

U.N. reports see a lonelier planet with fewer plants, animals

By Seth Borenstein
The Associated Press

WASHINGTON — Earth is losing plants, animals, and clean water at a dramatic rate, according to four new United Nations scientific reports that provide the most comprehensive and localized look at the state of biodiversity.

Scientists meeting in Colombia issued four regional reports on how well animals and plants are doing in the Americas; Europe and Central Asia; Africa; and the Asia-Pacific area.

Their conclusion after three years of study: Nowhere is doing well.

The Intergovernmental Science-Policy Platform on Biodiversity and Ecosystem was about more than just critters, said study team chairman Robert Watson. It is about keeping the Earth livable for humans, because we rely on biodiversity for food, clean water, and public health, the prominent British and U.S. scientist said.

“This is undermining wellbeing across the planet, threatening us long-term on food and water,” Watson said in an interview.

Scientists pointed to the death of the last male northern white rhino in Africa and severe declines in the numbers of elephants, tigers, and pangolins, but said those are only the most visible and charismatic of species that are in trouble.

What’s happening is a side effect of the world getting wealthier and more crowded with people, Watson said. Humans need more food, more clean water, more energy, and more land. And the way society has tried to achieve that has cut down on biodiversity, he said.

Crucial habitat has been cut apart, alien



LONELIER PLANET. Thai customs officials display some of 136 pangolins and 992 pounds of pangolin scales seized in 2017 at the Customs Department headquarters in Bangkok, Thailand, in this file photo. Scientists are concerned with severe declines in the numbers of pangolins, elephants, and tigers around the world. (AP Photo/Sakchai Lalit, File)

now threatened. In the last decade, 42 percent of the land plant and animal species have declined, said Europe co-chair Mark Rounsevell of the Karlsruhe Institute of Technology in Germany.

Wetlands have been cut in half since 1970.

Africa

Africa could lose half of some bird and mammal species by 2100. And more than 60 percent of the continent’s people depend on natural resources for their livelihoods, said report co-chair Luthando Dziba of South African National Parks.

Already more than 20 percent of Africa’s species are threatened, endangered, or extinct.

While scientists said government and society needs to change its ways, individuals can use less energy and less water as well as eat less red meat, Watson said.

“A balanced diet can really help,” he said. There are “lots of individual things you can do.”

The outlook is bleak if society doesn’t change, but it still can, Watson said.

“Some species are threatened with extinctions. Others, just pure numbers will go down,” Watson said. “It will be a lonelier place relative to our natural world. It’s a moral issue. Do we humans have a right to make them go extinct?”

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species have invaded places, chemicals have hurt plants and animals, wetlands and mangroves that clean up pollution are disappearing, and the world’s waters are overfished, he said.

Manmade climate change is getting worse, and global warming will soon hurt biodiversity as much as all the other problems combined, Watson said.

“We keep making choices to borrow from the future to live well today,” said Jake Rice, Canada’s chief government scientist for fisheries and oceans, who co-chaired the Americas report.

Duke University conservationist Stuart Pimm, who wasn’t part of the study team, said the reports make sense and are based on well-established scientific data: “Are things pretty dire? Yes.”

Among the regional findings:

The Americas

If current trends continue, by the year 2050 the Americas will have 15 percent fewer plants and animals than now. That means there will be 40 percent fewer

plants and animals in the Americas than in the early 1700s.

Nearly a quarter of the species that were fully measured are now threatened, Rice said.

And when all of “nature’s contributions” are taken into account, nearly two-thirds are declining and more than one-fifth are “decreasing strongly,” Rice said.

Asia-Pacific

If trends continue, there will be no “exploitable fish stocks” for commercial fishing by 2048. Around that same, the region will lose 45 percent of its biodiversity and about 90 percent of its crucial corals, if nothing changes, said Asia co-chair Sonali Seneratna Sella-muttu, a senior researcher at the International Water Management Institute.

“All major ecosystems are threatened in the region,” she said.

Europe and Central Asia

Even though it is the region that Watson said may be doing the best, 28 percent of the species that only live in Europe are

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Aguman Capampangan Northwest U.S.A., which was founded in 1996 as a social club for Pampangans, is a nonprofit Filipino-American organization based in Portland that promotes Kapampangan and Filipino culture, serves the northwest community, and supports the Philippines through humanitarian work. The organization raises funds through yearly Christmas carolling as well as a lu’au dinner and dance event and promotes culture by holding Santa Cruzan events and an annual La Naval Fiesta celebration. Aguman sent its tenth mission to the Philippines in February of 2017, providing more than 3,500 people with medical and dental services while also distributing relief goods in the form of rice, canned food, noodles, slippers, toothbrushes, toothpaste, and more to people in need in Pampang province. In addition to its work in the Philippines, Aguman also provides assistance locally by feeding homeless people in the Portland area. To learn more, visit <www.agumancapampangan.org>.

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The Asian Reporter Foundation is accepting nominations for its 2018 “Exemplary Community Volunteer” awards.
The recognition banquet will be held Thursday, April 26, 2018 at southeast Portland’s Wong’s King Seafood Restaurant. Nomination forms and award guidelines are available for download at <www.ARFoundation.net>.
The nomination deadline is Thursday, April 4, 2018 at 5:00pm.

The Asian Reporter Foundation’s 20th Annual Scholarship & Awards Banquet features:

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