

It is important to maintain the biological diversity of the rainforests

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"Biodiversity" not only refers to the number of individual species, but also the genetic variety within and between species and the diversity of ecosystems and regions. The richness of functions and interdependencies in the relationships of species within ecosystems is also a factor. The actual number of species is therefore only one facet of biodiversity. The diversity of species is lowest at the poles and increases toward the equator, with the deserts being obvious exceptions. Tropical rainforests and coral reefs are among the planet's richest and most complex ecosystems. The areas with the greatest diversity of plant life are the tropical Andes and southeastern Asia. The Amazon basin, Madagascar and parts of southern and central Africa also compare favorably. Roughly the same holds true for animal life. Yasuni National Park in Ecuador, for example, has more tree species per hectare than the United States and Canada combined. A single hectare is home to 100,000 insect species, 40,000 species of plants can be found in the Amazon basin, and 30,000 of them occur only there. 20,000 species of beetle and 456 tree species have been recorded on a single hectare. By comparison, only around 30 tree species are native to the United Kingdom. In Amazonas state in Brazil, 95 different species of ants have been counted on a single tree – the numbers are truly mind-boggling. Again, only around 50 species of ants can be found throughout the UK. Biodiversity is determined by counting the number of species occurring in a given unit of area. The greater the species diversity within an area, the higher the biodiversity, which can be calculated using various methods, such as diversity indices. Around 1.8 million animal and plant species have been scientifically documented to date, and new ones are being discovered every day, with 12,000 to 25,000 new species being added to the list every year. While the "discovery" of mammals and birds frequently catches the public eye, insects and the like tend to attract less attention. Estimates of the number of undiscovered species range from three to seven million, of which the lion's share are insects and other small creatures. The Wildlife Conservation Society (WCS) report "State of the Wild - a Global Portrait" contains a list of animals most threatened by extinction. The critically endangered Cuban crocodile, for example, can only be found in two small habitats in Cuba. The vaquita, a small porpoise endemic to the northern Gulf of California, is also extremely rare – as of 2014, less than 100 individuals remained. A relative of the vaquita, the baiji or Yangtze River dolphin, has not been sighted since 2007 and is presumed extinct. Among primates, the orangutan is, of course, the poster child for endangered species. According to the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN), deforestation and the spread of oil palm plantations in Indonesia are the biggest threats to the survival of great apes. The white-headed langur is one of the rarest primates in the world. Only 59 individuals remain – all on a single island in Vietnam. The Yangtze giant softshell turtle is found only in China and Vietnam. According to the IUCN Red List, only four individuals remained in 2012. On average, we lose about 150 species a day – that's around 55,000 every year! Many species will have become extinct due to human encroachment on their habitats long before we have discovered the true wealth of biodiversity we are destroying. The United Nations declared 2010 to be the International Year of Biodiversity to celebrate life on earth and underscore its precious nature. Once a species is lost, it is gone forever: we will never again be able to experience a Steller's sea cow – a marine mammal related to the dugong and manatee. The sea cows were hunted to extinction by our ancestors in 1768 – only 27 years after they were discovered by Europeans. The International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN) has listed many thousands of endangered animal and plant species from around the world in its Red List. The list is by no means complete, however. The relentless changes to the environment and habitat destruction by humans are by far the most important factors driving the current mass extinction. For example, the number of gorillas in Africa has plummeted by 60% in only the past twenty years due to widespread deforestation and animals falling victim to the wildlife trade and poaching. The oceans are also affected by overfishing, pollution, rising temperatures and acidification due to increasing CO2 levels. The concept of "biodiversity hotspots" was developed by researchers as a way to manage and focus conservation work more effectively. Hotspots are regions characterized by numerous endemic plant and animal species living in a particularly vulnerable environment. In the year 2000, scientists writing in the journal Nature identified 25 biodiversity hotspots that cover only about 1.4% of the Earth's surface, or an area of approximately 2.1 million square kilometers. While these areas provide habitat to nearly half (44%) of all known plant species worldwide, only about a third of them have so far been placed under protection. All of these hotspots are endangered by factors such as timber harvesting and slash-and-burn clearing driven by strong demand for tropical timber, the expansion of the mining industry and the cultivation of crops such as oil palms, sugar cane and soy. A further major issue is the dramatic rise of organized, commercial poaching. A species is "endemic" if it only occurs within a limited, relatively small area, such as a single island or archipelago, mountain range or forest. Among primates, examples include all of the lemur species that can only be found on the island of Madagascar. Berthe's mouse lemur, which was only discovered in 2000, is the smallest of them, with a body length of only 9 cm and a weight of around 30 grams. The lemur is found only in the Kirindy forest on the island's west coast. Queen Alexandra's birdwing is another example. Found only in Papua New Guinea, it is the largest butterfly in the world, with a wingspan of 28 cm. Its caterpillars rely on a single plant species for food – one that is seriously threatened by the destruction of the rainforests. Most hotspots are in the tropics, as can be seen on the map drawn up by N. Myers' team. They can be found in Southeast Asia – especially in Malaysia and Indonesia -, Madagascar, the Andes, Central America and the Caribbean. They also exist in temperate regions such as the U.S. west coast, parts of Chile, the Mediterranean and New Zealand. Researchers have not yet fully established the reasons behind the extremely high biodiversity of rainforests. However, factors such as the lack of nutrients in the soil, year-round high solar radiation and precipitation play an important role. The lower influence of the ice ages near the equator and the rainforests' great age, ranging in the millions of years, have contributed to their wealth of species. Diversity thus always arises in interaction with environmental conditions. Research has shown that biodiversity is a crucial factor