

United Nations Environment Programme Background Guide

Agenda: Protecting Endangered Animals and their Habitats

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Historical Context of Human-Animal Relations

There is a question that our people often ask each other- one of the great moral and existential dilemma of the past century or so.

“Are we alone in the universe?”, we ask. It is for closure that we do so; to know if we could ever interact with a living being or civilization apart from ours. We think up fantastical paradoxes and have branches of science dedicated to the hunt for extraterrestrial life. However, we forget that we are not alone in our world, let alone the entire universe. We do not own the Earth, we merely belong to it, and the ones who share this pale blue dot with us- the ones who have been around for longer than we have, are the animals of our world.

Our early civilizations were ones that worshipped our animal companions and their invaluable service¹. From the teachings of Pythagoras to the verses of the Yajurveda, animals were largely seen as equals. Kings founded cities to honour their equestrian companions. They were indispensable to daily life, military conquest and trade. It is this reliability that has brought on their current plight.



The aim of any being, is conquest. To expand, to have more resources. Our journey started somewhere in the rift valleys of Africa as a bipedal hairless ape. It is in this journey that we, as social animals, began applying emotional intelligence and empathy not just to our own kind, but also to the other animals around us. It all went well for a few millennia, barring few instances of jingoistic animal sacrifice. And then, the world grew too small for us. We wanted to conquer, take over new frontiers. The “Age of Discovery”, as it was called, led mankind to the pedestal of a new age- one where we would have total dominion. Man could now play God. Produce tools faster than ever. Tools that transport that same hairless ape from Africa, 12000 kilometres, from China to Madrid in 20 days’ time. In the course of playing God, we began to forgo our humanity. We began treating the same animals that had been part of our journey as mere tools. We began mass-producing them, as if they were commodities to be traded.

Contemporary Impact on Biodiversity

The callousness towards animals in one's immediate surroundings, lead to an even greater apathy towards animals living in the wild. A Spanish Conquistador² in Peru, or a Dutch missionary in Indonesia would rather cut and burn down forests to set up a plantation or set up a trading outpost on land reclaimed from a mangrove forest, than bother about the humans or animals that call the place home. We began treating animals and their habitats as collateral damage in the golden path towards “progress” and “development”. Little did we know that we were about to undo a fragile, self-sustaining ecosystem that had thrived for millions of years.



Over the past couple of centuries, humans have transformed the geological landscape of our planet drastically in our favour. The result of this has been disastrous, to put it lightly. Over the course of this mentioned period, we have directly or indirectly driven to extinction over 1,50,000 species over 500 years³. Population sizes of species in the wild have dropped by a minimum of two-thirds in the last 50 years⁴. Even according to the lowest estimates, the rate of extinction today is at least 1000 times the natural extinction rate.

The facts here seem to be irrefutable. Data collected over 200 years show that our actions have a negative impact on animal and plant life. The current swarm of extinctions has led to scientists classifying it as the 6th “Mass Extinction Event”, of which the previous ones included the asteroid which wiped out the dinosaurs, which caused the extinction of three-quarters of plant and animal life on Earth.

This is the impact we are having on our planet. We cannot help but compare ourselves to a virus that slowly, yet inevitably takes its host's life. Is this our predicament? Yet, even in the face of mountains of evidence and oceans of proof that it is our intervention that has caused thousands of species to go extinct, there are those who believe that this is merely nature having its way. The “Law of the Jungle”, they say, is that the weak perish and the fittest survive. This is the same troop that champions climate-change denial across the media. Make no mistake, evolution most definitely favours those that are better suited to their surroundings, and freak accidents such as the asteroid that wiped away the dinosaurs have a chance of occurring at any moment. But, for a such a large number of species to go extinct, and for the climate to change its patterns more erratically when there has been no external disturbance to the planet, either from the Sun or other heavenly bodies, it must be a particular species' doing. Is that the footprint we seek to leave? That of an utterly reckless and destructive species that burnt to the ground what every organism in the known universe calls home?

Understanding the Causes of Species Extinction

We must understand that an ecosystem is like a machine; an intricate, powerful machine that runs only when all its cogs function smoothly. Each animal, along with abiotic components (air, water, soil) are the components. Remove one, and the system falls apart. What we are doing now is akin to removing multiple components. But to understand how we reached here, we must know how the current extinction-saga took shape, and how it has evolved.

