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International failure to meet target to reduce biodiversity decline

Pressures on the natural world have risen since the 2002 Convention on Biological Diversity, say conservation groups

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The world has failed to meet the target set by international leaders to reduce the rate of biodiversity loss by this year, experts will announce next month.

Instead, a coalition of 40 conservation organisations claims there have been “alarming biodiversity declines”, and that pressures on the natural world from development, over-use and pollution have risen since the ambition was set in the 2002 Convention on Biological Diversity.

The first formal assessment of the target, published today in the journal *Science*, will be the basis of a formal declaration by the CBD in Nairobi on 10 May, at which governments will be pressed to take the issues as seriously as climate change and the economic crisis.

A growing number of studies have shown that it is almost impossible to calculate the value of the “ecosystem services” from the natural world, from food, rich soil and fuel for local people, to clean air and water, and plants used for the international pharmaceutical industry.

“Since 1970 we have reduced animal populations by 30%, the area of mangroves and sea grasses by 20% and the coverage of living corals by 40%,” said Professor Joseph Alcamo, chief scientist of the United Nations



The critically endangered araripe manakin (left), which is declining owing to ongoing habitat clearance for agriculture within its tiny range in Brazil and the critically endangered spoon-billed sandpiper from Asia (right).

Photograph: Chaiwat Chinuparawat and Andy & Gill Swash

Environment Programme, one of the contributing organisations.

“These losses are clearly unsustainable, since biodiversity makes a key contribution to human well-being and sustainable development.”

The *Science* study compiled 30 indicators of biodiversity, including changes in populations of species and their risk of extinction, the remaining areas of different habitats, and the composition of communities of plants and animals.

“Our analysis shows that governments have failed to deliver on the commitments they made in 2002: biodiversity is still being

lost as fast as ever, and we have made little headway in reducing the pressures on species, habitats and ecosystems,” said Stuart Butchart, the paper’s lead author.

“Our data show that 2010 will not be the year that biodiversity loss was halted, but it needs to be the year in which we start taking the issue seriously and substantially increase our efforts to take care of what is left of our planet.”

Examples of successful policies that have helped preserve and sometimes restore species and ecological areas are also highlighted in *Science*, and politicians are called on to fund more such initiatives.

These include new protected areas, including the Juruena national park in Brazil; projects leading to the recovery of species such as the European bison, and even animals on the brink of extinction, such as the black stilt, a wader bird from New Zealand.

Ahmed Djoghlaif, the CBD's executive secretary, said: "While many responses have been in the right direction, the relevant policies have been inadequately targeted, implemented and funded. Above all biodiversity concerns must be integrated across all

parts of government and business, and the economic value of biodiversity needs to be accounted for adequately in decision-making."

The failure to meet the CBD target will not be a surprise to experts or policymakers, who have warned for years that too little progress was being made. Last month the head of the IUCN species survival commission, Simon Stuart, told the Guardian that for the first time since the dinosaurs species were believed to be becoming extinct faster than new ones were evolving.

Natural England, the government's countryside agency, also warned that more than two species a year were becoming extinct in England.

Three weeks ago, in another paper in Science, the eminent ecologist E O Wilson led calls from the International Union for the Conservation of Nature and nine other conservation groups for a "barometer of life" to track the changing fortunes of 160,000 of the world's 2m known species.