

Forum:	General Assembly I
Issue:	The Biodiversity Crisis
Student Officer:	Ethan Rana
Position:	Deputy President

Introduction

Between 1970 and 2018, wildlife populations have dwindled by an average of 69%. The once ocean-full of fish and sharks collapsed along with populations of elephants, sealions, and other animals alike. Compared to the natural background extinction rate, the rate of biodiversity loss is estimated to be 100 to 1,000 times that. The biodiversity crisis poses as one of the most urgent and seemingly insurmountable environmental challenges.

It is led by harmful human activities such as overfishing and hunting, land use change, and other climate change-related issues. The loss of biodiversity is not limited to the disappearance of individual species; it threatens the very balance of nature. Ecosystems, which are largely responsible for clean water, food, and air quality, are placed in jeopardy. They are responsible for sustaining life on Earth. Despite previous attempts to solve the issue, it is unclear whether or not said actions have been successful. There is an urgency to address both the biodiversity crisis and its interconnected counterpart, climate change.

Definition of Key Terms

Ecological Restoration

When ecosystems have been degraded or destroyed, this process attempts to repair these areas and restore biodiversity.

Invasive Species

Invasive species are non-native, hostile species that, when introduced to a new environment, attempt to outcompete native species for resources, eventually leading to declines in the population of the native species.

IPBES (Intergovernmental Science-Policy Platform on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services)

The IPBES is an intergovernmental organization established to improve and assess knowledge on biodiversity in order to promote sustainable development. This includes assessments on socioeconomic structure, threats to nature, the health of ecosystems, and knowledge foundations.

WWF (World Wildlife Fund)

The WWF is a Swiss-based international non-governmental organization that conducts research and advocacy, emphasizing the need for a “nature-positive” approach to conservation. It works towards wilderness preservation and the reduction of human impact on the environment.

History & Developments

Discovery of hotspots

In 1988, Norman Myers, a British ecologist, published a paper identifying 10 “hotspots.” These were regions that were denoted with high levels of plant endemism and habitat loss. Each of these regions was all tropical forests, meaning they were rich in biodiversity and crucial ecosystems. Interestingly, they contained a disproportionate amount of the world’s biodiversity in small areas, meaning their conservation was of utmost importance. Myers’ work was able to highlight this. His hotspots were later adopted by Conservation International and assessed 7 years later. Currently, there are 36 recognized biodiversity hotspots; they account for 35% of the “ecosystem services” needed for human survival. Myers’ work was groundbreaking as it opened the door to more efficient conservation efforts. Researchers were able to focus on areas with high biodiversity and high threat levels.

UNEA 5.2 resolutions

From 28th February to March 2022, the 5th United Nations Environment Assembly resumed. They concluded with 14 resolutions aimed at slowing the progression of the triple planetary crisis, climate change, pollution, and biodiversity loss. The resolutions were geared towards achieving the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) by 2030 and bolstering measures to conserve nature. In total, 14 resolutions were passed. Namely, resolutions 1, 9, and 14. Resolution 1 outlines the animal welfare, environment, and sustainable development nexus. It called for the creation of a report identifying connections between the health and welfare of animals, the environment, and green development to human health. Resolution 9 highlights the importance of investing in sustainable and adaptable infrastructure. This includes clean energy, water, and transportation. Perhaps most importantly, Resolution 14 works towards an internationally legal binding mechanism to end worldwide plastic pollution. It was set to include both binding and voluntary approaches.

The Green Revolution

During the 1960s and 1970s, the Green Revolution was a period of significant agricultural innovation and growth. Throughout this period, agricultural yields, such as wheat and rice, saw a shocking increase. In India alone, cereal production over tripled. Despite allowing nations to become proficient in food production, the Green Revolution led to the extinction of numerous native crops. Farmers shifted to hybrid seeds and caused countries like India to lose nearly 100,000 varieties of native rice. Farmland also saw an overuse of chemical fertilizers, which degraded soil health, altered natural microflora, and increased excess pesticides in the environment. Modern researchers have also related the Green Revolution to climate change, water pollution, groundwater depletion, and soil salinization.

