

# More like a dying planet report

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**Earth continues to hemorrhage biodiversity, according to the latest *Living Planet Report*. Unfortunately, its authors cannot manage a clear statement of how to stop the bleeding.**

*by The Overpopulation Project*

“You could think of it as a health check for the planet,” says the World Wildlife Fund, introducing its most recent biennial *Living Planet Report*, “and a prescription for how to help it recover.” As in previous reports, the diagnosis is grim. Since 1970, for the 32,000 populations of 5200 vertebrate species surveyed, average numbers have declined 69%. If these populations are representative (and there is no obvious reason to doubt they are), that means that for every 10 wild birds, mammals, reptiles, amphibians and fish on Earth in 1970, only 3 exist today. It is an almost unimaginable loss for such a short period of time.

Of course, 69% is an estimate and an average: some groups are doing better than others, some regions are doing better than others, invertebrate numbers are less accurately and extensively censused than vertebrate numbers. But there isn't much comfort to be found in these complexities and uncertainties. Scientists might just as likely be underestimating total vertebrate losses as overestimating them. For every vertebrate group that is doing better than average, another is doing worse: for example, freshwater vertebrate populations have declined a stunning 83% since 1970. Even groups doing better than average have seen precipitous drops in overall numbers over the past 50 years. And invertebrates could be doing worse than vertebrates: concern about the demise of insects has spawned the term "Insectageddon."

Take that 69% average decline, cut it in half, and then project that rate of decline out another two hundred years. It still adds up to the sixth mass extinction of life on Earth, as habitat continues to be degraded and destroyed, individual populations wink out, ecological connectivity and the ability to recolonize former habitats diminishes, and species begin to disappear faster and faster, in ever greater numbers.

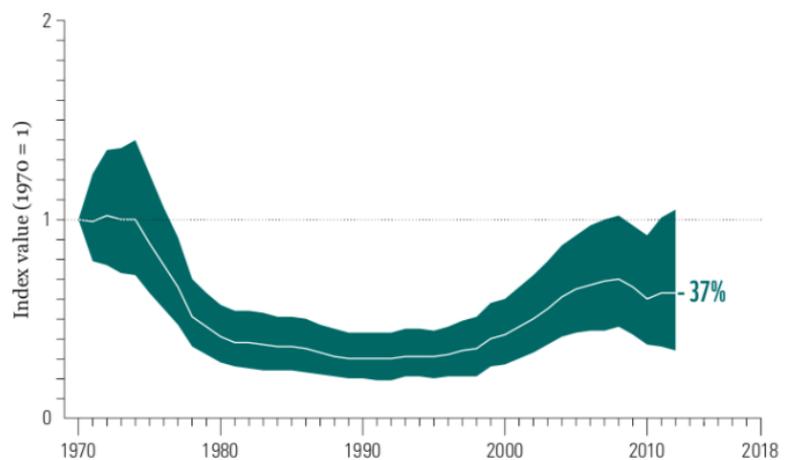
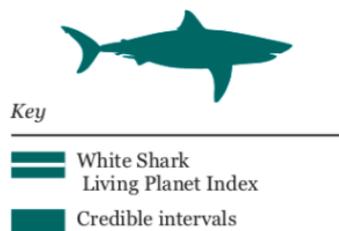
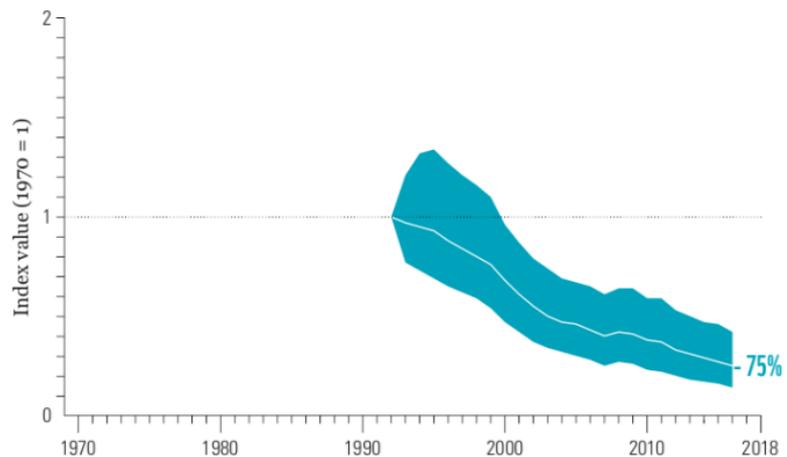
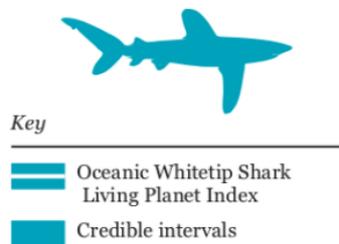
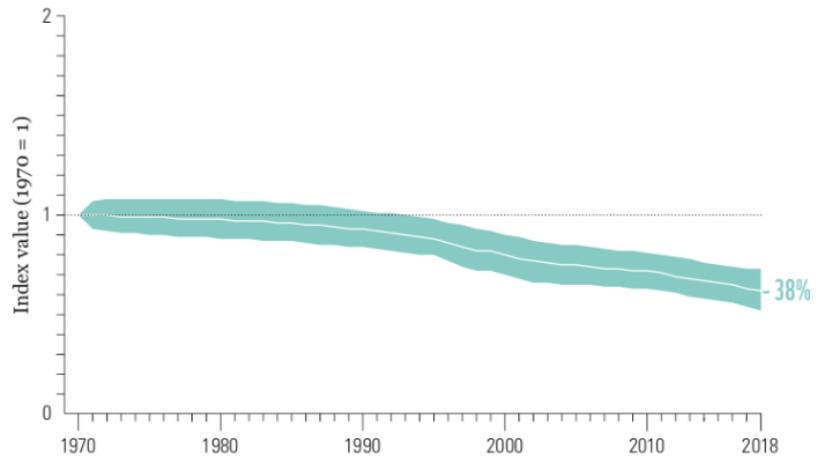
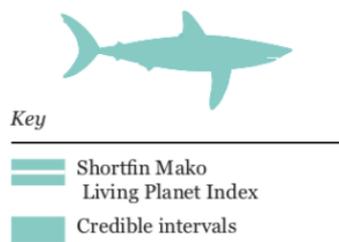


