

Nature: On the verge of bankruptcy

In a recent UN-sponsored report, the scale of desertification and drought occurring across the globe is highlighted

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Pressures on global land resources are now greater than ever, as a rapidly increasing population coupled with rising levels of consumption is placing ever-larger demands on the world's land-based natural capital, warns a new United Nations report.

Consumption of Earth's natural reserves has doubled in the last 30 years, with a third of the planet's land now severely degraded, according to the United Nations Convention to Combat Desertification (UNCCD). Its new report launched Sept. 12 in Ordos, China, during the convention's 13th summit.

"Each year, we lose 15 billion trees and 24 billion tonnes of fertile soil," the UNCCD's report, "The Global Land Outlook," stated, adding that a significant proportion of managed and natural ecosystems are degrading and at further risk from climate change and biodiversity loss.

In basic terms, there is increasing competition between the demand for goods and services that benefit people, like food, water and energy, and the need to protect other ecosystem services that regulate and support all life on Earth.

At the same time, terrestrial biodiversity underpins all of these services and underwrites the full enjoyment of a wide range of human rights, such as the rights to a healthy life, nutritious food, clean water, and cultural identity, adds the report. And a significant proportion of managed and natural ecosystems are degrading and at further risk from climate change and biodiversity loss.

The report provides some key facts: From 1998 to 2013, approximately 20 percent of Earth's vegetated land surface showed persistent declining trends in productivity, apparent in 20 percent of cropland, 16 percent of forest land, 19 percent of grassland and 27 percent of rangeland.

These trends are "especially alarming" in the face of the increased demand for land-intensive crops and livestock.

Land degradation contributes to climate change and increases the vulnerability of millions of people, especially the poor, women and children, says UNCCD, adding that current management practices in the land-use sector are responsible for about 25 percent of the world's greenhouse gases, while land degradation is both a cause and a result of poverty.

"Over 1.3 billion people, mostly in the developing countries, are trapped on degrading agricultural land, exposed to climate stress, and therefore excluded from wider infrastructure and economic development," stated the report.

Land degradation also triggers competition for scarce resources, which can lead to migration and insecurity while exacerbating access and income inequalities, the report stated.

"Soil erosion, desertification and water scarcity all contribute to societal stress and



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Carcasses of goats and sheep are seen Dec. 15 in the outskirts of Dahar town of Puntland state in northeastern Somalia.

breakdown. In this regard, land degradation can be considered a 'threat amplifier,' especially when it slowly reduces people's ability to use the land for food production and water storage or undermines other vital ecosystem services.

Meanwhile, climate change will alter the suitability of vast regions for food production and human habitation, according to the report.

"The mass extinction of flora and fauna, including the loss of crop wild relatives and keystone species that hold ecosystems together, further jeopardizes resilience and adaptive capacity, particularly for the rural poor who depend most on the land for their basic needs and livelihoods," it states.

Our food system, UNCCD warns, has put the focus on short-term production and profit rather than long-term environmental sustainability.

The modern agricultural system has resulted in huge increases in productivity, holding off the risk of famine in many parts of the world but, at the same time, is based on monocultures, genetically modified crops, and the intensive use of fertilizers and pesticides that undermine long-term sustainability, it adds.

Food production accounts for 70 percent of all freshwater withdrawals and 80 percent of deforestation, while soil, the basis for global food security, is being contaminated, degraded and eroded in many areas, resulting in long-term declines in productivity.

In parallel, small-scale farmers, the backbone of rural livelihoods and food production for millennia, are under immense strain from land degradation, insecure tenure and a globalized food system that favors concentrated, large-scale

and highly-mechanized agribusiness.

This widening gulf between production and consumption, and ensuing levels of food loss/waste, further accelerates the rate of land use change, land degradation and deforestation, warns the U.N. Convention.

Speaking at the launch of the report, UNCCD Executive Secretary Monique Barbut said, "Land degradation and drought are global challenges and intimately linked to most, if not all, aspects of human security and well-being – food security, employment and migration, in particular."

As the competition increases, there are winners and losers.

According the U.N. Convention, land is an essential building block of civilization yet its contribution to our quality of life is perceived and valued in starkly different and often incompatible ways.

A minority has grown rich from the unsustainable use and large-scale exploitation of land resources with related conflicts intensifying in many countries, UNCCD states.

Except for some regions in Europe, human use of land before the mid-1700s was insignificant when compared with contemporary changes in the Earth's ecosystems, UNCCD notes, adding that the notion of a limitless, human-dominated world was embraced and reinforced by scientific advances: "Populations abruptly gained access to what seemed to be an unlimited stock of natural capital, where land was seen as a free gift of nature."

The scenario analysis examines a range of possible futures and projects increasing tension between the need to increase food and energy production and declines.

From a regional perspective, these scenarios predict that sub-Saharan Africa,

South Asia, the Middle East and North Africa will face the greatest challenges due to a mix of factors, including high population growth, low per capita GDP, limited options for agricultural expansion, increased water stress and high biodiversity losses.

The big question is if this self-destructive trend can be reversed. The answer is yes, or at least that losses could be minimized.

On this, Barbut said that the U.N. Convention report suggests, "It is in all our interests to step back and rethink how we are managing the pressures and the competition."

She further added, "The Outlook presents a vision for transforming the way in which we use and manage land because we are all decision-makers and our choices can make a difference – even small steps matter."

Programme Administrator Achim Steiner stated, "Over 250 million people are directly affected by desertification, and about one billion people in over 100 countries are at risk."

They include many of the world's poorest and most marginalized people, he said, adding that achieving land degradation neutrality can provide a healthy and productive life for all on Earth, including water and food security.

The Global Land Outlook shows that "each of us can in fact make a difference."

Can Mother Nature recover? The answer is a clear yes. Perhaps it would suffice that politicians pay more attention to real human needs than promoting weapons deals – and that big business helps replenish the world's natural capital.

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