The invention of herbicides

The first major herbicide, Sinox, was developed in France in 1896. Since then, many more iterations of herbicides have been commercially released, namely 2,4-D. 2,4-D was a low-cost and efficient herbicide used to control weeds in corn, wheat, rice, and other cereal crops; it targeted broadleaf plants and not grasses. Its widespread use led to many unforeseen issues that disrupted local ecosystems. Although having target organisms, 2,4-D was found to be toxic to non-target organisms too. Beneficial insects, birds, and aquatic life suffered lethal injuries after repeated exposure to the herbicide.

When it came to marine life, 2,4-D was found to contaminate surface water and groundwater through runoffs. Overexposure eventually led to the decline of multiple species of fish and invertebrates. The presence of

herbicides—2,4-D, atrazine, glyphosate, and others—can disrupt aquatic food webs, leading to population imbalances, harmful algal blooms, and the bioaccumulation and biomagnification of harmful substances. Comparatively, amphibian species like frogs were found to have developmental issues due to reproductive toxicity. Amphibian species who were already facing other environmental stressors saw a decline in their population as adolescents struggled to grow.

On land, soil microorganisms were in complete disarray. Microorganisms, which were essential for nutrient cycling and soil health, were disrupted, leading to reduced soil fertility and increased vulnerability to erosion. When land is infertile, plants or crops are unable to successfully grow, reducing the available food source for many species. Plant species faced further challenges when bee foraging visits were reduced by 55% per day—loss of flowering plants and reduced foraging efficiency. A lack of pollination meant the disappearance of plant species and, consequently, organisms that depended on them.

Upon scrutiny, the commercial benefits of herbicides like 2,4-D are completely outweighed by their ecological harms. Something seemingly inconsequential—soil fertility, bee foraging, crop diversity—eventually leads to the degradation of biodiversity: if one species is unable to thrive, another species depending on it will no longer prosper, and so on.

***Boia irregularis*'s—an invasive species—introduction to Guam**

Boia irregularis, also known as the brown tree snake, was first discovered in Guam in 1949. By the 1970s, they had spread throughout the island. The snake's introduction was due to the absence of natural predators and plethora of prey on the island. Thanks to the snake's ability to climb and camouflage in cargo, spreading throughout the island was a breeze. Prior to their arrival, Guam was home to 13 native forest bird species—the Guam rail, Guam flycatcher, the Micronesian starling, and more. But just 10 years after their introduction, only 3 species were left; 10 were driven to extinction. The brown snake also preyed on other indigenous species, like the Mariana fruit bat and the Mariana cow, which led to their endangerment and near-extinction. Due to the heavy losses in animal species, Guam's ecosystem suffered. Food webs and the balance of native flora and fauna were both disturbed.

This remains one of the deadliest examples of an invasive species because of its widespread impacts. Not only were native species disappearing, humans also experienced their ruthlessness when the ecosystem started to suffer. The snake's unusual habit of climbing electrical poles and entering power stations caused frequent power outages. The island had to spend millions of dollars in repairs and consequently lost significant amounts of productivity annually. Not only this, but the snake's presence itself posed a danger to human health, as it was slightly venomous and had a painful bite. Evidently, the *boia irregularis* not only posed a threat to local ecosystems and species but even to human life—it highlights the dangers of invasive species.

Their widespread prevalence was not as simple as it seemed. Although their growth was propelled by the lack of predators and prey (which may have been due to overhunting), their initial introduction to the island was due to humans. During the post-World War II era, researchers suspected the snake was likely introduced to the island as a stowaway in military cargo ships or snuck onto transport aircraft. Once on the island, the brown tree snake was met with more than favorable conditions. It was easy to traverse, hunt, and reproduce. Originally, Guam would have been much harder to navigate, but because of heavy urbanization in certain regions, the resilience of native

species weakened. Not only this, but the changing of vegetation composition created environments that can support higher densities of species, both invasive and foreign. Ultimately, the combined effects of these human actions created an unfortunately favorable environment for the *boia irregularis* to prosper. Had it not been for humans, Guam may still have 13 forest bird species instead of 3.