for the properties and performance of ecosystems. Their stability depends in part on the complex interactions of their inhabitants. Massive human interference decimates individual species or drives them to extinction, while other existing species experience explosive growth, and yet others invade or are introduced by humans. This alters the nature of ecosystems or destroys them outright and impacts ecosystem services such as the provision of food and clean water. The United Nations Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD) that was signed by 192 member states at the Earth Summit in Rio de Janeiro in 1992 is designed to provide a legal foundation for protecting biodiversity. The signatories to the convention commit to the protection of biodiversity, its sustainable use and the fair and equitable sharing of benefits arising out of the use of resources. This involves major conflicts of interest, however. Developed nations are the UN's biggest financial backers and set the organization's policy agenda. Their excessive hunger for commodities and energy are the primary cause of global environmental degradation. Since the nations mainly responsible for destroying the environment are now developing "protective concepts" and shaping environmental policy, the question arises whether their primary drivers are the conservation of nature or commercial interests. In any case, continuous economic growth and increasing resource consumption are not compatible with conserving nature. Furthermore, the convention does not provide for any way to enforce sanctions if environmental standards are not observed. A neutral body without vested interests to monitor compliance with regulations and objectives and impose tough sanctions in case of violations would certainly be helpful. The United Nations regularly holds biodiversity conferences in various locations around the world. The topic of placing a monetary value on nature as the basis of life was on the agenda in India in 2012. British economics professor Sir Nicolas Stern put it quite succinctly: "If Earth were a bank, they'd bail it out" – an astute assessment, considering the responses of governments to the financial crisis of 2008. One of the key issues in India was funding for biodiversity conservation. No less important, however, is consistent action to implement the resolutions and impose sanctions for non-compliance. According to a report by senior experts of the World Conservation Monitoring Centre of the United Nations Environment Programme, implementing a strategic plan to protect biodiversity will require \$516 billion to \$2.35 trillion by 2020. So far, however, the plan only exists on paper. It has a long way to go to achieve recognition under international law and thus become an enforceable instrument. Money alone will not save biodiversity, however. The main reason why the natural environment is being exploited, polluted and destroyed on such a grand scale is humanity's hunger for resources. The only way to preserve ecosystems is to reduce our worldwide consumption significantly. This especially holds true for the inhabitants of the industrialized countries and the rich upper classes, since most people in the global South live in comparative poverty and thus have a minimal environmental footprint. The content – i.e. the goals and obligations – of conventions is established by the member states and can be deemed binding under international law when ratified. And therein lies the problem: countries CAN recognize the content as binding, but they are not REQUIRED to do so. Compliance with the convention is not enforced, and there are no consequences for countries that fall short in meeting their goals. Problems are thus continually being pushed further down the road without properly addressing them. There is also a huge difference between what politicians and officials are willing to say and the realities on the ground. Germany, for example, portrays itself as a pioneer in climate protection, yet the country's resource consumption continues to grow. Germany has outsourced much of its heavy industry to countries like China, Brazil and India, while at the same time calling on such countries to do much more for the environment. Unfortunately, biodiversity often takes a back seat when conservation measures are developed. Most concepts revolve mainly around attaching a monetary value to nature to determine how natural resources can be used to generate maximum revenue. They often overlook the fact that biodiversity is a decisive factor in the provision of ecosystem services. In oil palm plantations and other industrial-scale monocultures, a handful of standardized high-performance plant varieties produce huge quantities of agricultural commodities. Increasingly sophisticated processes are then used to turn those raw materials into the seemingly endless variety of products on our supermarket shelves. This development, which is a major factor in our current epidemic of obesity and other nutrition-related health issues, comes at a high ecological price: depleted soils, deforestation, pollution and mass extinction. In light of this, the International Assessment of Agricultural Knowledge, Science and Technology for Development (IAASTD) urgently recommends traditional smallholder farming as the most effective and reliable way to combat world hunger and minimize agriculture's impact on the environment. For example, improved cultivation methods, suitable seed and agro-ecological strategies offer considerable potential to improve yields. Wherever there is enough land, water, money and equipment, smallholders produce a much higher nutritional yield per hectare than industrial agriculture – and with a much lower environmental impact. It goes without saying that methods need to be adapted to local circumstances: optimized smallholder agriculture would be highly beneficial in many parts of India, for example. By contrast, the seminomadic indigenous peoples that inhabit the vastness of the Amazon basin would already benefit greatly from protection against the oil, tropical timber, gold and plantation industries. Your contributions toward protecting biodiversity are limited only by your imagination. Anyone can raise awareness: explain the consequences of deforestation to your family, friends and acquaintances. Tell people about the threat of extinction and stimulate public discussion. Review your own lifestyle and consumption behavior. Avoid products that contain palm oil. With regard to wood, use products made of local rather than tropical timber. Do not support the trade with tropical animals (parrots, reptiles, etc.) and never keep them as pets. Reduce your meat consumption – or better yet, stop eating animal products altogether. Livestock feed is grown on an industrial scale on land that was once rainforest. If you must eat meat, buy organic, or from small farms that raise and slaughter their own livestock. Save energy wherever you can. Support the work of Rainforest Rescue by signing and sharing our petitions. We also have numerous projects on the ground in rainforest countries that need financial support - your donations can go a long way toward saving the last unspoiled bits of paradise on our planet.

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