

# Halfway to 2030: getting back on track to achieve the nature-related SDGs

A reaction to the Secretary-General’s 2023 SDG Progress Report

## Summary

- Marking the halfway point to 2030 since the SDGs were adopted, the Secretary-General’s recent Progress Report shows that we are significantly off track to achieving the Goals.
- For many societal challenges, including those that relate to nature, we know what kinds of interventions work.
- This brief reviews the state of play of four SDGs directly related to nature (6, 13, 14, 15), and proposes several priority actions looking towards the SDG Summit in September.

“Promise in peril...disappearing in the rear-view mirror...severely off track...time to sound the alarm.”

Much of the Secretary-General’s [SDG Progress Report](#) makes for grim reading. Despite gains across many of the Goals, the acute and lingering effects of the pandemic, the war in Ukraine, and the associated food, energy, and debt crises have halted or reversed progress in many areas. Issued in April, it notes that halfway to 2030 since the Goals were adopted, progress on the SDGs is insufficient, and in many cases, deteriorating altogether. For the Goals most directly relevant to nature, as for other Goals, there is great urgency to correct course. As part of that effort, the Report calls for the [SDG Summit](#) in September to mark a turning point, and to deliver a “Rescue Plan for People and Planet.”

## What do the data say?

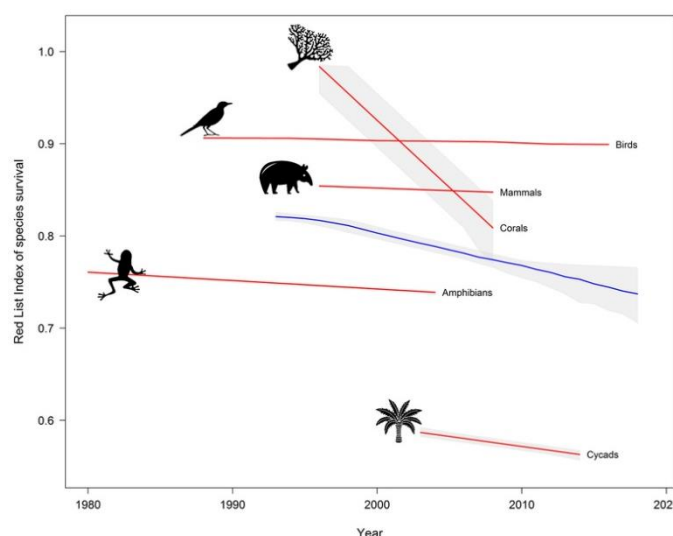
Greenhouse gas emissions are rising to levels unseen during the modern era, the world’s forests continue to decline, and more than ¼ of the 140,000+ species assessed by the [IUCN Red List](#) are threatened with extinction.



On land, deforestation, land degradation, and species extinctions are all major challenges to [SDG15](#), driven by the fact that more than 70% of global land surface has been significantly altered by

humans.<sup>1</sup> While over 15% of the Earth’s land surface is covered by protected areas, as the Secretary-General highlights, just under half of [Key Biodiversity Areas \(KBAs\)](#) are protected. Further, many are at risk of further adverse human impacts. For example, a recent analysis using the [Integrated Biodiversity Assessment Tool \(IBAT\)](#) found that more than 1,200 mines lie within KBAs, of which 29% were for minerals to support the low-carbon energy transition.<sup>2</sup>

At the species level, extinction rates are accelerating to levels unprecedented in human history according to the Red List Index. While there is considerable variation between the taxonomic groups covered, the Secretary-General notes that the Index has declined by 10% since the 1990s, with that deterioration occurring faster each decade. Almost every country has adopted invasive species legislation, yet the rate of introductions is not slowing down, threatening biodiversity impacts and economic losses, which totalled more than \$1.2 trillion over the past half century.<sup>3</sup>



The Red List Index of species survival for mammals, birds, amphibians, reef-forming corals and cycads. Source: IUCN (2022). The IUCN Red List of Threatened Species.



In the freshwater realm, the latest data on [SDG6](#) indicate that none of the targets are on track. Unsustainable water use remains a key driver of ecosystem degradation and species loss.