Figure 1. Living Planet Index from 1970 to 2018 for three species of oceanic sharks. Some formerly abundant, wide-ranging shark species have declined so steeply that they now fall into the two highest threat categories on the IUCN Red List. Figure 9B from Living Planet Report 2022, p. 44.

## The cause

A 69% decline in vertebrate numbers in only fifty years is a staggering loss to the natural world. Of course, it has also been an immense gain—for people. We have replaced them with us and our economic support systems. While wild vertebrates have declined 69% since 1970, people have increased our numbers by 116%: from 3.7 billion to 8 billion. And we are living much more luxuriously, on average. As the new Living Planet Report puts it:

*Direct drivers [of biodiversity loss] are underpinned by a range of more indirect drivers, such as increases in human population and affluence, as well as sociocultural, economic, technological, institutional and governance factors, connected to values and behaviours. Over the last 50 years, the human population has doubled, the global economy has grown nearly fourfold and global trade has grown tenfold, together dramatically increasing the demand for energy and materials. Economic incentives have generally favoured expanding economic activity, often with environmental harm, rather than conservation or restoration. (p. 64)*

Can we say that more clearly? Climate change is no more or less a “direct” cause of biodiversity loss than increased human numbers. Nor is there any empirical evidence that “values” or changes in values are on a par with economic growth in terms of displacing biodiversity. Let’s rewrite the previous paragraph to state clearly why there are only 3 wild vertebrates today for every 10 that existed fifty years ago:

*The immediate causes of biodiversity loss, such as urban sprawl, overfishing, and conversion of wild lands to agricultural uses, are driven by increased human numbers and increased resource use per person. As human economies grow, they displace Nature’s economy. Over the last 50 years, the human population has doubled, the global economy has grown nearly fourfold and global trade has grown tenfold, dramatically increasing human demands for food, land, energy, and other resources. Expanding their economies and increasing their wealth and power are the primary goals of the world’s nations, while protecting the natural world has been an afterthought at best, and often ignored altogether.*

## **The solution**

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Obviously, to preserve what biodiversity remains and create the “nature positive” societies called for in the report, we would need to scale back human numbers and economic demands. We would have to decrease the size of human economies and increase the percentage of Earth’s lands and seas in protected areas—the former making the latter possible. We would have to accept limits to growth. Here, though, we reach a different kind of limit: the limited ability of big environmental organizations dependent on foundation funding to question conventional economic thinking.

It is one thing to call vaguely for “transformative change” in economics (p. 86), quite another to advocate straightforwardly for an end to the pursuit of economic growth. According to the WWF report’s website, to “bend the curve to reverse nature loss” requires “more conservation efforts, more sustainable production and more sustainable consumption. None of these actions alone are enough. Only when all three actions are taken together will we see the reversal of nature loss at the speed we need.” Beyond a few half-hearted calls for less meat eating, however, “sustainable” economic consumption

and production turn out to mean producing and consuming more efficiently. Plugging greater efficiency into the current global economy, however, is simply a recipe for more growth and more biodiversity loss.

