



Colonies of chinstrap penguin – a case-study species in the 2024 Living Planet Report – have declined on average by 61 per cent from 1980–2019. The loss is due to changes in sea ice and reduced krill prey as a result of climate change and increased fisheries.

YVA MOMATIUK & JOHN EASTCOTT/NATUREPL.COM



OPINION

“Governments have never met a single biodiversity target in the history of UN agreements”

MARK CARWARDINE

HAVE A DREADFUL ADMISSION TO MAKE. I feel gripped by a sense of doom like never before. I’m struggling not to slip into total despair. The latest research reveals that we have lost nearly three-quarters of the world’s wildlife in the past 50 years. How can such a staggeringly catastrophic decline fail to make headline news around the world?

How much worse does it have to get before everyone wakes up and takes notice?

You’d have thought the powers-that-be would take it more seriously. Yet this jaw-dropping annihilation is only going to get worse – as global heating accelerates, as business continues as usual and as governments repeatedly fail to give a damn.

The World Meteorological Organization recently announced that the greenhouse gases in the atmosphere have reached a record high and carbon dioxide is accumulating faster now than at any time in human existence. And that’s despite all the publicity and promises.

Meanwhile, the COP16 biodiversity summit, held in Colombia in October, was striking for its gross underachievement. Two years earlier, at COP15 in Montreal, the world reached an historic agreement to protect 30 per cent of the planet for nature by 2030 and to phase out or reform US\$500bn of environmentally damaging subsidies. Yet no fewer than 158 nations (out of 196) arrived at the summit without formal plans on how they are going to meet these targets. But then why should we be surprised? Governments have never met a single biodiversity target in the history of UN agreements.

Why are conservationists still being ignored, as if saving life on Earth is an optional extra? Why is the world so woefully and bizarrely unenthusiastic when it comes to avoiding mutual destruction? It doesn’t help that environmentally friendly and scientifically astute politicians are themselves an endangered species. Most politicians are obsessed with reckless short-termism. If the planet becomes uninhabitable after their brief spell in office, so be it (I’m not being melodramatic – a group of 80 researchers from 45 countries issued a warning this week that the planet is, indeed, becoming increasingly uninhabitable).

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We are failing miserably, and it’s terrifying. Yes, we are slowing the decline (without conservation, our plight would be far, far worse). And, yes, there are success stories. But many don’t even register on the scale of destruction, and many others are merely hot air – promises that are never kept.

There were even positive murmurings about the Living Planet Index, focusing on the figures for Europe (where we’ve lost 35 per cent of our wildlife populations since 1970) and North America (39 per cent lost). But there’s a reason our losses are relatively low: we’d already wiped out much of our wildlife by the time these records began. Besides, who in their right mind would celebrate the fact that we have lost ‘only’ 35 per cent or 39 per cent of all our wildlife in 50 years?

I know that we are all wired to try harder when there are reasons to be cheerful. Some people argue that conservationists have become too pessimistic for our own good. We don’t want the constant pessimism to

→ AT A GLANCE

- Recent research reveals that global wildlife populations have plunged by an average of 73 per cent in the past 50 years (1970–2020). Latin America and the Caribbean recorded the steepest average declines – a staggering 95 per cent – with Africa second at 76 per cent.
- The figures were published in the 2024 Living Planet Report, a biennial report measuring the state of the world’s biological diversity, produced by WWF and the Zoological Society of London.
- Meanwhile, the COP16 biodiversity summit took place in Colombia, where delegates from 196 countries discussed progress in preserving biodiversity and stopping the destruction of nature – but, yet again, the political pace failed to match the scale of the challenge.

cause everyone to tune out. But it’s equally irresponsible to lull people into a false sense of security. The comment we hear time and again – “It’s not too late; if we act now, nature can recover” – is sounding increasingly vacuous.

Don’t get me wrong. I’m not about to hang up my conservation hat just yet. I get that fighting against the intractable forces of bureaucracy, greed, conflict and ignorance is in the job description. We live it each and every day. But it is increasingly difficult not to be overwhelmed by a sense of grief and failure when your days are filled with cajoling and battling – and you’re constantly beleaguered by bad news.

But, first, I need to calm down, in the best way I know. By spending some time outside in nature. What’s left of it. 🐦

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