

10 Minutes for the Planet

A million species being destroyed by one ©

by Sarah Heath



Hello! I'm Sarah Heath and you're listening to 10 Minutes for the Planet on EnglishWaves.

If latent observers living through these ominous environmental times needed yet another wake-up call to the state of the planet, surely the latest news to come out of the United Nations will awaken their impulse to act?

Just the summary of this new report is enough to make your toes curl. The Intergovernmental Science-Policy Platform on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services has stated – without any preconceived intention of scaremongering or exaggerating – that the human race is the major force behind the threatened, and imminent, extinction of over a million plant and animal species. That's a full seven-figure number of species which will soon die out. Forever.

The full findings of this extensive research will be released in the coming months but the foreshock of what will be learnt in the 1,500-page report has already had some world leaders, including President Macron, jumping to attention.

The study includes information sourced from 15,000 government and scientific departments in 50 countries worldwide, work which has been undertaken by 145 scientists and researchers but has also incorporated information from indigenous communities, many of whom have a far-better understanding of – and reliance on – the workings of the natural world than people living in western societies.

According to scientists, planet earth is currently going through its sixth mass extinction phase, a very natural phenomenon but which differs vastly from its predecessors: this one is man-made. Not asteroids or volcanoes but human beings. This current extinction rate is estimated to be between 1,000 to 10,000 times that of what is considered the usual 'background rate' of extinctions of between one to five species each year.

Among the key accelerators to the dying out of plants and animals are habitat loss, overfishing, climate change, pollution and invasive species destroying areas which are unable to sustain their presence in a delicate ecosystem.

There are roughly 8 million known species on our planet. It is believed that 12.5% are under threat of dying out. Those most in danger are 10% of insects, 33% of marine mammals and corals, and 40% of amphibians. Forests which are home to half the world's animals, some possibly still yet undiscovered, have been decimated: between 1980 and the year 2000, over 100 million hectares of forest have been destroyed mostly for agricultural purposes – cattle farming and palm oil production being the major culprits. Industrial fishing is wiping out fish stocks and the last hundred years has seen over half of the world's coral reefs dying.

Human activity accounts for 75% of total land mass being altered in some way, a third of it for agriculture. Urban areas are growing at frightening speed to keep up with the additional 1 billion people adding to the world population every 13 years.

Species which became extinct in 2018 include three types of bird: the Po'ouli, a songbird native to Hawaii which was wiped out when non-indigenous animals were introduced to its natural habitat; the Alagoas Foliage Gleaner lived in Brazil's rainforest until deforestation wiped it out; another Brazilian native, the Spix's Macaw became extinct in the wild last year, although a small number do remain in captivity.

And the dismal predictions for this year? The world's rarest marine mammal, the Vaquita Porpoise will certainly die out in the very-near future. Living in the Gulf of California, there are believed to be fewer than 30 left in the wild, their demise largely brought about by being drowned in illegal fishing nets.

The Northern White Rhino has just two females left in existence after the last male died last year. Despite desperate measures by conservation groups, poaching for rhino-horn has obliterated rhino populations within the past decades and now it is just a matter of time.....

How bad does it need to be for the world to pay more attention? The chairman of the UN research group who compiled this damning report, Sir Robert Watson, said: "We are eroding the very foundations of our economies, livelihoods, food security, health, and quality of life worldwide".

Education surely has to be the key when it appears even some world leaders with access to the best information are in denial of the obvious and the man on the street doesn't even have a grasp on the basics. A chat show in the United States carried out a short and informal, but very-telling, survey asking American passers-by whether the Homo sapiens species should be saved. Most had no idea that Homo sapiens is the Latin term for human beings. Many respondents believed other issues should be focused on before saving...our own race! One woman went as far as saying, "Let the Homo sapiens die! Save the humans"! Ironic that the literal translation of Homo sapiens is "Wise Man". Are we really?

A quote from the Cree Indian tribe in Northern America puts it most succinctly: "Only when the last tree has been cut down, the last fish been caught, and the last stream poisoned, will we realize we cannot eat money."

Tune in next week for more stories on the environment, here on English Waves.