## **Population neglect**

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While the report mentions population growth as a cause of biodiversity loss, it is simply accepted as inevitable. For example, it discusses plans to mitigate climate change in ways that might “put nature on a path to recovery while contributing to halting climate change and feeding an increasing and wealthier global population” (p. 82). Population growth is assumed to end sometime in the future, but no mention is made of policies to hasten its end, much less reverse it, as is needed. This is particularly evident in the discussions of agriculture, a leading cause of biodiversity loss, and one where the impacts of human numbers are obvious. Instead of reducing the number of mouths to feed, all the emphasis is on reducing the resources needed to feed each person, by “making food production and trade more efficient, reducing waste and favouring healthier and more sustainable diets” (WWF 2022 report website). While these changes are necessary, the benefits gained from them will be undone by further population growth.

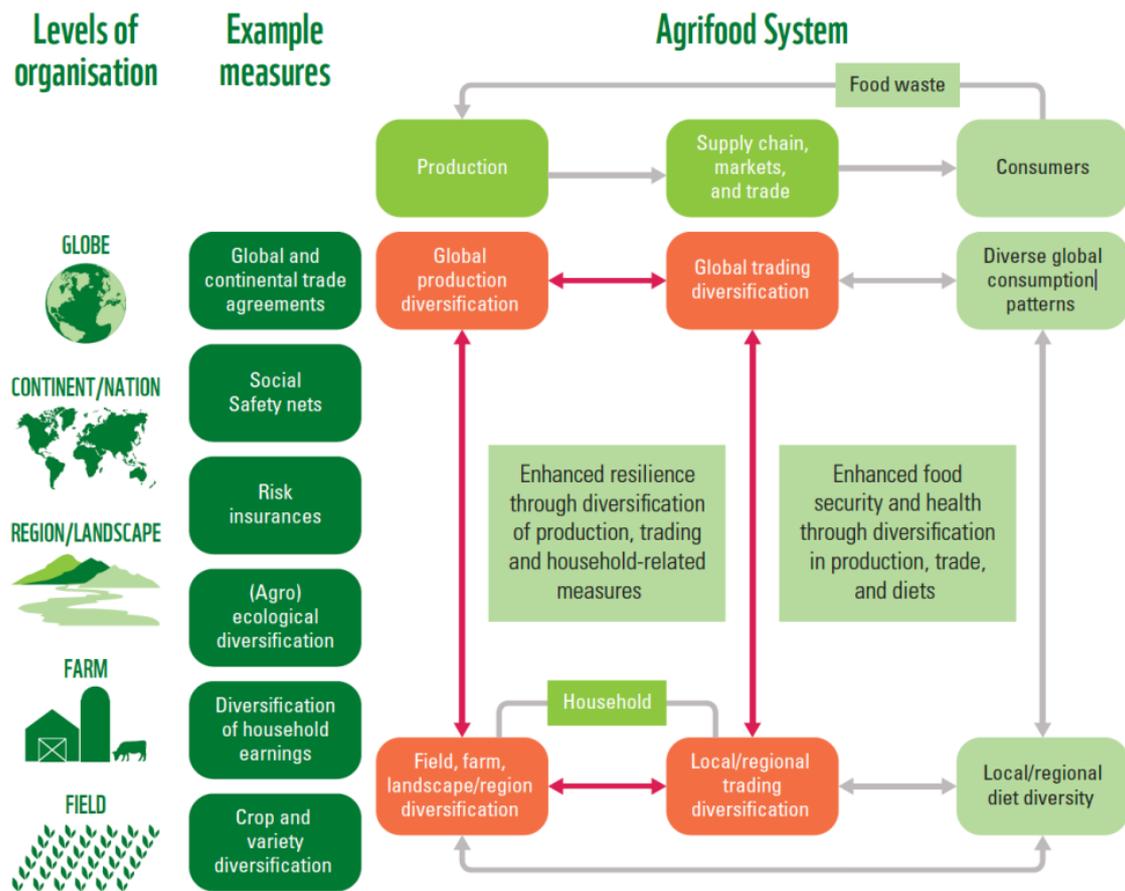


Figure 2. Food system diversification to enhance food systems' resilience, food security, and health. Note how the model ignores the impact of total human numbers on both human food security and on biodiversity impacts. Figure 17 from Living Planet Report 2022, p. 77.

