperiled in Congress) will be approved before the UN Glasgow conference. If approved, this U.S. example could create pressure on other nations to also act forcefully to prevent a global calamity.



Dr. William Felice was named the Florida Professor of 2006 by the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching. [UNKNOWN | Photo: Courtesy]

Yet, a second existential crisis — biodiversity loss — also threatens our future existence and too little has been done to address this issue. The decline in biodiversity caused by human action creates dangers to humanity equal to those of global warming.

Drawing on the work of hundreds of international experts and thousands of scientific studies, the UN reports that “human actions threaten more species with global extinction now than ever before.” With an average of 25 percent of species in assessed animal and plant groups threatened, the report asserts that around 1 million species already face extinction “unless action is taken to reduce ... biodiversity loss.”

These species and systems collectively sustain life on Earth in that we rely on nature for our survival. The critical services provided by the interactions of living organisms with the environment include the purification of air and water, renewal of soil fertility, pollination of crops, dispersal of seeds and mitigation of floods and droughts. There is no technological substitute for the ecosystem services created by natural processes and species interactions.

Biodiversity and climate change are, of course, intertwined and successful actions to mitigate global warming can be a “win-win” for both crises. Protecting biodiversity is thus a key part of the global negotiations in Glasgow. For example, President Emmanuel Macron of France and Prince Charles for the U.K. have proposed devoting 30% of the climate funds leveraged at the conference to contribute directly to restoring biodiversity.

But climate change is only one cause of biodiversity loss. Other causes include pollution, overfishing at sea and habitat destruction on land through farming, mining and logging.

Unfortunately, the world's leaders and media paid minimal attention to a critical United Nations Conference on Biodiversity held in mid-October 2021. Instead of bold action, the conference adopted a meek “declaration” calling for “urgent and integrated action” in regard to biodiversity. The participating countries could not agree on deadlines, targets, or how to fund conservation in poorer countries. The United States remains on the sidelines at these talks. The U.S. and the Vatican remain the only countries in the world that are not a party to the treaty underlying the negotiations, the Convention on Biological Diversity.

Francis O'Gwal, one of the UN leaders working on biodiversity, stated to *The New York Times*, “If the global community continues to see it (biodiversity) as a side event, and they continue thinking that climate change is now the thing to really listen to, by the time they wake up on biodiversity it might be too late.”

Brian O'Donnell, director of the campaign for *Nature*, put it this way: “When you have two concurrent existential crises, you don't get to pick only one to focus on — you must address both no matter how challenging. This is the equivalent of having a flat tire and a dead battery in your car at the same time. You're still stuck if you only fix one.”

The UN Biodiversity Conference will reconvene in Kunming, China, in April 2022, where biodiversity targets for the next decade will be determined. Significant action on protecting biodiversity must be the result of this global event. The stakes could not be higher.

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