

# Save Biodiversity: A New Challenge for the World

By CAROLINA GARCIA

IN 2020, the world community will meet in Beijing to discuss how to correct an almost irreversible problem – biodiversity loss at the Convention on Biological Diversity. Over the past half century, there has been a massive decrease in the size of species populations worldwide. At the Beijing conference, China could play a decisive role in securing the planet's future.

Recently, I had the opportunity to observe a family of white rhinos grazing in Lake Nakuru's savannah in Kenya, Africa. They were completely relaxed and unaware that they were being guarded by trained rangers devoted to preserving the few rhinos of that species that are still left in Kenya. These wild majestic animals are on the edge of extinction. According to the International Rhino Foundation, their numbers declined by 95 percent in just 20 years due to illegal poaching. Unfortunately, their fate is not unique.

Human overexploitation of natural resources is creating a massive loss of biodiversity worldwide. According to the latest Living Planet Index that tracks the population of more than 4,000 species worldwide, population sizes have decreased by 60 percent in less than 50 years. China alone, considered to be one of the most biodiverse countries in the world and home to 15 percent of the world's vertebrates and 12 percent of its plants, has lost half of its terrestrial vertebrates in the last 40 years as a result of flourishing economic development.

In March 2019, the Intergovernmental Science-Policy Platform on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services



On June 6, 2019, the World Oceans Day, Shanghai inaugurated an activity themed Protection of Marine Life Diversity.

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(IPBES) raised a red flag: one million species in the world are at risk of disappearing. The situation is so critical that scientists have warned that we are facing the sixth mass extinction on earth.

Mass extinction is a frightening concept. Many remember studying in school how the mighty dinosaurs disappeared.

It seemed as remote as a tale from another planet. A giant space rock hit the earth, causing earthquakes, landslides, and a tsunami in the Atlantic that wiped out more than 70 percent of the living species at that time.

A similar process is happening now. Out of all the mammals on earth, 60 percent are livestock, 36 percent humans and 4 percent are wild animals. Thus, only a quarter of the land is free from human activity, a figure projected to decline to a tenth by 2050. "If we hit nature,

nature will hit harder,” my Kenyan guide told me while crossing the Maasai Mara National Reserve.

Losing biodiversity, which encompasses diversity of species and ecosystems, has an incalculable impact. We depend on nature’s services for our most basic needs – food, water, and energy – and for our more sophisticated ones – medicine, innovation, and recreation. For instance, according to the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN), there are nearly 70,000 medicinal plants that are used by various industries.

These services are highly valuable. In fact, in its regional report for the Americas, IPBES calculated that nature’s services accounted for more than US \$24 trillion per year, nearly twice as much as China’s GDP.

Losing this value will hit hard, and we are just beginning to notice it. In its recent Global Risks Report, the World Economic Forum included biodiversity loss as one of the main risks that the private sector is facing this century. The stakes are high and the window of opportunity to act is closing. Yet, we can still bend the curve.

Europe gives us a hopeful example. After losing most of its forest cover, several European countries have implemented policies to regrow them. In fact, from 1990 to 2015, European countries have grown 90,000 square kilometers of forest, an area nearly as big as Portugal.

However, exceptional good practices will not be enough. We need to take massive, scalable action. The year 2020 will be a decisive year for nature and humankind’s future, and China will be at the epicenter of the decision making. The Convention on Biological Diversity will meet in Beijing to set up a new, hopefully ambitious, agenda that will align states, academia, civil society, and the private sector to bend the curve.

After 26 years of international negotiation, the Convention of Biological Diversity, which convenes all of the countries in the world except for the United States, has not managed to preserve the world’s biodiversity. The Strategic Plan for Biodiversity, a 10-year action framework that finishes in 2020, along with its 20 Aichi Targets, were a fair but failed attempt.

In 2020, there will be an opportunity to adopt a new deal for nature and the fact that China will be leading this important meeting gives a glimmer of hope. Less than five years ago, nations met in Paris to adopt a new agreement to tackle dangerous climate change. China positioned itself as a leader aiming for ambitious goals

to reduce its carbon emissions. Without its leadership, an agreement would not have been feasible. If it was possible for climate, it is also possible for biodiversity. It must be.

To achieve this difficult task, not only is there a need for the state to take responsibility, but the private sector needs to commit as well. That was a key element of the Paris Agreement where China has helped show the way. At the Convention on Biological Diversity, China should be as active on this priority as it was on climate change. Indeed, it is a natural extension to efforts already underway in China to promote the principles of ecological civilization, a topic that the InterAction Council discussed in Guiyang in 2016 and that will most certainly depend on biodiversity.

The efforts of the private sector are as essential to solving our biodiversity issues as they are to tackling our climate change priorities. For instance, 500 multinational companies control 70 percent of the world’s production and trade of 15 key commodities, which are key drivers of habitat destruction and deforestation. It is easier to track, monitor, and change business as usual in 500 companies than to engage with the two end points of the supply chain: 2.5 billion primary producers or 7 billion consumers.

Finally, mobilizing civil society will also create a momentum by demanding traceability from the products that they buy. In most surveys, consumers state that they would choose a sustainably sourced product over another. Yet asymmetries of information rarely allow them to consume responsibly.

In 2018, more than two million visitors came to Kenya mostly to see its wildlife, more than 80,000 of which were Chinese. Possibly after their stay, they left as hopeful and inspired as I did. The Kenyan Maasai Mara National Reserve and the Tanzanian Serengeti National Park have managed to preserve more than 15,000 square kilometres of land, home to millions of wild animals. This place is so incredible that it seems, as the late Polish journalist Ryszard Kapuscinski once said, “as if one were witnessing the birth of the world.”

Kenya shows what can be done to protect biodiversity. In 2020, China should take the lead in making biodiversity a global priority every bit as important as climate change. ■

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