Since 1970, freshwater biodiversity has declined by 83%,<sup>4</sup> especially troubling as freshwater covers less than 1% of the Earth's surface yet supports over 10% of known species and 30% of vertebrates.<sup>5</sup> Meanwhile, wetlands, the world's most effective carbon sinks, declined by 35% over the same period, or 3x the rate of forests.<sup>6</sup>



In the ocean, none of the [SDG14](#) targets to be met by 2020 were achieved. Only about 8% of the ocean is covered by protected areas, with less than 3% fully or highly protected.<sup>7</sup> As such, the vast

majority, including more than 98% of areas beyond national jurisdiction, remain vulnerable to threats, including fishing, aquaculture, shipping, resource extraction, and pollution.<sup>8</sup>

Unsustainable consumption and production and poor waste management systems have resulted in over 14 million tons of plastic in the oceans annually, over 80% of the debris from surface to floor.<sup>9</sup> As a major threat to ocean and human health, marine species, food safety, and tourism, transformational change to our production and consumption patterns is needed.

The ocean is deeply affected by climate change, having absorbed more than 90% of the excess heat from greenhouse emissions since the 1970s. Ocean acidification is occurring 10x faster than over the previous 300 million years, leaving the ocean 30% more acidic than during the pre-industrial era, as the Secretary-General notes. Further, the ocean's oxygen content has decreased by 2% since the 1950s and is expected to fall 3-4% by 2100 due to climate change and nutrient discharge, with severe impacts for marine biodiversity and the functioning of the ocean's ecosystems.<sup>10</sup>



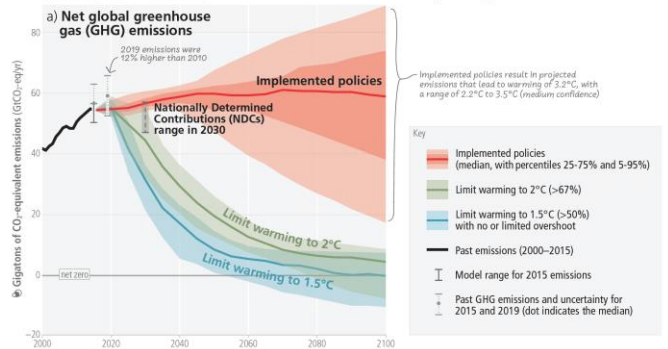
On the climate more broadly, the Secretary-General shows that progress on [SDG13](#) is not on track for a single target. This is alarming, given the IPCC's recent findings that global greenhouse

gas emissions continue to increase, and that limiting temperature rise to 1.5°C requires that global emissions peak by 2025, decline by 43% from 2019 levels by 2030 and reach net zero by 2050.<sup>11</sup> According to UNEP, absent transformative change, there is no credible pathway to 1.5°C.<sup>12</sup>

Climate change is among the greatest direct drivers of biodiversity loss,<sup>13</sup> which has important knock-on effects, reducing nature's ability to mitigate climate change as a carbon sink, and its ability to support adaptation, through the services it provides to protect lives and livelihoods, as temperatures continue to rise. It threatens progress

### Limiting warming to 1.5°C and 2°C involves rapid, deep and in most cases immediate greenhouse gas emission reductions

Net zero CO<sub>2</sub> and net zero GHG emissions can be achieved through strong reductions across all sectors



Global emissions pathways consistent with implemented policies and mitigation strategies. Source: IPCC (2023). Synthesis Report of the Sixth Assessment Report.

on the Goals on poverty eradication, food security and human health, and has become the most widespread current and potential future threat to natural World Heritage sites.<sup>14</sup>

### Prioritising action across the Goals

As the Secretary-General notes, despite the sobering picture of our progress on the SDGs, there is much more that we can do. For many societal challenges, including those that relate to nature, we know what kinds of interventions work. There is strong evidence that conservation efforts have had positive effects: absent these efforts, trends in species extinction risk would be at least 20% worse, and looking forward, according to the [Species Threat Abatement and Recovery \(STAR\)](#) metric, restoring habitats could reduce global extinction risk by 56%. Often what is missing is the political will to implement these interventions at speed and scale, and to persevere in the face of adversity.

