

Scientists call for a Paris-style agreement to save life on Earth

Radical Conservation

Conservation

Conservation scientists believe our current mass extinction crisis requires a far more ambitious agreement, in the style of the Paris Climate Accord. And they argue that the bill shouldn't be handed just to nation states, but corporations too.

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Photograph: Xinhua / Barcroft Images

Let's be honest, the global community's response to the rising evidence of mass extinction and ecological degradation has been largely to throw crumbs at it. Where we have acted it's been in a mostly haphazard and modest way — a protected area here, a conservation program there, a few new laws, and a pinch of funding. The problem is such actions — while laudable and important — in no way match the scope and size of the problem where all markers indicate that life on Earth continues to slide into the **dustbin**.

But a few scientists are beginning to call for more ambition — much more —

and they want to see it enshrined in a new global agreement similar to the Paris Climate Accord. They also say that the bill shouldn't just fall on nations, but the private sector too.

A Global Deal for Nature

In 2016, E.O. Wilson — arguably the world's most lauded living evolutionary biologist — published a book called **Half Earth** where he proposed that to save life on Earth (and ourselves) we must **set aside around half the planet** in various types of reserves. Not surprisingly, the idea was **immediately controversial** — but it was also picked up by other scientists hungry for an ambitious, hopeful way of facing a future of ecological Armageddon.

Last year, 49 scientists wrote a **landmark paper** exploring how feasible Half Earth might be across Earth's different terrestrial ecosystems. But the headline news of this paper was really this sentence: “We propose a Global Deal for Nature — a companion to the Paris Climate Deal — to promote increased habitat protection and restoration, national — and ecoregion — scale conservation strategies, and the empowerment of indigenous peoples to protect their sovereign lands.”

Could we set aside half the Earth for nature?

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In less technical parlance, this is a ringing call for a massive, global agreement that would look at drastically increasing the amount of the world covered by parks — in some cases up to the Half Earth goal — and indigenous protected areas. Indigenous people are now widely recognized as some of the best defenders of nature after decades of being sidelined.

This new agreement, they authors contend, should embrace the Half Earth — or Nature Needs Half — goal.

“A number of empirical studies are telling us that we need to set aside about half of the terrestrial and marine realms to avoid the worst of the two great environmental catastrophes — climate change and the sixth extinction crisis — looming on the horizon,” Eric Dinerstein, the lead author on the paper, said. Previously with WWF, Dinerstein is today the Director WildTech and the **Biodiversity** and Wildlife Solutions Program with the NGO, RESOLVE.

Such an agreement would likely fall under the United Nation's **Convention on Biological Diversity**, first established in 1992, as an international treaty. Today, the CBD meets every two years.

The CBD

In 2010, the nations of the CBD agreed to something called the Aichi Biodiversity Targets, these are 20 goals that nations are supposed to be working towards by 2020. We've pretty much failed to meet the majority the targets, including halving **habitat loss and deforestation**, sustainably managing fisheries, preventing the extinction of known endangered species, and minimizing the impact of climate change on coral reefs.



Animals' skeletons displayed at the comparative anatomy gallery of the French museum of Natural History, in Paris. Photograph: Martin Bureau/AFP/Getty Images

But we are close on one of the targets: setting aside 17 percent of land area under protected areas and ten percent of marine and coastal areas. Currently, 15 percent of land area is protected (though much of this lies in so called 'paper parks' which suffer from a dearth in funding) and about 8 percent of the oceans.

The CBD has had a number of disadvantages. For one, much like the Paris Agreement, it's non-binding and largely voluntary. This has been a necessary concession in order to get so many nations sign on — just like with Paris — but it also means there's no legal way to enforce action. Just international peer

pressure.

For another it's lacking a major signatory. Guess who? Yes, of course, the United States — that global black sheep. The non-binding treaty was signed by President Bill Clinton in 1993, but was never ratified by Congress. Every other nation in the world is a member of the agreement however.

Finally, the CBD has not been able to garner the same kind of media attention and interest as the various climate change declarations. For some reason, an agreement about the fate of millions of species on Earth just hasn't grabbed our attention-deficit media.

But these drawbacks need not ensure that the CBD be toothless or ineffectual. And if there's a time for it to prove its mettle, it's now.

Since the Aichi Targets expires in 2020, the CBD needs something to replace it. And it looks likely that the idea of Half Earth will be discussed. The Executive Secretary of the CBD, Dr. Cristiana Paşca Palmer, recently **told** the Guardian in April that a new agreement should include a proposal to make half the planet more nature-friendly by 2050. This is not quite Half Earth — which envisions half the planet under various types of protection — it does, however, offer a significant ratcheting up of ambition compared to the Aichi Targets committed to ten years ago.