Major Parties Involved

Intergovernmental Science-Policy Platform on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services

The IPBES is an intergovernmental organization established to improve and assess knowledge on biodiversity in order to promote sustainable development. They operate as an independent intergovernmental body and are based on four core functions: assessment, knowledge generation, policy support, and capacity building. The assessments they conduct relate to socioeconomic structure, threats to nature, the health of ecosystems, and knowledge foundations.

Assessments are conducted with the help and supervision of experts around the world and synthesize the latest scientific knowledge on biodiversity. Since its creation in 2012, IPBES has released eight official major assessments, covering issues such as pollination, invasive species, land degradation, and the global assessment of biodiversity and ecosystem services. In addition to assessments, IPBES has also begun working on models—correlative models, process-based models, and expert-based models—to guide decision-making. Their models are often simulations or establish statistical relationships between actors.

In the upcoming years, IPBES will continue providing expert advice and aim to further develop their models for future assessments. Their 2030 work program is a demand-driven program that is meant to propel the achievement of their overarching mission. It is aligned with the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and focuses on three main topics: understanding the cruciality of biodiversity, strengthening communication and effectiveness of IPBES, and further advancing work on nature.

World Wide Fund for Nature

The WWF is a Swiss-based international non-governmental organization that conducts research and advocacy, emphasizing the need for a “nature-positive” approach to conservation. It works towards wilderness preservation and the reduction of human impact on the environment. It is acclaimed as one of the largest and most recognized conventions. Since its inception in 1961, the WWF has moved from focusing solely on the conservation of endangered species to understanding their habitats, ecosystems, and human wellbeing. Their six key areas of focus are forests, the climate, food, wildlife, freshwater resources, and marine life. Each area’s common point is the advocacy for better policies—clean energy policies, sustainable agricultural practices, and habit protection, to name a few—that benefit both the environment and people.

The organization is a strong advocate for the establishment and management of protected areas to conserve important ecosystems and biodiversity hotspots. The WWF works closely with many education systems to raise public awareness by connecting educators with resources to teach children about relevant issues. These often include activities and virtual events hosted by WWF experts.

As of now, they operate in over 100 countries worldwide and have built a network of over 1.1 million supporters. They have been successful in many areas, such as the establishment of protected areas, breeding

programs for endangered species, and increased awareness about many issues. The WWF is continuing to adapt their current model and create new strategies to combat emerging threats to biodiversity. They have begun focusing on advocating for policies that prioritize both ecological health and economic prosperity. The group has emphasized their goal to further collaborate with other stakeholders to amplify its impact on global conservation efforts.

Brazil

Known as one of the world's most megadiverse countries, Brazil is the home to 15-20% of the world's biological diversity. The Amazon rainforest accounts for over 10% of all species worldwide. However, due to recent urbanization, the rainforest has faced extensive deforestation and mining. New policies that prioritize economic development over environmental protection take the country by storm and play a pivotal role in worsening biodiversity. In 2020 alone, Brazil lost nearly 13,000 square kilometers of rainforest. The former administration oversaw the rollback of many environmental protections and weakened regulatory agencies. Currently, President Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva has pledged to reverse pro-deforestation policies and aims to have zero illegal deforestation by the year 2030. In the first half of 2023, there was a 42% decrease in deforestation rates compared to the previous year.

China

The rapid industrialization and urbanization in China have led to grave amounts of habitat destruction and pollution. Like Brazil, China is known for its biodiversity and hosts an assortment of ecosystems—forests, wetlands, grasslands, and marine environments—which is home to 10% of all known species. Since the 1950s, the nation has lost around 50% of its wetlands, which are critical for numerous ecosystems and species. China's expansion of railways, roads, and other infrastructure has destroyed many natural habitats, including sensitive areas. The conversion of land for agricultural use has also played a part in this. The cultivation of crops and livestock grazing has led to the loss of grasslands, wetlands, and forests alike.

