

Biodiversity Experts to Create Global Intergovernmental Advisory Panel

LONDON, UK, July 19, 2006 (ENS) - Warning that "a large number of populations and species are likely to become extinct in the present century," biodiversity scientists and policy experts from 13 countries today proposed a global coordinating mechanism to provide a united, authoritative scientific voice to inform government decisionmaking internationally. A consultation process has begun that will shape such a panel within 18 months.

In a declaration published in the July 20 issue of the UK journal "Nature," the scientists warn that, "The forces that push towards biodiversity loss globally are much stronger than the conservation gains." They urge the wider scientific community and stakeholders to support a new consultation process create an international organizing and unifying mechanism for science advice on biodiversity.

"For the sake of the planet, the biodiversity science community has to create a way to get organized, to co-ordinate its work across disciplines, and together with one clear voice advise governments on steps to halt the potentially catastrophic loss of species already occurring," said signatory Dr. Robert Watson, chief scientist at the World Bank.

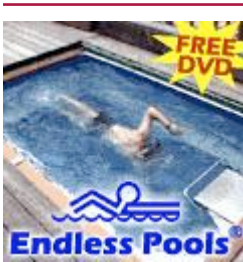
Dr. Robert Watson, now chief scientist at the World Bank, chaired the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change from 1997 to 2002. (Photo courtesy [Earth Negotiations Bulletin](#))



Watson now chairs or recently has chaired high-level global scientific collaborations, including the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC), the Millennium Ecosystem Assessment and the Ozone Assessment Panel.

"Virtually all aspects of biodiversity are in steep decline," warned Watson. "Despite this evidence, biodiversity is still consistently undervalued and given inadequate weight in both private and public decisions."

"There is an urgent need to bridge the gap between science and policy to take action," he said.



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Experts from Canada, Chile, China, France, Germany, Ghana, India, Mexico, The Netherlands, Norway, South Africa, the United States and the United Kingdom said in their declaration a useful model for the proposed biodiversity advisory body is the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change.

The IPCC was established in 1988 by the World Meteorological Organization and the UN Environment Programme to assess the risk of human-induced climate change. Made up of more than 2,500 scientists from many countries, the IPCC is now widely accepted as the scientific authority on global warming.

The experts said a similar inter-governmental mechanism to speak for the biodiversity science world must be created "urgently" and that the world's science community must be far more strongly organized and integrated to stem the alarming loss of species.

"Some 12% of all bird species, 23% of mammals, 25% of conifers, 32% of amphibians and 52% of cycads are currently threatened with extinction, and climate change alone might commit an additional 15 to 37% of extant species to premature extinction within the next 50 years," the scientists declare, in figures based on a 2005 study by the declaration's lead author Michel Loreau of the Department of Biology, McGill University, Montreal, Canada.



Michel Loreau of the Department of Biology, McGill University, Montreal, Canada also chairs DIVERSITAS, the international biodiversity program. (Photo by Owen Egan courtesy McGill)

"We need diversity of opinions and approaches but we also need unity behind this collective effort, to speak with one voice globally when it comes to recognizing key issues and how they can best be addressed," said Loreau, who also serves as chair of DIVERSITAS, the international program on biodiversity.

Although protected areas have slightly increased during the past few decades, the scientists acknowledge, "collectively they contain only a small fraction of the world's terrestrial species and ecosystems, and the situation in the oceans is even worse."

Habitat destruction in tropical forests, inland waters and coastlines, introduction of invasive species, overfishing in the seas, pollution, and now "clear signs of global climate change" are major threats to biodiversity and "continue unabated, driven by unsustainable growth of the world's

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population, production, consumption and trade," the scientists declare.

As a result of these forces, biodiversity loss is accelerating globally. "Since biodiversity loss is essentially irreversible, it poses serious threats to sustainable development and the quality of life of future generations," the declaration states.

According to the 2005 Millennium Ecosystem Assessment, two-thirds of the evaluated benefits to society from ecosystems, defined as ecosystem services, are currently being degraded or used unsustainably.

"Biodiversity provides ecosystem services such as disease and climate regulation, storm protection and habitat for useful species. The loss of biodiversity imposes real economic costs on society, and we need to develop clear science guidance for policy options accordingly," says signatory Charles Perrings of Arizona State University and Vice-Chair of DIVERSITAS.

Polar bears are set to become one of the most notable casualties of global warming, according to the IUCN-World Conservation Union. The impact of climate change is increasingly felt in polar regions, where summer sea ice is expected to decrease by 50-100 percent over the next 50-100 years. (Photo by Georg Bangjord courtesy [WWF](#))



The scientists say biodiversity is "intrinsically more complex than issues such as the stratospheric ozone hole or even global climate change because it spans several levels of biological organization - genes, species, ecosystems.