1. Invasive Species⁵: One of the most overlooked factors leading to wildlife extinction is invasive species. This is primarily due to the lack of knowledge on the part of amateur conservationists, who only seek to do good and inspire their local communities. A seemingly harmless, even supposedly helpful step of freeing caged birds, snakes or other pet species and releasing them into the wild does more harm than it does good. These species, if they are not indigenous to the area, will most probably end up causing an imbalance to the local ecosystem, potentially wiping away other species in the process. An example is the Burmese Python, which while native to Asia, has found its way to Florida in the USA, where it threatens the existence of deer, alligators, and even panthers.
2. Overfishing⁶: According to most leading conservationist journals, fishing today has crossed a tipping point wherein the rate of fishing is greater than the rate of reproduction or replenishment of fish. This is causing a net imbalance in the seas. It might not necessarily seem like a problem that an ocean with billions of fish is lesser by a thousand fish. However, when these fish tend to be the ones keeping the ecosystem in check, it

tends to be a problem. Apex predators, such as sharks, for example are vital and their removal is of concern. Nearly 100 million sharks are removed from the oceans every year by humans alone, and this is unsustainable⁷. This level of fishing is now not merely to support populations, but to use these fish and their body parts to make medicine, perfume, etc.



3. Pollution: As of 2019, nearly 750 species are directly at risk of extinction due to plastic pollution alone. Each year 1 million sea birds die to plastic pollution alone⁸. Water pollution due to discharge of wastewater and chemical wastes, air pollution due to the burning of plastics and other non-biodegradable substances, and soil pollution⁹ due to agricultural agents are all leading causes for the decline in population of animals directly dependent on such resources. Belugas are found dead, saturated

with herbicides and other toxins. Whales wash up ashore with over 40 kg of plastic in their stomach. If the chemical does not poison them, it most certainly will render them unable to obtain food, starving them to death.



4. Habitat Loss: This is the single biggest question mark among conservationists today. No matter what steps we take to ensure animal safety- banning poaching and hunting, regulating fishing, if the animal is to survive in the world, then it needs a wild and an environment that is stable and in natural state. We may provide a polar bear with ample prey and companions, but if the ice melts and the Arctic is no more, then there is only so long it can hold on for. Tigers have slowly made a return to the wild, but their habitat remains same of the same size while their numbers increase. Today, global warming has changed climate patterns so much so that monsoons, winters and the whole shebang are off kilter. Therefore, we must tread carefully and measure our options while considering these animals' future.

Securing a Shared Future for All Species

Animal conservation is not so much as a single-step problem wherein removing or correcting a single error will put everything back to where it was. As stated earlier, some damage is irreparable. We must go back to square one and re-iterate the fact that this is not an issue up for negotiation, so much as the animals are considered. It is not our aim to debate on what animal needs or does not need saving. We are here to decide what measures must be taken to save all of them. We may debate amongst ourselves on how to save these animals, and regarding who takes what measure, never whether we should save them or not.

We have tried to suppress nature and our neighbours for long enough to recognise the error of our ways. We do not inherit the Earth from our ancestors; we borrow it from our children. Our successors will look back at this moment and recognise the efforts we have taken to ensure that they get a better world. We must find ways to rally our collective economic and political might behind such a noble cause, for if we do not, we and everything we love and cherish in this world, will be history.

Essential Reading

Kindly read through the following articles in order to develop a basic understanding of the agenda. This list is neither exclusive nor compulsory, merely a recommendation:

- a. Wildlife Conservation:
<https://education.nationalgeographic.org/resource/wildlife-conservation/>
- b. Endangered Species:
<https://education.nationalgeographic.org/resource/endangered-species/>
- c. Decreasing numbers:
<https://news.mongabay.com/2023/06/global-study-of-71000-animal-species-finds-48-are-declining/>

The following are a few of the trusted websites you may refer to in the course of your research. Kindly note, Wikipedia is not an accepted source, but the websites mentioned in the References Column of Wikipedia may be accepted as a valid source, depending on the website. This list is not exclusive, but the authenticity of other websites you refer to will be checked:

- a. World Wildlife Fund: www.worldwildlife.org
- b. International Union for Conservation of Nature: <https://iucn.org/>
- c. IUCN Red List of Threatened Species: www.iucnredlist.org
- d. Britannica: <https://www.britannica.com/>
- e. National Geographic Society:
<https://www.nationalgeographic.org/society/>
- f. United Nations Environment Programme:
<https://www.unep.org/>

Problems to be Addressed

Delegates are expected to work together in Committee to find practical solutions to the real-world problems being discussed. A few such issues on which we expect to see decisions taken and resolutions made, are:

- a. What steps must international bodies (such as the UN) take, to protect endangered species and their habitats?
- b. What are the measures to be taken by governments to control habitat destruction?
- c. How can the ordinary citizen be made aware of this pressing issue, and persuaded to contribute towards wildlife conservation?
- d. How can private corporations be held accountable and prodded towards a more eco-friendly manufacturing process?
- e. What legalities exist in international law regarding endangered species' protection, and how must they be changed to prepare for a future of mass extinctions?
- f. What laws present in the judicial framework of any member state regarding species protection are noteworthy in their effectiveness, and could quite possibly be implemented in a larger number of nations?