

U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service declares 23 species extinct

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A small portion of the death toll inflicted on the earth's biosphere by human-induced climate change and destruction of natural habitats was acknowledged officially in a recent announcement by the United States Fish and Wildlife Service, which changed the status of 23 species (including 11 birds, eight freshwater mussels, two fish, a bat and a plant) from endangered to extinct under the terms of the Endangered Species Act (1973).

These species include the ivory-billed woodpecker, the Bachman's warbler, and the Kauai O'o, a Hawaiian forest bird. This is the largest single group of species designated as extinct since the act went into effect, a reflection of the increasing pace of extinctions. In the nearly 50 years since the law was passed, only 11 species in the US had previously been determined to be extinct.

By contrast, a conservative estimate (National Wildlife Federation, 2018) suggests that in the US alone at least 150 species have already gone extinct and another 500 are likely to have suffered that fate. One-third of US species are considered "vulnerable," with one in five "imperiled." A total of more than 1,600 species are currently listed as endangered.

The impact of the Endangered Species Act on the rate of extinction is limited and decreasing. The inclusion of new species to the protected list is extremely slow. A 2016 study found that species waited a median of 12 years to receive safeguards, during which time they continued to be under stress. At least 47 species have gone extinct while being evaluated for listing as endangered. News accounts play up the removal of 54 species from the endangered list, supposedly because they are now "safe." The accelerating rate of extinctions, both in the US and worldwide, indicate that such moves are cosmetic at best.

The significance of this latest finding goes well beyond the loss of these particular forms of life. It represents only a tiny fraction of the ongoing sixth global mass extinction of lifeforms on this planet, the first to be caused by humans.

The speed and scope of this process, along with the other devastating impacts to the environment (e.g., rising sea levels, environmental pollution, raging wildfires and floods, global warming) caused by uncontrolled human activities, of which species extinction is only one part, threaten to render the planet unlivable in the not too distant future.

The earth's ecosystem is formed by the dynamic interaction of a huge variety of biological and physical components, constantly affecting and being affected by each other. The diversity of these elements and their complex interactions tends to have a stabilizing influence on the system as a whole. Change is a constant, at varying rates at different times and in particular sub-components. Over time, species adapt or become extinct, and new ones arise. When changes result in the reduction in diversity of species from the complex of interactions that create the environment (i.e., the reduction in biodiversity), this tends to make the system as a whole less stable.

An example of the interdependence of species is one of the species now declared extinct. The ivory-billed woodpecker, a relatively large bird, creates its nests by excavating cavities in the trunks of dead trees. Once the young have reached maturity, the nests are abandoned, then to be appropriated by other species, including wood ducks, eastern bluebirds, opossums, gray squirrels and honeybees. The loss of the woodpeckers has likely lessened the opportunities for suitable nesting spots for these species.

The rapid loss of a growing number of species now

occurring accelerates the rise of instability. The rate at which these changes have occurred over the last several centuries is unprecedented in human history.

Since the end of the last Ice Age, human society has developed in the context of a relatively stable set of environmental conditions (of course, with regional and temporal variations). These conditions provide what have come to be known as “environmental services,” such as fairly predictable seasonal cycles of temperature and precipitation, and the contribution of a variety of animals (e.g., pollinating insects and birds) to the growth of crops, to name but a few.

The disruption of this environmental context at an ever-accelerating rate will soon threaten massive failures that will impact billions of people. In recent decades, the widespread occurrence of wildfires, floods and droughts at an unprecedented scale, as well as the increasing rate of extinctions, are signaling this process. Worldwide, millions of people have already been forced to become “climate refugees” due to changes that have made their local environments unable to support pre-existing ways of life, compounded by the effects of armed conflicts.

A further and very consequential impact of habitat loss is the increasing proximity of wild animals with human populations due to the latter’s incursion into previously undeveloped areas, raising the potential for the spread of zoonotic (animal-derived) diseases. The COVID-19 pandemic is likely an example of this process.

The United Nations Convention on Biological Diversity recently concluded that, worldwide, up to 150 species may go extinct every day. The International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN) estimates that over 6,000 species are critically endangered.

This is a worldwide process which cannot be effectively addressed within the confines of the nation-state system. As the abject failure of capitalism to cope with either the pandemic or climate change have dramatically illustrated, this system is not only incapable of mounting effective responses to these existential crises, but is, in fact, compounding and accelerating their effects.

In contrast to past centuries, humans now have the scientific knowledge and technological capacity to confront and effectively control the range of dangerous environmental impacts, including the loss of

biodiversity, that threaten catastrophe in the near future. The only obstacle is the insanely destructive drive of the capitalist system to prioritize private profit above human survival. The only social force that can bring an end to this system is the working class, by implementing a rational, scientifically based socialist reorganization of society.



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