Latest UN plan to address catastrophic decline in biodiversity—more empty platitudes

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The planet is now faced with the sixth mass extinction of life on Earth, which will, if not averted, make the world unlivable for humanity. However, unlike the previous five, which were caused by various natural processes, the impending catastrophe is being triggered by human-induced climate change and other forms of environmental degradation caused by the irrationality of the capitalist system, and it is within our ability to stop it.

Last year, the United Nations' Intergovernmental Science-Policy Platform on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services (IPBES) estimated that approximately one million plant and animal species face extinction over the next several decades. The global rate of species extinction is already at least thousands of times higher than the average over the past 10 million years.

As recent extreme weather events, including the devastating, climate-induced bushfires in Australia, but also Indonesia, Portugal, California, and the Arctic demonstrate, entire communities of plants and animals, not to mention humans, are at grave risk. Estimates suggest that more than a billion animals have been killed, with many more injured and/or short of food and water in Australia so far during this fire season alone.

Already during the industrial period, 75 percent of Earth's land and 66 percent of marine ecosystems have been altered by human activity. It is estimated that nearly 600 plant species have been driven to extinction over the past 250 years.

Now, a draft plan by the Working Group of the Convention on Biological Diversity, prepared for the upcoming five-day summit in Kunming, China, scheduled to start February 24, titled *Zero Draft of The Post-2020 Global Biodiversity Framework*, presents an initial version of a proposed plan to address this impending crisis. It warns that unless nearly a third of the planet is protected to provide livable habitats for endangered plant and animal species, and pollution cut by half, this mass extinction is inevitable.

The proposed plan asserts that to avert this crisis, "transformative changes across economic, social, political and technological factors" are needed. It goes on to state, "Biodiversity, and the benefits it provides, is fundamental to human well-being and a healthy planet." However, "Despite ongoing efforts, biodiversity is deteriorating worldwide and this decline is projected to continue or worsen under business-as-usual scenarios." The plan aims to develop necessary "goals and targets" to combat this crisis, with the aim of stabilizing biodiversity over the next decade and permit ecosystems to recover by mid-century.

The plan identifies 20 targets. Among them are:

• Cutting pollution from biocides, plastic wastes, and excess nutrients by at least 50 percent.

• Providing protected status to sites important for biodiversity—covering at least 30 percent of these land and sea areas by 2030, with at least 10 percent under "strict protection."

• Promoting sustainable agriculture.

Over the past several decades, as the effects of climate change and other human-induced environmental degradation on the world's ecosystems have become increasingly apparent and are an established fact in the scientific community, the capitalist system has demonstrated its utter incapacity to undertake anything approaching the "transformative changes" necessary to avoid a global ecological catastrophe. A plan similar to the one now being proposed—the Strategic Plan for Biodiversity 2011–2020—had been formulated at a summit in Japan in 2010. Grand promises were made. However, predictably, the goals were not met, and conditions continue to deteriorate at an ever-increasing rate.

The situation is dire. Every year that passes without substantial, world-wide, coordinated action brings Earth closer to irreversible devastation. Scientists have warned that at a certain point the process of global warming would reach a "tipping point" beyond which a positive feedback loop would be initiated whereby environmental degradation would re-enforce itself, making any future efforts to stabilize the environment difficult or impossible. This tipping point may be reached sooner rather than later.

A study by an international group of scientists published last year in the journal *Nature* (23 January 2019) projects that by 2060 the planet's ability to absorb anthropogenic (human produced) carbon dioxide will begin to decline. That would greatly accelerate the pace of global warming, substantially compounding the environmental effects already underway.

As Elizabeth Maruma Mrema, acting executive secretary of the UN Convention on Biological Diversity, put it, 2020 must

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not be another “year of conferences.” It is likely to be just that, however. She has criticized the *Zero Draft of The Post-2020 Global Biodiversity Framework* as inadequate. Its “vision” is that “By 2050, biodiversity is valued, conserved, restored and wisely used, maintaining ecosystem services, sustaining a healthy planet and delivering benefits essential for all people.” It is, in fact, simply another set of vacuous language with no mechanism for implementation or enforcement.

At the just concluded Davos World Economic Forum, biodiversity loss was listed as the third greatest risk to the world. Again, predictably, it was nothing but talk. The drive to “maximize shareholder value” supersedes all other concerns.

Human existence depends on what are termed “ecosystem services”—such as breathable air, drinkable water, and an adequate food supply—which are the product of a complex, dynamic interaction between living and non-living components. These cannot be replaced, certainly not within the foreseeable future. As just one example, a substantial number of agricultural crops on which humans rely are pollinated by animals, primarily insects and birds.

Of the 115 leading global crops consumed by humans, 87 rely on animal pollination, to some degree. These pollinators include 2,000 bird species and 20,000 species of wild bees that are key to crop propagation. Often, the relationships between plant and pollinator are exclusive. This delicate system is in grave danger.

A recent study by Cornell University found that the US and Canada lost one in four birds—or 3 billion total—since 1970. The Audubon Society reported that North America could lose 389 of the 604 types of birds it studied due to climate change. According to Audubon, limiting the temperature rise to 1.5C could protect 148 bird species. A UN report published in 2016 estimated that at least 9 percent of bee and butterfly species are at risk.

The negative impacts on complex ecosystems by drought, wildfires, flooding and other climate-driven catastrophes now being experienced at the unprecedented scale and frequency, which will only worsen in coming years if drastic action is not taken, make it increasingly difficult for plant and animal communities to bounce back once the immediate episode has passed. The loss of individual species to extinction goes far beyond the simple reduction in the diversity of a biological community. The intricate and dynamic web of interactions between species in any given ecosystem have evolved over millennia. As growing numbers of species are lost, the fragility of the overall system increases, ultimately reaching the point of an irreversible collapse. Put simply: remove one leg from a chair and it may yet stand, remove two and it falls.

The problem is not that humanity does not have the means to avert this crisis. Or that the world’s population is unaware of the situation. The current bushfires in Australia have generated mass anger against the political establishment’s dismissal of climate change in favor of big business, especially the fossil fuel industry. In the US, recent research by Yale University found that a majority of those polled responded that they are “concerned” or “alarmed” about climate change. The numbers reporting alarm tripled over the last five years.

The causes of climate change and environmental pollution have been known for decades. Just 100 companies have produced more than 70 percent of the world’s greenhouse gas emissions since 1988. A mere 20 corporations are responsible for the majority of plastic pollution in the oceans.

Disaster is not inevitable. The necessary technological, economic, and social mechanisms to rectify them exist. And new tools are constantly being developed. The vast resources now being wasted on the military and obscene enrichment of the capitalist elite could be redirected to such urgent tasks as the replacement of fossil fuels with renewable energy and the replacement of plastics with truly recyclable packaging materials, etc., etc. However, as long as the world’s economy is divided into competing corporations and nation-states, and controlled by a tiny minority of the population, who operate solely for their own, immediate personal interest, there will be no meaningful change in the current catastrophic trajectory toward environmental disaster.

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