

• 20 May 2022

COVID delays are frustrating the world's plans to save biodiversity

Scientists hope an ambitious agreement to arrest species extinction will be finalized in China later this year, but the country's pandemic response puts that in doubt.

• [Smriti Mallapaty](#)



Young caimans captured in Brazil. Illegal hunting is a major threat to biodiversity. Credit: Collart Hervé/Sygma via Getty

Researchers are increasingly concerned that the world is running two years behind schedule to finalize a new

global framework on biodiversity conservation. They say the delay to the agreement, which aims to halt the alarming rate of species extinctions and protect vulnerable ecosystems, has consequences for countries' abilities to meet ambitious targets to protect biodiversity over the next decade.

Representatives from almost 200 member states of the United Nations' Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD) were [set to meet](#) in Kunming, China, in October 2020, to finalize a draft agreement. It includes 21 conservation targets, such as protecting 30% of the world's land and seas. But the meeting, called the 15th Conference of the Parties, was cancelled because of the COVID-19 pandemic and has been postponed several times since.

The conference is tentatively rescheduled for late August or early September, but China — which as the conference president is also the host — hasn't confirmed the date. And now the country's strict COVID-19 lockdown in Shanghai and rising cases of the virus in Beijing have put that meeting in doubt, too.

Researchers say the delay in finalizing the agreement is stalling conservation work, especially in countries that rely on funds committed by wealthier nations to achieve the targets. The almost two-year hold-up means that

countries will have less time to meet the agreement's 2030 deadline. "We now have eight years to do more, whilst many countries are facing a recession and trying to prioritize economic recovery," says Alice Hughes, a conservation biologist at the University of Hong Kong. "The longer we wait, the more diversity is lost."

A [2019 report](#) estimated that roughly one million species of plants and animals face extinction, many within decades. In the past 2 years alone, the International Union for Conservation of Nature's Red List has classified more than 100 species as extinct, including the large sloth lemur (*Palaeopropithecus ingens*), the Guam flying fox (*Pteropus tokudae*) and the Yunnan lake newt (*Cynops wolterstorffi*). Sparse monitoring means that the true scale of species and habitat loss is unknown, says Hughes.

On top of that, tropical forests, especially in Brazil, are disappearing fast, environmental safeguards have been relaxed in some regions, and researchers have documented escalated poaching of plants driven by unemployment during the pandemic. "Every year we continue to lose biodiversity at an unprecedented and unacceptable rate, undermining nature and human well-being," says Robert Watson, a retired environmental scientist formerly at the University of East Anglia in Norwich, UK.

Releasing funds

The importance of a global agreement on biodiversity cannot be overstated, says Aban Marker Kabraji, an adviser to the United Nations on biodiversity and climate change. These agreements spur action — for example, governments might hold off on updating or developing their national strategies until after they are settled. “It is extremely important that these meetings take place in the cycle in which they’re planned,” says Kabraji.

Global agreements also lead to the release of funds earmarked to help countries to meet their biodiversity goals, such as through the Global Environment Facility, says Hughes. At a preparatory meeting in October 2021, Chinese President Xi Jinping committed 1.5 billion yuan (US\$223 million) towards a Kunming Biodiversity Fund to support developing countries in protecting their biodiversity, but details about those funds have yet to be released.

Funding delays will be felt especially in “countries which have the highest levels of biodiversity and the fewest resources to actually conserve it”, says Kabraji.

Meeting uncertain

The CBD secretariat in Montreal, Canada, has said that the Kunming conference will take place in the third quarter of 2022, but it is waiting on China to confirm dates. David Ainsworth, information officer for the secretariat, says preparations for the meeting are under way, including plans for meeting participants to be isolated from local residents, similar to the process for the Winter Olympics in Beijing in February. There are provisions for the event to be held in another location if a host has to back out, but Ainsworth says there are no official plans to do that yet. Conference officials, including representatives from China, will meet on 19 May to discuss the date and location of the summit, he says.

A decision to relocate the meeting would require China's approval, which it is unlikely to agree to, say researchers. But sticking to having the meeting in Kunming could delay it further, owing to China's strict lockdowns that have brought cities to a standstill. Several major sports events scheduled for later this year, including the Asian Games in Hangzhou, have already been postponed. The meeting will probably be pushed to after September or even next year, says Ma Keping, an ecologist at the Chinese Academy of Sciences Institute of Botany in Beijing.

Some researchers say that the world should wait for China to host the meeting — whenever that will be — and that its leadership is important for the success of negotiations. “The Chinese government has worked very hard to prepare such a meeting,” says Ma. “It should happen in China.”

Others think that it is more important that the meeting happens this year — whether in China or not. Facilities to host such a meeting exist in Rome, Nairobi and Montreal. “Any of these places would be preferable to indefinite further delays,” says Hughes.

“A further delay sends a problematic signal that habitat loss and species extinction can somehow wait,” says Li Shuo, a policy adviser at Greenpeace China in Beijing.

Regardless of when and where the meeting happens, researchers say what’s most important is that the world agrees to ambitious biodiversity goals and delivers on them. The two-year delay has given countries more time to develop the draft framework, but countries have yet to agree to [many of the terms](#), or to figure out how to finance and monitor the work. There are “significant disagreements still on just about every aspect of every target,” says Anne Larigauderie, executive secretary of Intergovernmental Science-Policy Platform on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services in Bonn, Germany.

Nations will meet again only once more — in Nairobi, Kenya, in June — before the agreement is expected to be finalized at the summit in Kunming.

doi: <https://doi.org/10.1038/d41586-022-01384-w>