Destruction of nature as dangerous as climate change, scientists warn

Unsustainable exploitation of the natural world threatens food and water security of billions of people, major UN-backed biodiversity study reveals

Jonathan Watts, Global environment editor | The Guardian, Fri 23 Mar 2018

Human destruction of nature is rapidly eroding the world's capacity to provide food, water and security to billions of people, according to the most comprehensive biodiversity study in more than a decade.

Such is the rate of decline that the risks posed by biodiversity loss should be considered on the same scale as those of climate change, noted the authors of the UN-backed report, which was released in Medellin, Colombia on Friday.

Among the standout findings are that exploitable fisheries in the world's most populous region – the Asia-Pacific – are on course to decline to zero by 2048; that freshwater availability in the Americas has halved since the 1950s and that 42% of land species in Europe have declined in the past decade.

"The time for action was yesterday or the day before," said Robert Watson, the chair of the Intergovernmental Science-Policy Platform on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services (IPBES) which compiled the research. "Governments recognise we have a problem. Now we need action, but unfortunately the action we have now is not at the level we need."

"We must act to halt and reverse the unsustainable use of nature or risk not only the future we want but even the lives we currently lead," he added.

Divided into four regional reports, the study of studies has been written by more than 550 experts from over 100 countries and taken three years to complete. Approved by the governments of 129 member nations, the IPBES reports aim to provide a knowledge base for global action on biodiversity in much the same way that the UN's Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change is used by policymakers to set carbon emission targets.

Conversion of forests to croplands and wetlands to shrimp farms has fed a human population that has more than doubled since the 1960s, but at a devastating cost to other species – such as pollinating insects and oxygen-producing plants – on which our climate, economy and well-being depend.

Since the start of colonisation by Europeans 500 years ago, he said 30% of biodiversity has been lost in the region. This will rise to 40% in the next 10 years unless policies and behaviours are transformed.

In many regions, the report says current biodiversity trends are jeopardising UN global development goals to provide food, water, clothing and housing. They also weaken natural defences against extreme weather events, which will become more common due to climate change.

Despite the grim outlook, he said there was cause for hope. The report outlines several different future paths, depending on the policies adopted by governments and the choices made by consumers. None completely halt biodiversity loss, but the worst-case scenarios can be avoided with greater conservation efforts. The missing link is to involve policymakers across government and to accept that biodiversity affects every area of the economy. Currently, these concerns are widely accepted by foreign and environment ministries; the challenge is to move the debate to incorporate this in other areas of government, such as agriculture, energy and water. Businesses and individual consumers also need to play a more responsible role, said Watson.

Without more pressure from civil society, media and voters, governments have been reluctant to sacrifice short-term economic goals to meet the longer-term environmental challenge to human wellbeing.