The former Minister for Environment, Waters and Forests in Romania, Paşca Palmer says biodiversity is the “infrastructure” that keeps our planet going.

“In my view, we need to ensure that the entire planet is used sustainably,” she said in an **interview**. But this, according to Paşca Palmer, will require a wholesale change in our economy operates.

“We need to...shift to an economic model that accounts for the fact that we operate within a closed system – planet Earth – and that our economic growth is limited by the ecological limits of the planet”

Who's going to pay?

Arguably, the largest element holding back greater conservation action worldwide is funding. To date, the money is simply magnitudes less of what is actually required.

“As with any public good, biodiversity conservation suffers from a free-riding problem, in which governments have an incentive to provide less than the optimal level of funding in the hope that others will cover the costs,” said Edward Barbier, an economist with Colorado State University, adding, “the current global biodiversity crisis is in large part due to the lack of international commitment and funding over the past 25 years.”



Rescued Javan slow loris by the International Animal Rescue Indonesia. Javan slow lorises are critically endangered and have nearly been hunted to near-extinction for use in traditional Chinese medicine and for the illegal pet trade, despite the fact that they are venomous.

Photograph: International Animal Rescue Indonesia/AFP/Getty Images

Barbier is a lead author on a **new paper** suggesting a novel way to ratchet up funds for the other **eight million-plus species** on the planet.

“It will take around \$100 billion a year to protect the earth’s broad range of animal and plant species, and current funding fluctuates around \$4-10 billion annually,” he said, illustrating the massive shortfall for global conservation.

In order to raise \$100 billion a year — ten times more than is currently spent in the very least — Barbier argues we can’t just depend on governments but must turn to the private sector. He and his co-authors argue any new agreement through the CBD should create a mechanism that would allow private corporations to join with their own targets and funding goals.

But what would compel corporations to sign on?

“Corporations depend on the health of our eco-systems and are therefore at risk of losing the very foundations upon which their businesses rely,” explained Thomas Dean, co-author of the paper and sustainable development professor at Colorado State University. “Growing awareness of this challenge will increasingly motivate corporations to engage.”

The paper points to industries where biodiversity is vital to their bottom line such as fisheries, forestry, agriculture and insurance.

“For too long we have viewed corporate and environmental interests as adversarial. However they need to become aligned if we are to be successful both economically and environmentally,” Dean said. “After all, this is the fundamental purpose of an economic system — serving the needs of society in the short and long term.”

Steps

But is protecting 50 percent of the world even possible? Let’s put it this way: it’s not *impossible*.

Dinerstein’s study last year found that of the 846 ecoregions on land, over ten percent of them already have attained fifty percent protection. Moreover a number of countries — including Namibia, Bhutan and Venezuela — are close to fifty percent protection on land.

Dinerstein says that conservationists will have to get creative to reach such an ambitious target, but he believes it can be done.



Indigenous people fishing with bow and arrow in the river with the Asurini do Tocantins tribe in the Brazilian Amazon. Conservation scientists have realized that often the best defenders of ecosystems are indigenous tribes. Photograph: WIN-Initiative/Getty Images

“We will have to include semi-intact areas, managed areas, areas under indigenous protection, and probably about 7-10 percent restoration of key areas...The key here is to be strategic and protect the most irreplaceable sites first over the next decade and fill in the rest over the coming years.”

This doesn't mean every ecoregion can hit the 50 percent target. Some — think the tallgrass prairies of the US — have no chance. Indeed, the study found that 207 of the world's ecoregions have less than four percent habitat left.

Dinerstein says getting to 50 percent in these areas is “delusional” but aiming for 10-15 percent in such habitats via restoration would be a starting place.

Such an endeavor would go a long way towards solving another global environmental crisis: climate change. Preserving and restoring forests and other habitats has long been touted as one of the quickest and cheapest ways of decreasing global carbon emissions. Around 15 percent of global CO₂ emissions today are directly tied to forests being chopped down, peatlands drained or mangroves cleared.

“Without [Half Earth] by 2050...the goal of Paris accord will not be achievable,” argues Dinerstein. “In essence, the two goals are mutually interdependent. You can't succeed in one without success in the other.”

Of course, the biggest hurdle is likely to be political — as it was, and continues to be, with combating climate change. Will proponents be able to convince the world that Half Earth would be a positive — and inspiring — way to create a better, more ecologically stable world?

“It is certainly a major challenge, as has been the case with the Paris Climate Accord. But we need to start somewhere,” Dean said.

If all this sounds like utopian fiction, Dinerstein pointed to the fact that Chinese scientists have already published a paper on how they could hit 50 percent protected land in one of the most populous countries on Earth.

“Nature Needs Half is the biggest idea out there,” Dinerstein said, “and the only one that could guarantee a future for all life on Earth.”