

2020 World Environment Day

Spotlight on biodiversity

A working brief - April 6, 2020

The biggest, most celebrated day for positive environmental action

World Environment Day is celebrated every year on 5 June to focus the world's attention on a pressing environmental issue. The Day strives to raise awareness and encourage action for the environment. It offers an opportunity to reflect on accomplishments and renew our resolve in overcoming the environmental challenges facing the world today. Held annually since 1974, World Environment Day is a vital platform for promoting progress on the environmental dimensions of the Sustainable Development Goals.

Countries all over the world participate each year in national and international celebrations to champion environmental causes—governments, major corporations, non-governmental organization, local communities, celebrities and citizens across the world adopt the World Environment Day brand in support of the environment. World Environment Day 2020 is hosted by Colombia in partnership with Germany and focuses on biodiversity.

Biodiversity is the foundation that supports all life on land and below water

Biodiversity—the variety of life forms in any given habitat, from large animals to plants to fungi to the smallest of organisms—is threatened like never before. We are on the verge of a mass extinction: within the next 10 years, around 1 million species may be wiped off the surface of the planet. That's one out of every four known species. Wildlife has declined on average by over 60 per cent in last 50 years. At this rate, species are disappearing tens to hundreds of times faster than the average speed of the past 10 million years.

The biosphere, which is the collection of all life on Earth, is being altered at an unprecedented scale. We have significantly changed 75 per cent of the land surface. Two thirds of the ocean area are impacted by human activity. Just 15 per cent of wetlands still exists today. Between 2010 and 2015 alone, 32 million hectares of forest have disappeared. To date, we have lost one third of all forest area compared to pre-industrial levels, and live coral cover on reefs has nearly halved in the past 150 years. If we continue on this path unabated, the loss in biodiversity will have severe implications for humanity, from the collapse of food and health systems to the disruption of entire supply chains. Our unsustainable use of nature is largely to blame for this dramatic situation.

Nature's ability to sustain all life forms on Earth and provide for human well-being continue to decline at an alarming rate

Nature comprises all living organisms, whether these are animals, plants or microorganisms, and the natural world, such as terrestrial, freshwater and marine ecosystems. Our existence and quality of life depends on nature. The food, energy and materials we consume are all sourced from nature. At the same time, our production of food, feed, fibre and bioenergy has come at the cost of those same services nature provides to sustain our very existence, from air to water to climate to habitat.

Changes in land and sea use, direct exploitation of organisms, climate change, pollution and invasions of alien species have the largest global impact on nature. These direct drivers of change are underpinned by societal values and behaviours such as rapid human population growth, unsustainable production and consumption and associated technological development.

Only by knowing nature can we sustainably harness its benefits and preserve diversity of life on Earth

Restoring nature is critical for reversing the loss of biodiversity and sustaining a healthy planet. This will only be possible when we start to appreciate how crucial nature is for our own existence and quality of life. In the words of David Attenborough, "Never has it been more important to understand how the natural world works and how to help it."

- Nature provides us with food. It is our source of energy and other material needs fundamental for our physical well-being. Yet, as natural landscapes continue to be transformed into land for agriculture, urban development and resource extraction, we keep degrading and fragmenting nature's ability to provide for our needs.
- Nature underpins all dimensions of human health. It is the source of our medicines. An estimated 4 billion people rely primarily on natural medicines for their health care. Yet, unsustainable harvest and trade in wildlife and related products doesn't just pose a major threat to biodiversity, it also affects drug discovery and biotechnology. It limits access to traditional medicines on which an estimated 60 per cent of the world's population rely for their health care needs.
- Nature is a source of livelihood for billions—more than 1 billion people rely on forests and another 3 billion on marine and coastal biodiversity for their livelihoods. Agriculture and food production are the world's largest employer. But the way we are producing and consuming

food is causing major environmental and human health issues. Land degradation and loss of soil fertility affect 3.2 billion people and threatens food security for a growing part of the global population.

