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Scientists report frightening forecasts Cite human need for biodiverse world

Jul. 20, 2006. 01:00 AM

PETER GORRIE

FEATURE WRITER

The world faces a "major crisis" as growing numbers of animals and plants disappear, a blue-ribbon panel of scientific experts warned yesterday.

"Virtually all aspects of biodiversity are in steep decline and a large number of populations and species are likely to become extinct in this century," states the report in the British journal *Nature*.

The issue is crucial, says Robert Watson, the World Bank's chief scientist and one of 19 experts from 13 countries, including

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Canada, who endorsed the report. At risk are "a whole range of services that we may not be aware of" though they are essential for human survival.

They include food, medicines, fibre for construction and clothing, as well as purification of air and water, climate regulation, and control of pests and diseases.

Despite its importance, there is no agreement among nations on even the modest action proposed by the scientists: creation of an international group to assess and provide information about the problem, Watson said in an interview from Washington.

Some crucial areas for plants and animals have been protected over the past few decades, but "they contain only a small fraction of the world's (land-based) species and ecosystems, and the situation in the oceans is even worse," the report states.

"The forces that push towards biodiversity loss globally are much stronger than the conservation gains," it adds.

Population growth and expansion of such industries as farming and logging destroy forests — three-quarters of Earth's original tree cover is gone — as well as wetlands, grasslands and other important habitat, it notes. Globalization and carelessness spread invasive species that wipe out local populations. Climate change is beginning to take a toll.

We're losing not only species, but also the genetic variety within them that helps them to adapt to environmental changes.

As a result, the report states: "Some 12 per cent of all bird species, 23 per cent of mammals, 25 per cent of pine and other conifer trees, 32 per cent of amphibians and 52 per cent of cycads (ancient tropical plants) are currently threatened with extinction, and climate change alone might commit an additional 15 to 37 per cent ... to premature extinction within the next 50 years."

A study released this week shows an impact close to home. The number of known invasive species in the Great Lakes has climbed to 182, and a new one is discovered, on average, every 28 weeks — the highest rate in any freshwater area on Earth, says Anthony Ricciardi, of McGill University's school of environment in Montreal.

Most, including the destructive and prolific zebra mussel and round goby, arrived in foreign ships' ballast water. Recent regulations have failed to control them, Ricciardi says.

The newcomers eliminate many native species. They also contribute to



conditions that have killed thousands of birds and, each summer, create a massive "dead zone" in the middle of Lake Erie.

As well, this year, 54 more plants, animals and habitats were added to Canada's list of species at risk. It now totals more than 500.

The biodiversity report contains dire warnings but only a cautious call for action.

The issue is a tough sell because it's complicated, hard to measure, and solutions appear to threaten vested interests.

The scientists want consultations that will decide by next summer whether to establish an international, government-led effort to collect evidence of biodiversity loss, similar to the groups created to deal with climate change and the hole in Earth's ozone layer.

"We need to put in place a long-term process for assessing knowledge and making sure it gets to the relevant decision-makers," says Watson, a former chair of the climate change panel.

The proposed biodiversity talks would "assess the need for such an assessment."

"To me it's clear," Watson says. "Some governments and people are not convinced."



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