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Species in Peril: Loss, Love and Protection

Our nonhuman relatives need us and, we need them.

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Human calamities abound. The unrelenting coronavirus pandemic has already claimed more than 900,000 lives worldwide. The images of exploding wildfires from the American Southwest—California, Colorado, Oregon, and Washington—look apocalyptic. Racial injustice and inequity in the United States marches on. And, the economic suffering?—painful.

In this moment of so much death and suffering—do we even have the capacity to extend our care, our love for nonhuman kin—bears, bees, bugs, butterflies, and all the other nonhuman animals and plants with whom we share this Earth? Perhaps, for most, not, or not that much. And yet, there are committed people all over the world who have long fought for, and will continue to fight for, the natural world, which is really a fight for our survival too.

But let us peek into the nonhuman world for a moment, which is also our world.

The *Living Planet Report 2020* is out now. Two years ago, in an article, "Biological Annihilation: A Planet in Loss Mode," I had summarized the findings in the *Living Planet Report 2018* with the following words:

> As a comprehensive survey of the health of our planet and the impact of human activity on other species, its key message was grim indeed: between 1970 and 2014, it found, monitored populations of vertebrates had declined in abundance by an average of 60% globally, with particularly pronounced losses in the tropics and in freshwater systems. South and Central America suffered a dramatic loss of 89% of such vertebrates, while freshwater populations of vertebrates declined by a lesser but still staggering 83% worldwide.

The Living Planet Report 2020 updates those numbers with two additional years of data. Between 1970 and 2016, monitored populations of vertebrates—or amphibians, birds, fishes, mammals, and reptiles—have declined in abundance by an average of 68% globally, up from 60%; in South and Central America, the loss is still most pronounced: at 94%, up from 89%; and for freshwater species globally: 84% decline, up from 83%.

In other words, our nonhuman relatives are vanishing at an extraordinary scale and pace. But that tragedy is not yet registering in our collective imagination.

Have you witnessed, or organized a collective mourning to honor our dead nonhuman relatives? Have you seen any flowers, real or plastic, placed by the roadside, or at a city square to honor the dead bears, bugs and bees?

While the *Living Planet Report* serves up, every two years, a health assessment of our living

Earth—the present compared to the recent past—another report, the landmark May 2019 UN biodiversity assessment offered a glimpse of where we are headed: one million animal and plant species face extinction, many within decades, due to human activity.

Are we even awake to the fact that we are doing our damnedest to ensure that our nonhuman relatives don't have a snowball chance in hell to survive on this planet?

That is only half of the story, however.

Many committed people around the world—Indigenous land, water and species protectors; biologists and ecologists; the species conservationists; policy makers; artists; writers; educators; and community organizers—are all working hard to chart more-just and livable multispecies futures.

The crisis of biological annihilation, which includes human-caused species extinctions, mass die-offs and massacres, is as much a scientific issue as it is cultural and political.

War on Biological Nurseries and Conservation Laws

How has the United States' White House responded to the intensifying biodiversity crisis since President Trump took office in January 2017?

The answer: By waging an all-out war on nonhuman lives.

Shortly after assuming office, President Trump announced his intention to make America "energy dominant" and, then Secretary of the Interior Ryan Zinke suggested that that dominance would come from drilling for oil and gas in Alaska, including in the Coastal Plain of the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge. The Coastal Plain of the Arctic Refuge is a biological nursery of global significance, and a place the Indigenous Gwich'in people call *Iizhik Gwats'an Gwandaii Goodlit* ("the sacred place where life begins"). The Trump administration also proceeded to expand oil and gas development around Chaco Canyon in New Mexico, a place considered sacred by the Indigenous peoples of the Southwest. In response, I convened a national conference, *the last oil: a multispecies justice symposium* in February 2018.

Things are heating up on the Arctic Refuge issue. Last month, the Trump administration "finalized its plan to open up part of the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge in Alaska to oil and gas development, a move that overturns six decades of protections for the largest remaining stretch of wilderness in the United States," the *New York Times* reported on August 17. Interior Secretary David Bernhardt is hopeful that "there could be a lease sale by the end of the year."