- Nature sustains the quality of air, fresh water and soils on which humanity depends. It distributes fresh water and regulates the climate. But our food systems are driving climate change, biodiversity loss, water insecurity, soil and water pollution, and other environmental problems. Agriculture and related land-use change cause over 70 per cent of tropical

deforestation and are responsible for around one quarter of all greenhouse gas emissions.

- Nature provides pollination and pest control and reduces the impact of natural hazards. More than 75 per cent of global food crop types, including fruits and vegetables and some of the most important cash crops, such as coffee, cocoa and almonds, rely on animal pollination. But a growing number of pollinator species worldwide are being driven towards extinction, threatening millions of livelihoods and hundreds of billions of dollars' worth of food supplies.

In the build-up to World Environment Day, a United Nations Environment Programme global campaign on nature

The 2020 World Environment Day global campaign aims at highlighting how we as humans are inextricably linked to and depend on nature for our existence and quality of life. Recent events, from bushfires in Brazil, United States and Australia to locust swarms to the COVID-19 outbreak, highlights how meddling with ecosystems and biodiversity from its natural state is creating unprecedented challenges for humankind on a global scale. Human activities such as pollution, unsustainable use of land and sea, exploitation of organisms, climate change and invasion of alien species, are leading to biodiversity breakdown and the decline and degradation of natural ecosystems at an unprecedented scale. The crisis also reflects our connectedness to one another and how actions and events in one part of the world affect us all. It also brings to the spotlight the need for international cooperation and coordination in responding to the challenges posed by environmental degradation. Yet, these events are symptomatic and require us to address the decline of nature through transformational and sustained reforms with nature at the heart of decision-making. This World Environment Day, the need to heal our relationship and start living in harmony with nature, perhaps, has never been this stark in modern history. The United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) is calling on governments, businesses and civil society to work together in building global understanding of biodiversity and nature's key contribution to our survival.

With less than three months left to this year's celebration, the whole world finds itself engulfed in the COVID-19 outbreak. A number of countries throughout the world have put in place stringent measures such as travel restrictions to prevent and curtail further spread of the disease. Citizens are encouraged to stay away from crowded places, limit outside activities to only those that are essential and strictly observe social distancing. Several key international events have also either been cancelled or postponed and the fate of many others also hang in the balance. UNEP is redesigning this year's celebrations primarily around a global digital campaign aimed at increasing knowledge and engagement in virtual spaces on the theme of biodiversity.

The global digital campaign will be launched in April 2020 to draw attention to the need for restoring nature and reversing biodiversity loss. It will feature a distinct visual identity and will run using the hashtag #ForNature. A key objective of the campaign will be to build understanding on how all living things on Earth are connected in the web of life. The campaign will develop many assets, including interactive visual stories to showcase the interdependence of all life on Earth, tied together through the interconnectedness of people and biodiversity. These connections make up the fabric of nature—weakening or removing one form of life impacts the entire biodiversity ecosystem, making species vulnerable to extinction and natural systems less resilient. As part of the campaign, UNEP will also be producing communication toolkits for partners, including the private sector, that will contain key messages and actions.

To celebrate World Environment Day [from 25 May through 5 June 2020], UNEP invites the global community—families, friends, peers, neighbourhoods, government and non-governmental organizations, and small and large businesses—to show their commitment to protecting nature and to the sustainable use of nature's resources.

2020 is a critical year for biodiversity. It's a year of crucial decisions for planet and people, and all other forms of life on Earth. While 2020 also concludes the United Nations Decade on Biodiversity, the scientific community continues to sound the alarm on global biodiversity breakdown. Living in harmony with nature—a goal world leaders have set for 2050—cannot be achieved unless we stop the loss of the planet's biodiversity by 2030. This leaves us with a decade for action, which will start with the 2020 United Nations Convention on Biological Diversity in October in Kunming, China and the design of a new 10-year framework for biodiversity. World Environment Day celebrations will help build momentum and rally the world community behind a more ambitious and robust framework that can lead to significant change.

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