Biodiversity cannot be measured by simple, universal indicators such as temperature and atmospheric CO₂ concentration; and its distribution and management are more local in nature, the experts say.

Existing organizations such as the Convention of Biological Diversity "do not have the structural means to mobilize the expertise of a large scientific community that spans a wide range of disciplines," they point out.

With the support of French President Jacques Chirac, international consultations funded by the government of France through the Consultative Process Towards an

International Mechanism of Scientific Expertise on Biodiversity, www.imoseb.net, are expected to produce recommendations for such a panel within 18 months.

Supervised by an International Steering Committee, the consultation process will proceed in two phases.

During the first phase, a number of studies will define the need for, and goals of, an international panel on biodiversity. These studies will examine the global decisionmaking landscape concerned with biodiversity, analyze successes and failures of biodiversity conservation efforts at different scales, and assess existing international mechanisms that deliver scientific expertise.



The

scimitar-horned oryx was once one of the most common large mammals of northern Africa. Overhunting and habitat loss have wiped this species out. Currently listed as Extinct in the Wild, this oryx is now part of a captive breeding and reintroduction program. (Photo © Antonio di Croce courtesy [IUCN](http://www.iucn.org))

In a second phase, this information will be used to articulate a set of recommendations for an international panel on biodiversity, which will be presented at a set of regional meetings to seek input from all sectors of society and all regions of the world.

The consultations will determine what kind of biodiversity information is needed by decisionmakers in many fields with an influence on biodiversity - including industry, fisheries, transportation, and parks management - in order to design a panel that addresses those requirements.

An electronic forum has been set up to collect opinions on the consultative process and its evolution (<http://www.imoseb.net> or contact executive-secretariat@imoseb.net).

The outline of a biodiversity panel is already taking shape in the minds of the declaration's signatories.

They recommend that such a panel, like other intergovernmental scientific panels, have a formal link to, and be funded by, governments to help ensure that the information will lead to action nationally and globally.

It should be objective and independent, with broad participation, including governments, the private sector and non-governmental organizations as well as scientists.

It must be transparent and representative in terms of opinions, disciplines and geographical regions, with a strict peer review process.

The panel they envision will generate clear, readily accessible information about the status and trends of biodiversity, projections of future changes and options for conservation and loss mitigation, which will allow decision-makers to set clear targets for action; and it will build synergy with existing international organizations.

"The climate change panel, the International Assessment of Agricultural Science and Technology, the Ozone Assessment Panel and other scientific collaborations today provide worthy examples of the sort of device needed," Watson said. "Each model has strengths and weaknesses but essentially they all serve as a reliable source of information and advice for the public, their governments and decision-makers, who then chose what to do."

Among the declaration's signatories are two former chairs of the Convention on Biological Diversity's Subsidiary Body for Scientific, Technical and Technological Advice - Alfred Oteng-Yeboah of Ghana and Peter Schei of Norway.

The other signatories are:

- Mary Kalin Arroyo, Institute of Ecology and Biodiversity, University of Chile
- Didier Babin, Agricultural Research Centre for International Development, France
- Robert Barbault, Ecology and Biodiversity Management Department, National Museum of Natural History, France
- Michael Donoghue, Department of Ecology and Evolutionary Biology, Yale University, USA
- Madhav Gadgil, Centre for Ecological Sciences, Indian Institute of Science, India
- Christoph Häuser, Staatliches Museum für Naturkunde, Germany
- Carlo Heip, Centre for Estuarine and Marine Ecology, Netherlands Institute of Ecology
- Anne Larigauderie, DIVERSITAS Secretariat, Paris, France
- Michel Loreau of McGill University, Canada, Chair of the Board of DIVERSITAS, the international

- program on biodiversity
- Keping Ma, Institute of Botany, Chinese Academy of Sciences, Beijing
 - Georgina Mace, UK Institute of Zoology
 - H.A. Mooney, Department of Biological Sciences, Stanford University, USA
 - Alfred Oteng-Yeboah, Council for Scientific and Industrial Research, Accra, Ghana
 - Charles Perrings, Global Institute of Sustainability, Arizona State University, USA, Vice-Chair, DIVERSITAS
 - Peter Raven, Missouri Botanical Garden, USA;
 - Jose Sarukhan, Instituto de Ecología, National University of Mexico, UNAM, Mexico
 - Peter Schei, BirdLife International, Fridtjof Nansen Institute, Norway
 - Robert J. Scholes, Natural Resources and Environment, CSIR, South Africa
 - Robert Watson, Environment Department, World Bank, USA

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