But licking your chops doesn't always lead to eating.

On Wednesday, September 9, Gwich'in Tribal governments continued their decades-long fight to protect the Coastal Plain from fossil fuel development by filing suit against the Interior Department.

Additionally, fifteen state governments, led by the State of Washington's **Attorney General Bob Ferguson,** stood alongside the Tribes and filed a separate lawsuit in the federal district court in Alaska.

Two years ago, when I was in Washington, DC, for a two-day Arctic Refuge campaign strategy workshop—the morning started with New Mexico's **Senator Tom Udall** addressing us. Sen. Udall has long been our champion in Congress to protect the Arctic Refuge, and a true friend to the Gwich'in Nation. After all, it was his uncle, Arizona **Congressman Morris "Mo" Udall** who was one of the principal architects of the most expansive environmental protection laws in U.S. history—the 1980 Alaska National Interest Land Conservation Act (ANILCA), which doubled the size of the original Arctic National Wildlife Range, renamed it a Refuge, and granted subsistence rights to the Indigenous peoples, including inside designated wilderness.

Back to Trump's war on conservation.

On July 15, 2020, President Trump "unilaterally weakened one of the nation's bedrock conservation laws, the National Environmental Policy Act, limiting public review of federal infrastructure projects to speed up the permitting of freeways, power plants and pipelines," the *New York Times* reported.

Earlier this year, when the Trump administration was moving to gut the National Environmental Policy Act, or NEPA, Sen. Udall called "move to gut NEPA is one of the worst decisions made by the worst environmental administration in history. … At a time when we are staring down the serious threat of climate change to our way of life—especially in states like New Mexico—and are in peril of another mass species extinction, NEPA is one of the few tools we have to limit further damage to our environment."

After all, NEPA was established during the tenure of the Senator's father, **Stewart Udall**, a passionate conservationist who served as U.S. Secretary of the Interior during the 1960s.

And, how did the Trump administration respond last year to the landmark May 2019 UN biodiversity assessment which warned that one million animals and plant species face extinction due to human activity?

Three months later, on August 12, 2019, the Trump administration announced its intention to gut the Endangered Species Act (ESA), the hallowed legal framework to protect imperiled species.

The community members in the U.S.-Mexico borderlands had offered a different kind of response last Fall to the UN biodiversity assessment. Artists and academics across the Rio Grande watershed, from southern Colorado to Ciudad Juarez, Mexico, responded creatively by organizing more than a dozen exhibitions and programs that expressed both sorrow and hope, our connection to the living earth and need for action.

> "This may be the first time that communities across a large region spanning two nations have engaged the biological crisis in such an expansive and distributed manner with a shared concern and generosity," I wrote in the exhibition catalog essay.

During the same time, responding to a call from scientists, in October 2019, Sen. Udall co-sponsored the Thirty by Thirty Resolution to Save Nature, which calls on the federal government to establish a national goal of conserving at least 30 percent of the land and the oceans within the territory of the United States by 2030. The following month, in November, Sen. Udall sponsored the Tribal Wildlife Corridors Act which would support

wildlife management efforts by tribal governments.

And, on February 7, 2020, New Mexico **Rep. Deb Haaland** with support from her colleagues, introduced a companion Thirty by Thirty Resolution to Save Nature in the House.

Building on the foundations of these community-engaged and culturally inclusive creative and federal policy initiatives, Sen. Udall and I will be co-hosting UNM Biodiversity Webinar Series—Fall 2020, which will launch on Monday, September 14, and will conclude on Thursday, December 3. The webinar series will foster conversations on the escalating biodiversity crisis and inspire public participation to mitigate the tragedy. This online symposium is FREE and open to the public, but registration is required. I hope to see you at the inaugural webinar on Monday.

These times can seem bleak, but we take inspiration in the endurance of people like the Gwich'in and members of the Udall family, who resolutely maintain the struggle to better protect the natural world. Our nonhuman relatives need us and, we need them.

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Featured image: A polar bear keeps close to her young along the Beaufort Sea coast in Arctic National Wildlife Refuge. (Photo: Susanne Miller/USFWS/Flickr)