Agriculture and urbanization have consequently introduced invasive species to areas, which have largely outcompeted local populations. Because of this, many species are facing the threat of extinction, with an estimated 4,088 higher plant species and 1,050 vertebrae species threatened. Unhealthy agricultural practices—pesticides/herbicides, artificial fertilizers, overcultivation, and alike—do not end there. By replacing traditional crops with High Yielding Variety seeds (HYVs), which are resistant to insects and diseases, genetic diversity has experienced significant losses. Studies have shown that although HYVs are considered better in quality, they decrease soil fertility and require substantial amounts of fertilizers. As previously explained, both of these aftereffects are extremely harmful for local ecosystems. It is important to note that China is not the sole contributor to these harmful practices; it is a global issue.

China has taken steps to combat these issues, including the creation of the China Biodiversity Conservation Action Plan. After its creation in 1984, it has laid the groundwork for biodiversity conservation in China. Recently, their strategy was adapted to emphasize improving legal frameworks, boosting public participation, and implementing biodiversity conservation into regional planning. China has also released another biodiversity conservation strategy that aims to achieve President Xi's vision of "lucid waters and lush mountains." It will focus

on establishing a national park system and align with the Kunming-Montreal Global Biodiversity Framework. As of 2021, there have been an approximate 10,000 newly established protected areas.

Previous Attempts to Solve the Issue

Kunming-Montreal Global Biodiversity Framework

During COP 15, this framework was adopted on December 19, 2022, and aimed to achieve global goals for biodiversity conservation. The framework is often referenced as the “Paris Agreement for Nature.” because of its comprehensive and ambitious strategy. The Paris Agreement is an international treaty passed in 2016, with the overarching goal of maintaining the global average temperature to be below 2 oC above pre-industrial levels and to limit temperature increase to 1.5 oC above pre-industrial levels.

The Kunming-Montreal Global Biodiversity Framework aims to protect 30% of the planet’s land and oceans by 2030 and restore approximately 30% of degraded ecosystems. It has four main goals for 2050 and 23 specific targets for 2030. Particularly, its goal is ecosystem integrity and fair sharing of benefits. This outlines the need to maintain current ecosystems and restore the integrity of harmed ones. The framework emphasizes the idea of equitable sharing of both monetary and non-monetary benefits from genetic resources and traditional knowledge. These are to be shared with indigenous peoples and local communities. On the other hand, its 23 targets can be categorized into three main areas: reducing threats to biodiversity, meeting people’s needs while upkeeping sustainability, and tools/solutions for implementation.

The framework also launched an awareness campaign titled “The Biodiversity Plan: For Life on Earth.” The campaign wishes to communicate its goals to relevant stakeholders and the public. Multiple summits have conceded to the importance of public participation in any climate or environmental-related crisis, as “governments cannot reach environmental protection goals alone.” Part of their implementation framework highlighted the need for national commitments and for parties to set their own targets, presumed they are aligned with the framework’s goals.

UN Sustainable Development Goals

The UN Sustainable Development Goals, or more commonly known as SDGs, came to fruition in 2015 and consisted of 17 sustainable development goals. It served as a universal call to action and was part of an agenda that aimed to address global challenges. Although these challenges were not limited to climate change or environmental harms, SDG 15’s focal point was “Life on Land.” It aims to protect, promote, and restore sustainable use of terrestrial ecosystems. It addressed global environmental issues like climate change, pollution, biodiversity loss, desertification, and land degradation. As part of its promotion, biodiversity was highlighted as being critical for maintaining fruitful ecosystems that supported both animal and human life. Biodiversity was dubbed “humanity’s life-support system.” SDG 15 included 12 targets and indicators, which were to be achieved by 2030. The successful achievement of these goals will be benchmarked by every level of government; each goal is broken down into 169 targets spread out across all the goals.