To that end, IUCN offers the following additional priority actions looking towards the SDG Summit:

- **Promote Nature-based Solutions.** Centred on the conservation, restoration, and management of the world's ecosystems, Nature-based Solutions can make a critical contribution towards climate change adaptation and mitigation, biodiversity conservation, health, poverty eradication, food and water security, and many other SDGs. Their potential has been explicitly recognised in key international policy fora, including the UN Environment Assembly,<sup>15</sup> the Rio Conventions, and the High-level Political Forum on Sustainable Development.<sup>16</sup> The [IUCN Global Standard for Nature-based Solutions](#) can help to design, execute, and evaluate Nature-based Solution with coherence and integrity, while the [ENACT Initiative](#), launched at UNFCCC COP27 to coordinate global efforts to address climate change, land and ecosystem degradation, and biodiversity loss through Nature-based Solutions, can strengthen collaboration among existing efforts and partnerships to build coherence across conventions and agendas.

- **Implement the Kunming-Montreal Global Biodiversity Framework (GBF).** Sustainable development crucially hinges on nature, and in particular on its biological diversity. Conservation and sustainable use of biodiversity, as well as the fair and equitable sharing of the benefits arising from its utilisation, need to be at the heart of national development planning processes and policies, and poverty eradication strategies. Inclusive and participatory processes for establishing ambitious national biodiversity targets and action plans need to start as soon as possible, to ensure a whole-of-society approach.
- **Scale up and repurpose finance for biodiversity and climate.** At its heart, the 2030 Agenda is an investment agenda, and substantial investments in nature will be critical to reach the SDGs by 2030. Sustained financial resources must be secured and invested in conservation action, particularly in developing countries. This means adequately resourcing the GBF Fund without delay, mobilising \$200 billion per year by 2030, and reforming at least \$500 billion of the \$1.8 trillion in subsidies that are harmful for biodiversity.<sup>17</sup> Only about 3% of climate financing is directed towards agriculture, forestry, and other land uses – what might broadly include Nature-based Solutions.<sup>18</sup> Noting the recent analysis suggesting that flows to Nature-based Solutions must double by 2025 and triple by 2030, additional financing must be mobilised at scale.<sup>19</sup>
- **Protect, restore, and promote healthy freshwater systems and habitats.** Healthy freshwater ecosystems disproportionately support species and provide ecosystem services to people. To ensure their health, we must target better connectivity, quality, pollution control, and system integrity, while taking decisions around water governance and investment that consider multiple values of nature, including Indigenous knowledge and cultural values. Natural infrastructure – including mangroves, saltmarshes, and mudflats – can complement built infrastructure, accruing value and providing services to society over time.
- **Invest in land health.** Globally, agriculture and food systems are the leading drivers of land-use change and stress on biodiversity. There is an urgency not only to relieve this stress but to support biodiverse and resilient agricultural systems capable of feeding the world’s population while responding and contributing to evolving consumer expectations and diets. This will involve adopting agroecological and regenerative approaches, reducing and redirecting subsidies that are harmful to the environment,<sup>20</sup> and building mutual understanding between the conservation and agricultural communities.<sup>21</sup>
- **Mainstream nature as a cost-effective, no-regret approach to reducing disaster risk.** Many ecosystems and their services can provide protection and reduce damages from natural hazards, often more cost-effectively than built infrastructure.<sup>22</sup> While ecosystem-based disaster risk reduction has been acknowledged at the highest policy levels, much work needs to be done to mainstream these approaches in our governance, policy, and financial systems.
- **Make trade work against pollution and for nature.** It is essential that trade policies be designed inclusively to foster non-discrimination and assistance to developing countries to allow them to fight pollution in a way that meets their obligations both under trade law and multilateral environmental agreements,<sup>23</sup> while advancing the SDGs. Building on the progress made at the WTO 12<sup>th</sup> Ministerial Conference, which adopted an historic Agreement on Fisheries Subsidies, the upcoming 13<sup>th</sup> Ministerial Conference should solidify the implementation of the Agreement, as well as reflect the need to bridge the issues of fisheries subsidies, plastic pollution, and fossil fuel subsidies in the WTO with commitments under the GBF and the ongoing plastic pollution treaty negotiations.
- **Put people at the centre.** There is a role for everyone to contribute to the accelerated implementation of the 2030 Agenda and its SDGs. As stewards of nature who hold and manage almost 40 million km<sup>2</sup> of land, including 40% of protected areas and as much as 80% of the world’s remaining biodiversity,<sup>24</sup> the implementation of the SDGs, like the GBF, must be carried out with the full and effective participation of Indigenous peoples and local communities. Likewise, women and girls, whose equality is a fundamental prerequisite for sustainable development, must be empowered and included to achieve our environmental, social, and economic goals.

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