

## BACKGROUND PAPER:

# UN Environment Programme (UNEP) *Endangered Species*

### Introduction:

The August 2019 CITES Conference (Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Flora and Fauna) ended with countries promising to strengthen trade regulations for hundreds of species threatened by overhunting, overfishing, and overharvesting. Naming everything from smaller species of plants up to the giraffe, it seems that the conference was largely a success. With the UN General Assembly poised to add to those successes in a resolution, and with stories of animals like the bottlenose dolphin and gray whale recently removed from the Endangered Species list, it would seem that this problem is, at long, perhaps on the right road to solutions.

However, privately and outside the Conference, many involved in preventing extinctions have seen the emptiness in many of these “successes.” None of the resolutions, for instance, will sanction countries that fail to follow the rules. Without consequences, what sort of long-term success can we expect?

Several species, [such as the saiga antelope](#), failed to make the list. Several African nations [continue to petition to sell ivory on the free market again](#), South Africa is once again hunting the black rhino [under CITES approval](#), and the “background die-off” of species that is expected in nature (1-5 species per year) is now around 1000x that number, making this the largest species loss rate since the loss of the dinosaurs. According to some, [we are in the midst of the sixth mass extinction event in the Earth’s history](#). We may [lose one million species \(about 30% of the total number\) by the middle of this century](#).

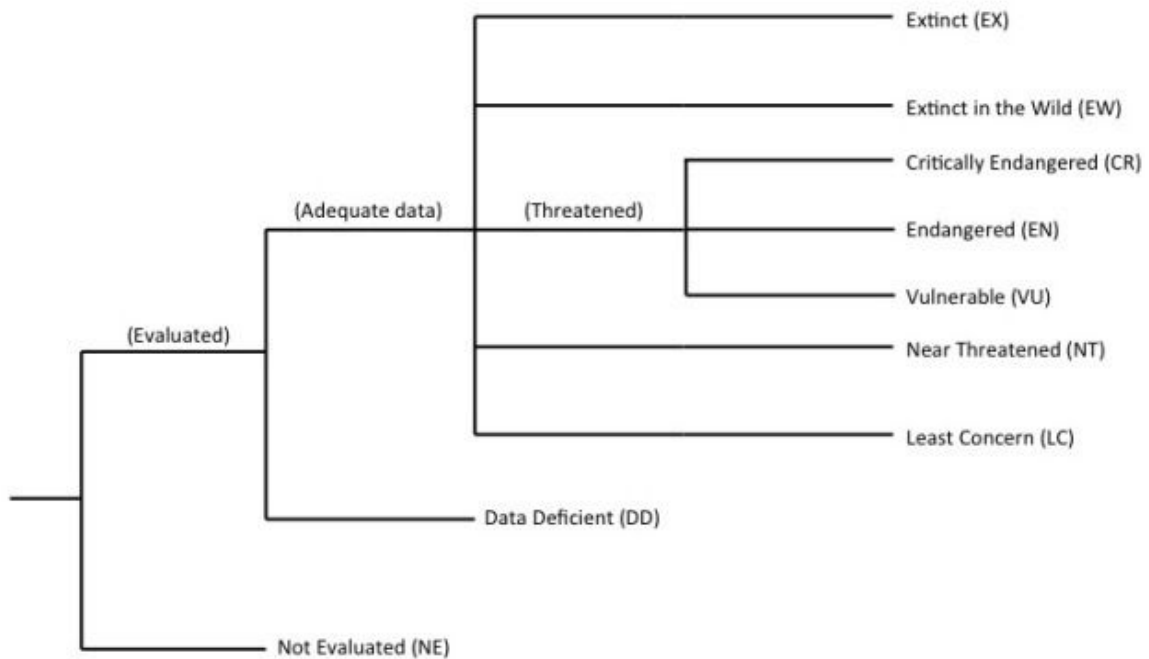
### Background & History:

None of this is particularly new. Activists have shouted and reported about the science of biodiversity loss for decades. And it isn’t denied anywhere but on the fringes that this is attributable largely to human activity. No country argues that we are “not losing species” or that “it doesn’t matter.”

In fact, the Intergovernmental Science-Policy Platform on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services ([I.P.B.E.S.](#)), a research arm of the United Nations, told the world that we may be on our way to losing as many [as a million plant and animal species](#). It is thought that scientists have catalogued only about 1.8 million of the

eight million species extant on earth—a mass extinction means that many of them may now never be known to us. With so many striking around the world against the political inactivity on climate change, it’s easy to lose sight of this companion issue. What does such a loss mean for humans? It’s hard to imagine.

While most agree action should be taken, up to now, most UN bodies like UNEP have limited themselves to [Action Plans focused specifically on regions and species](#). While there is nothing wrong with each of these insofar as they address a specific need, they fail to acknowledge the larger picture of the total planet.