UNEP/EA.5/Res.14

UNEA Resolution 5/14, titled “End Plastic Pollution: Towards an Internationally Legally Binding Instrument,” was adopted during the fifth UNEA held in February 2022. It addressed the issue of plastic pollution

and created a framework to combat it. Due to the widespread concern of plastic pollution and the estimated 300 million tons of plastic produced annually, this resolution was prompted to create a legally binding instrument. It calls for such an instruction that aims to cover the entire lifecycle of plastics—production, design, consumption, waste management—and properly enforce its oversight. Unlike traditional UN resolutions, a legally binding one records legally enforceable acts or agreements; it allows for increased accountability and a higher likelihood of change. Moreover, the resolution called for a comprehensive approach to tackling the issue by using methods such as reducing plastic production and consumption, providing better alternatives, and enhancing waste management systems. In order to achieve this, the resolution suggested the creation of a multilateral fund and the use of the best available science.

UN Decade on Ecosystem Restoration

Launched in 2019, the United Nations General Assembly created a global initiative aimed at preventing, halting, and most importantly, reversing the degradation of ecosystems. The initiative is set to run from 2021 to 2030, which aligns with the aforementioned SDGs. Its primary goal is to restore broken ecosystems by returning them to their natural state. The UN plans to reintroduce native species, remove invasive species, and restore natural processes. A practice dubbed regenerative agriculture will enhance soil health, increase biodiversity, and ensure the reduction of reliance on chemical inputs. This newer form of agriculture will reduce the use of water and other inputs, which can protect soil and water resources. Overall, the initiative will adopt “mosiac restoration,” which is a form of landscape restoration that does not rely solely on a singular mechanism. The UN hopes to restore 350 million hectares by 2030, which may cost upwards of \$9 trillion. By restoring forests, which are major carbon sinks, and rewetting peatlands (which are also carbon sinks), these efforts are expected to remove anywhere from 13 to 26 gigatons of greenhouse gases.

Possible Solutions

In the biodiversity crisis, it is important to consider the root causes of the issue. Many areas are rich in biodiversity and considered important ecosystems, and yet they are degraded constantly. This is due to the lack of protected areas and conservation areas. **By establishing these zones—in biodiversity hotspots—clear boundaries for human activities are set.** They are designated regions that serve the purpose of conserving all life within them while still being situationally open to the public. These areas can include national parks, nature reserves, or marine protected areas.

Irregardless of their designation, they provide ample protection against harmful human activities—urbanization, deforestation, agriculture, and resource extraction—with three main steps: **identifying relevant regions, engaging local communities, and implementing regulations to protect these areas from malpractice.** The last step can be difficult and is often where most protected zones fail. In order for there to be proper regulation, there must also be oversight. Proper management plans and objectives, such as allowed activities or visitation, should be determined based on the ecosystem fragility and social importance of the area.

In the status quo, another root cause is climate change. **Its solution: further climate change mitigation.** Climate change mitigation involves many methods, mainly to **reduce greenhouse gas**

emissions and enhance carbon sinks. One commonly discussed idea is the shift from fossil fuels to renewable energy—solar, wind, hydroelectric power, and more. This gradual change will help the world shift away from carbon-intensive energy and industrial processes. However, its implementation is key. The world has been attempting to shift away from carbon energy for years now and has produced mixed results. Many countries are unable to make the shift due to either their economic situation or heavy reliance on fossil fuels. **Another possible approach is through enhancing carbon sinks.** These are natural environments—forests, oceans—that can absorb carbon dioxide from the atmosphere. To achieve this, reforestation and other restoration techniques are a must.

The UN has already established various methods for ecological restoration, which can be built upon. The main idea remains the same: **take degraded ecosystems and sustainably restore them.** As technology advances, potential methods only grow. Large-scale restoration projects can be used to rehabilitate a range of environments, ranging from degraded forests to coastal areas. In spite of the widespread effort and recognition of restoration, a few key factors should be kept in mind. Firstly, the meticulous selection of native species for replanting is of utmost importance. Reintroducing species should not lead to the introduction of more possibly invasive ones. Additionally, it should also be determined whether or not the species will still fit with the environment, given its debasement. Candidates for potentially reintroduced species should be considered accordingly. Just like with protected areas, monitoring and adaptive management are also vital components of success. Having an iterative process will ensure maintaining the area's effectiveness over time, as potential complications can be swiftly handled.

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