

SPECIES LOSS A SILENT EPIDEMIC¹

David Suzuki with Faisal Moola[©]

Scientists warn that the twin threats of climate change and wildlife extinction threaten our planet's life-support systems, including clean air, clean water and productive soil. Awareness about the causes and consequences of climate change is growing, leading some governments to look for solutions in areas such as clean energy. Species extinction, however, has gone largely unnoticed by government leaders.

In an article in the *Guardian* newspaper, France's ecology secretary and the World Resources Institute's vice-president of science and research argue that "unlike the impacts of climate change, biodiversity – and the ecosystem services it harbours – disappears in a mostly silent, local and anonymous fashion. This may explain in part why the devastation of nature has triggered fewer alarm bells than a hotting-up planet."

Sadly, this is true. Unlike the devastating forest fires, deadly heat waves and violent storms that have ravaged the planet as a result of climate change, the disappearance of plants and animals seems only to get the attention of politicians when it results in serious economic and social upheaval – such as when overfishing led to the collapse of cod stocks in Atlantic Canada. The unravelling of food webs that have taken millennia to evolve is happening all around us. With every patch of forest cut, wetland drained, or grassland paved over, our actions are destroying wildlife habitat at an unprecedented rate.

Scientists warn that we are in the midst of a human-caused, catastrophic wildlife crisis. Of the species we know about, some 17,000 plants and animals are facing extinction, including 12 percent of birds, nearly a quarter of mammals and a third of amphibians. Some of the species most vulnerable to human impacts are iconic, well-loved creatures; of the eight distinct bear species that grace our planet, six are now in serious trouble, including sun bears, pandas and polar bears.

The response of our leaders has, for the most part, been abysmal. The United Nations has declared 2010 the International Year of Biodiversity. Countries are now reporting on their progress in reducing biodiversity loss as required under an international treaty called the Convention on Biological Diversity that most nations, including Canada, have signed. However, the UN has admitted that governments have failed to meet the treaty's objectives "to achieve by 2010 a significant reduction of the current rate of biodiversity loss at the global, regional and national level..."

Despite our collective failure to meet the 2010 biodiversity target, countries are preparing to negotiate new global targets to slow the rate of biodiversity loss. A flurry of international activity is now underway that will include a special session of the UN General Assembly on the biodiversity crisis in September.

It's easy to be skeptical about the effect these negotiations will have on protecting life on our planet, given the lack of meaningful progress so far. But one recent outcome of the global biodiversity talks gives us hope. Government negotiators from around the world just met in

¹ The Common Ground, June 2010

Busan, South Korea, where they approved the creation of a global science body that will inform government leaders on major biodiversity declines and to identify what must be done to reverse these damaging trends.

This global Biodiversity Scientific Body will be modelled on the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC), which, through science, has catalyzed worldwide understanding and action on global warming.

Despite the efforts of huge multinational oil companies to discredit its work, the IPCC has compiled the best available science on the causes and impacts of global warming, as well as charting the most effective ways for us to solve the problem. In doing so, it has ensured that climate change has remained a priority for governments and has proven to be an invaluable tool to help the media understand and report on the issue – independent of politics or PR spin. We hope the newly created “IPCC for Nature” will play a similar role in educating, inspiring and mobilizing policy-makers and the public to take decisive action to stem the biodiversity crisis.