*A flow chart showing how a species is placed on an Endangered list (above) and categories of protections (below).*

Appendix	Level of Protection	Trade
Appendix I	Species threatened with extinction	Permitted only in exceptional circumstances
Appendix II	Species might be threatened with extinction but not required	Trade is controlled to ensure survival
Appendix III	Species are protected in at least one country	Trade is controlled after a member country has indicated that assistance is needed in this capacity

**Table 3. Species and level of trade permitted depending on listing in CITES Appendix.**

## The Causes of Failure:

Since most countries agree that we are at risk of losing our planet's health through a lack of biodiversity, what could possibly make them fail to address it meaningfully? There are actually a number of factors.

First, the human reasons for species loss primarily number five:

- (1) changes in land and sea use;
- (2) direct exploitation of organisms;
- (3) climate change;
- (4) pollution and
- (5) invasive alien species.

Those invested in the status quo (nations and private organizations that profit from this list) will resist real change to it. We change the land and sea to create more cropland, for instance, or more habitats. We buy and sell “exotic” species for consumption, recreation, and entertainment. We demand more energy and “high quality” lifestyles that promote climate change. We fail to recycle globally well (let alone reduce and re-use!), and through poor regulation and ill-considered choices, we allow invasive species to kill off local ones.

Countries which oppose serious responses to endangered species oppose changing these above choices, at least in any significant way.

## The Problem:

More, the problem is largely outside of our thinking. As a civilization, we are bombarded with problems and distractions, and we make priorities that most directly and immediately affect us. [Why should we worry about a panda when a country does not have adequate health care and must bring resources to that problem?](#) And isn't this fundamentally a Western issue of privilege?

And if we do not see the harm each day in a direct way (species loss does not look, for instance, like a forest fire, and it did--in Brazil, for instance--we see it primarily as a climate change issue), then how can we muster the political will to change it?

This is why the IPBES report talks about a “transformative change,” the requirement being that we actually change how we think about the issue so that our political will to act will alter, too. [Here is a list of some of the most significant statistics we are facing.](#)

## Committee Focus: Transformative Change

So what exactly does that look like? This is the focus of the committee's debate.

This is not about PR campaigns to make people pet the otters, though. Posters and celebrity endorsements may cause a few people to stop eating shark fins, but they don't change the fundamental thinking of nations and their leaders. And simply giving people "more information" does not change attitudes.

Robert Watson, the IPBES Chair, says that "by transformative change, ***we mean a fundamental, system-wide reorganization across technological, economic and social factors, including paradigms, goals and values.***"

Think "big picture" and long term with our global relationship to nature. What assumptions do we make about the status quo that we might re-think? What must a policy-maker have to think about the environment to see that a change is needed? What sorts of thinking motivates policy-makers to action?

### Relevant Documents:

- [Rio+20. The Future We Want. 2012](#)
- [IPBES Report: "Species Extinction Rates". 2019](#)
- [Convention on Int'l Trade in Endangered Species. 2019. CITES](#)
- [General Assembly Resolution GA/73/L.120, "Tackling Illicit Trafficking in Wildlife", Sept 2019](#)

### Bloc Positions:

Fundamental to every country's position will be its ability to:

- Find resources necessary to make change a priority
- Have a system of government which can sustain that change over time and without corruption
- Alter the thinking of its culture to make prioritizing bio-diversity a natural habit
- Make changes to its society in tech, economics, and social institutions to promote and sustain that thinking

This is no small order, so we can expect a gulf between developed and less developed nations: the more ambitious the type of change, perhaps, the less likely lesser developed nations would accept it.

On the other hand, countries with larger indigenous populations or rich bio-diversity might embrace change more readily, while those nations rich in industry and making progress in development might resist altering their course.

Each nation (and blocs of nations) will have to weigh its idealism vs. practicality in order to fulfill the committee's mission.

### **Committee Mission:**

By the end of the conference, this committee should adopt a draft document which outlines the major beliefs required to save endangered species of all kinds (those beliefs fitting the idea of transformative change) as pre-operatives, and perhaps list as operatives several steps countries might take to reach those beliefs.

The goal is to think ambitiously but not generically. A pre-operative of “believing that all species are important” is so vague and obvious that it need not be said, but “believing that each country should announce “conservation of natural resources” as part of its constitution or that every private company will be audited for its impact on species habitats are more ambitious!

### **Questions to Consider:**

- 1.) What practical and immediate needs does your country have that might interfere with such ambitious goals?
- 2.) How does your government operate and how likely is it that it can sustain a difficult and controversial policy across several decades?
- 3.) What practices in technology, economics, or social values does your country have which might be examined for their impact on species? How willing are you to examine or change them?
- 4.) What might be done to or for countries which are unwilling to change?

### **Sources for Further Research:**

- [World Wildlife Fund](#) for their work in transforming businesses
- [Wildlife Conservation Society \(WCS\)](#)
- [International Union for Conservation of Nature](#)
- [Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species \(CITES\)](#)
- [International Anti-Poaching Organization](#)
- [Endangered Species Laws by Country](#)
- [Some success stories](#)