

Analysis Warns Global Biodiversity Is Below ‘Safe Limit’ Ahead of COP 15

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The world’s biodiversity has fallen below the ‘safe limit’, researchers suggest, as habitat destruction and agriculture take their toll on nature.

Ahead of the 2021 UN Biodiversity Conference (COP 15), the Museum has launched the Biodiversity Trends Explorer, an online tool that will allow everyone, from members of the public to policymakers, to see how the biodiversity of different regions has changed over time.

According to new analysis of over 58,000 species by Museum scientists, the UK has only half of its [entire biodiversity](#) left, putting it in the bottom 10% of the world’s countries.

With an average of just 53% of [its native wildlife](#) intact, it falls behind countries including the USA and China following widespread destruction of its habitats from the seventeenth to nineteenth centuries.

Globally – biodiversity intactness, which represents the proportion of the original number of species in an area that remain and their abundance – is measured at 75%. This is significantly below the 90% average [set as the ‘safe limit’](#) to maintain the ecological processes such as pollination and nutrient cycling that are vital to our survival.

The researchers behind the new analysis have called on governments around the world for ambitious action to preserve and enhance biodiversity globally ahead of the 2021 UN Biodiversity Conference (COP 15).

Professor Andy Purvis, who researches biodiversity at the Museum and carried out the analysis, says, ‘Biodiversity loss is just as catastrophic as climate change, but the solutions are linked. Stopping further damage to the planet requires big change, but we can do it if we act now, together.

‘Muddling through as we currently are doing is nowhere near enough to halt, let alone reverse, this devastating decline in biodiversity.’

‘Governments possess the power – economic, political and legal – to address the planetary emergency, and there may still be time, but they must act now.’

The Museum has also launched a new tool, [the Biodiversity Trends Explorer](#), to allow people around the world to track biodiversity changes from 2000 to 2050.



The Industrial Revolution contributed to much of the loss of British biodiversity. Image © T.H. Hayhurst, licensed under Public Domain via [Wikimedia Commons](#)

The ghost of biodiversity past

Under the analysis, scientists looked at data from ecological studies from around the world covering over 58,000 species, including animals, plants and fungi. This data was used to produce a metric, known as the Biodiversity Intactness Index (BII), for countries and island groups around the world.

[Five different scenarios](#) were modelled to predict how the BII could change in the years to 2050. These scenarios range from Taking the Green Road, where the world moves gradually to a more sustainable future, to Taking the Highway, where fossil fuels are used to fuel growth. Other scenarios imagine countries competing with each other and becoming more unequal.

Under the scenario where current trends continue, the researchers found that the UK lags behind much of the world. In the 2021 figures, only a handful of countries such as Denmark and Ukraine were found to have a lower BII.

This low figure has been attributed to the events of the Agricultural and Industrial Revolutions. These events saw traditional farming and industry increasingly replaced by more intensive practices and mechanisation, [which destroyed swathes of habitat](#).

‘It’s over 200 years, probably, since we passed the [safe threshold](#) in terms of having enough

biodiversity to reliably meet our needs in the UK,' Andy says. 'But since then, we've in effect been exporting biodiversity damage elsewhere by importing materials from those places.

'We've done that because our spending power has been high. Basically, we cashed in our natural capital for economic capital hundreds of years ago.'

These impacts mean [the UK is one of the most nature-depleted countries in the world](#). Even in the twenty-first century, the nation's BII fell from 53.88 in 2003 to a low of 52.31 by 2007. It is yet to return to its former level. While gains are predicted until 2050, this will only reach 56.32 in the most generous scenario.



Timor-Leste's coral reefs are some of the most pristine in the world, contributing to its high BII. Image © Mayumi.K/Shutterstock

The ghost of biodiversity yet to come

While the UK is starting from a low baseline, scientists are concerned that countries with high BII values now may see them collapse as resources are exploited to fuel development in wealthy countries.

'Taking the Green Road is the fairest route,' explains Andy. 'We, the developed world, mustn't export our biodiversity loss to lower-income countries which often have more unique biodiversity and whose people depend critically on what their local ecosystems can provide them with.'

For instance, under a scenario in which wealthy countries exploit low-income countries, Timor-Leste – currently home to some of the world's most biodiverse marine habitats – could see its BII value fall by almost 25% by 2050.

'Because we have purchasing power in the UK, it's easy to massively improve the state of nature as we could just stop farming. But what that would mean is that the UK would just buy everything in, usually from places that have more unique biodiversity than the UK ever had.'

'At a global level, that would be terrible.'

Cooperation between everyone is vital to protect global biodiversity, with negotiators set to meet in China for COP 15 in October 2021, where it is hoped they will set binding targets for the preservation of biodiversity. However, agreement won't be easy.

'It's easier for wealthy nations to meet targets based on trends because theirs are largely stable, whereas it's easier for developing countries to meet targets based on status because they usually have more left,' says Andy. 'Both these viewpoints are valid, so it may well be that the equitable outcome involves different countries making their contribution in different ways.'

Agreements such as the Convention on Biological Diversity are based on a principle of fairness, with some suggesting wealthier countries with poorer biodiversity should provide funding to lower-income countries to preserve theirs.

'I think that there's a huge fairness and equality issue here,' Andy says. 'Biodiversity damage is driven primarily, but not exclusively, by consumption in rich countries.'

'I think there is an obligation on developed countries that have cashed in their own nature for profit to be compensating other countries to retain theirs, which might mean financial instruments are needed to enable those transfers to happen.'



Negotiators are set to meet at COP 15 and COP 26 for vital talks about biodiversity and climate change.
Image © Dominika Zara/Shutterstock

Fight for the future

Ahead of COP 15, the Museum has launched the Biodiversity Trends Explorer (BTE), [which uses BII data](#) to provide open monitoring of biodiversity for all. It is hoped that the tool will allow negotiators to make fair agreements using the latest data and predictions.

Andy says,

'The negotiations at [COP 26](#) [the UN Climate Change Conference] and [COP 15](#) can only be successful if the validity of both sides' positions is clearly understood, by providing each country with accurate information, not only on its recent biodiversity trend but also how much nature it has retained.

'Accessing the Biodiversity Intactness Index via our BTE tool can help negotiators reach equitable agreements.'

Lord Zac Goldsmith, UK Government Minister for Pacific and the Environment, says,

'As Presidents of COP26, the UK has put nature at the heart of the agenda, and we very much welcome this important study which highlights the crucial connections between climate and biodiversity and the urgent need to protect nature.

'We wholly support this new tool and encourage all countries to increase their efforts to protect and restore nature as a solution not only to climate change, but biodiversity loss and poverty too.'

While nations must play their part, there are also actions that individuals can do as well. For instance, cutting down on meat intake, growing more nature-friendly gardens and using fewer fossil fuels can all help the planet.

'I think it's really important to retain the optimism that that this can be fixed,' Andy says. 'It's not so much consumption of natural resource that's the problem, it's overconsumption.

'Buying less and thinking about it more can make a really big difference.'

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Featured image: The world's biodiversity intactness is around 75% - below the 90% limit scientists believe is safe. Image © Tarcisio Schnaider/Shutterstock

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