

MY WAY OF THINKING

MARK CARWARDINE

The conservationist discusses the latest United Nations biodiversity report and invites your thoughts on the subject.

The United Nations has just published its most damning report yet on the state of the natural world. It warns that nature is being destroyed at a rate unprecedented in human history – and this is endangering our own survival.

Published by the UN Convention on Biological Diversity, the report looks at a decade of so-called conservation efforts by 196 ratifying parties (including every member of the UN – with the exception of the United States – plus the European Union). In 2010, 20 targets were agreed under the convention to stem the destruction of wildlife and life-sustaining ecosystems. The world's nations had 10 years to get their act together and make significant changes.

Well, their time is up – and guess what? They failed. Miserably. Not a single target was met. The scientific warnings have gone largely unheeded, the politicians have continued with 'business as usual', and our state of planetary emergency just got worse.

The report – as all such reports seem to do these days – tries to be positive. It sprinkles glimmers of hope and progress among its 210 pages and stresses that it's not too late to slow, halt and eventually reverse decline in biodiversity. I understand the need to put a positive spin on everything – or we'd all be jumping off a cliff – but there really is no sugar-coating the reality.

Even some of the purported progress is dubious. According to the report, 7.5 per cent of the world's oceans are officially 'protected'. But they're not really protected. Many European marine reserves, for example, allow destructive trawl fishing, and research shows that some species (sharks, in particular)

are worse off inside reserves than outside.

None of this is new. We all know that global wildlife populations are in freefall. And on our current trajectory, the future is scary.

But the powers that be still don't get it. Even national leaders and other politicians who claim to understand the environmental crisis find it difficult to resist powerful lobbies, short-term interests and, of course, their overwhelming desire for re-election.

They keep promising to do better, but they don't. Even now, in what feels like apocalyptic times with the skies of California glowing an ominous orange and a global pandemic bringing world economies nearly to a halt – among many other warning signs – the gap between rhetoric and reality seems to be getting wider.

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As the report states very clearly, the only solution is 'transformational change'. We have to turn our whole way of life upside-down and get governments, businesses and other stakeholders to understand that conservation is not a competing interest but is fundamental to human survival.

It means putting conservation at the heart of all policy-making. Yes, we have environmental ministries. And, yes, they are crucial. But they tend to be low down the pecking order. There are some exceptions – in France, for example, the powerful Ministry for the Ecological Transition's broad remit includes everything from biodiversity and climate change to energy and transport – but they are few and far between. The really important stuff – the overwhelming pressures from overfishing, deforestation, transportation, agriculture and energy production – is nearly always under the control of other, significantly more powerful ministries that don't pay much attention to conservation.

Unfortunately, we are long past the stage where conservationists and scientists alone can solve this crisis. But history proves that change often starts at the bottom, kick-started by individuals and non-profit groups, and this is our best hope. We have to focus on forcing it up the spiral to the decision-makers post-haste. If they're not on board, we all lose. ☒

MARK CARWARDINE is a frustrated and frank conservationist.

WHAT DO YOU THINK? If you want to support Mark in his views or shoot him down in flames, email wildlifeletters@immediate.co.uk



Severe wildfires have raged across California this year.