NATURE NEEDS US TO ACT—NOW

Life as we know it depends upon biodiversity, which is why the Campaign for Nature seeks to protect at least 30 percent of the planet by 2030.

Biodiversity is a concept that’s commonly referenced, yet regularly misunderstood. The complex term not only refers to the mind-boggling variety of life on Earth, but to how everything from genes to entire ecosystems interact to make the planet habitable. The bad news: science shows that biodiversity is deteriorating worldwide at a faster rate than at any time in human history. That’s obviously devastating for everything in nature—including us.

"If biodiversity disappears, so do people," says Dr. Stephen Woodley, field ecologist and biodiversity expert with the International Union for Conservation of Nature. "We are part of nature and we do not exist without it...."

Every living thing—from microorganisms to behemoth blue whales—plays an integral role in supporting life on the planet. So, any nature loss has a negative impact. Suffer enough losses and the biosphere—the living layer of Earth that supports life as we know it—collapses.

Preventing such a catastrophe, says Woodley, begins with understanding why biodiversity is declining, and then taking action to reverse course.

"The two greatest causes of biodiversity loss are habitat loss, primarily on land, and over-exploitation, primarily in the ocean," he adds. Woodley explains that we can solve these problems by permanently protecting more lands and oceans and managing them for their conservation values.

That’s the mission of the global Campaign for Nature, a partnership of the Wyss Foundation and the National Geographic Society. The foundation, created by entrepreneur, conservationist, and philanthropist Hansjörg Wyss, is committing $1 billion over the next decade to help protect at least 30 percent of the planet by 2030.

Currently, only 15 percent of the land and seven percent of the ocean are protected. The campaign calls on policy makers to invest in conservation and commit to The New Deal for Nature and People, a science-driven plan to save the diversity and abundance of life on Earth. This plan, which is currently being developed, is set to be finalized and signed in October at the 15th Conference of the Parties of the Convention on Biological Diversity in Kunming, China. The campaign is working to ensure that the plan establishes “30 by 30” as a global conservation target and is accompanied by long-term funding for management.

Instead of simply protecting 30 percent of the Earth, the campaign also encourages nations, in full partnership with indigenous peoples and local communities, to focus on the right 30 percent. Those areas, says Woodley, harbor the most important biodiversity values such as, endangered species and ecosystems; rare species and ecosystems; examples of every living thing on Earth; unique aggregations like bird migration stopover points; and intact wilderness areas.

The campaign also recognizes the importance of indigenous-led conservation and respecting indigenous rights. Indigenous peoples manage or hold tenure over lands that support about 80 percent of the world’s biodiversity, making it essential for these communities to be full partners in developing and implementing strategies.

Protecting the health of key biodiversity areas also is vital for tackling climate change, says National Geographic Explorer-in-Residence Dr. Enric Sala, an author of a 2019 paper outlining the need for a Global Deal for Nature (GDN). Pairing the GDN and the international Paris Agreement to combat climate change, the paper asserts, "would avoid catastrophic climate change, conserve species, and secure essential ecosystem services."

"Biodiversity is stability," says Sala. "Trees, wetlands, grasslands, peat bogs, salt marshes, healthy ocean ecosystems, mangroves, and plants absorb much of the carbon pollution humans put into the atmosphere. Yet, right now, less than half of the planet is in its natural state, which isn’t enough....."

Bottom line: Nature needs us to act—now. [Moving to] Mars is not an option, Sala adds. "The only conditions for our life and for the prosperity of human society are here on Earth... it is up to us to protect it."