Like the 2022 IPCC Assessment Report, the most recent *Living Planet Report* bases its scenario modelling on the SSP2 projection for world population growth. But this projection is far lower than United Nations demographers find plausible and has greatly underestimated population growth since it was published in 2014. Instead of using such a fanciful projection to diminish the importance of population, it would have been valuable to follow Project Drawdown's example and discuss "bending the curve" on future population growth, by ensuring women have access to good reproductive health services and by ending harmful practices such as child marriage.

Such policies have great potential to help reduce future biodiversity losses. And why not suggest that people in rich countries avoid large families? Why is it OK to appeal to individuals to change their eating and shopping behaviours, but not to change their family size aspirations?

The new report holds up Costa Rica as a shining example for reversing previously high deforestation rates—as well it should (pp. 61-62). But no mention is made of the successful promotion of family planning that reduced Costa Rica's fertility rate, and the

demand for more farmland to be carved from its forests. In Central American countries which failed to make such efforts, deforestation has continued apace, while poverty and unrest have increased.

The World Wildlife Fund was not always so coy about population growth. Up to 2014, its biennial reports clearly referenced population growth undermining progress for both humans and wild animals, noting “the increase in the Earth’s productivity has not been enough to compensate for the demands of the growing global population” (Living Planet Report 2014). They made clear that biodiversity was declining most rapidly in underdeveloped countries, where rising numbers of poor people continue to clear forests and hunt wild animals to survive. And they highlighted the challenge of achieving sustainable wellbeing for all within planetary boundaries when each person’s slice of a sustainable pie was shrinking due to population growth. But somewhere around 2014, WWF became one more environmental organisation keen to deflect attention from population.

## Defective ethics

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WWF can’t say people need to limit our numbers or the size of our economies. Its report talks around these issues, sometimes nibbling timidly at secondary aspects. For example, a section titled “What do we need from economics for transformative change?” mentions providing “a thorough social cost-benefit analysis” for new infrastructure projects and reducing subsidies for activities that harm biodiversity (p. 87). But it can’t come out and advocate for reducing the size of a bloated human economy that is sucking the life out of the earth. It cannot advocate for limits to growth.

This same problem shows up in the report’s treatment of ethics. A rather sad little figure (below, Figure 3) suggests the hope that greater attention to “values and norms” will help societies address the fundamental causes of biodiversity loss and somehow tame the economic juggernaut that is causing all the damage. Unfortunately, the report’s authors don’t seem able to clearly state any norms for how people should treat wild nature.

Nowhere does the report say: “it is wrong to extinguish other species. People should not do it, even when it is profitable.” Nowhere does the report suggest that dividing habitat and resources fairly between people and other species is a matter of justice or recommend norms for doing so. Nowhere does it state that other species have a right to continued existence, free from untimely anthropogenic extinction.

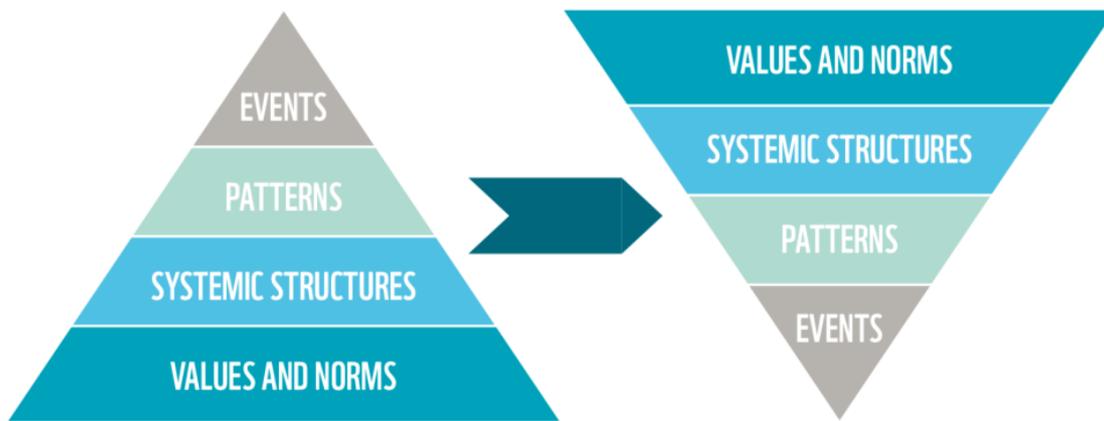


Figure 3. “Conventional conservation efforts mainly focus on events that directly drive biodiversity loss, while ignoring the root causes that led to these events and patterns in the first place. Transformative approaches focus on addressing the systemic structures (e.g. economics, political and social systems) and the values and norms that shape our relation to nature.” Figure 20 from Living Planet Report 2022, p. 86.

The problem is that advocating such moral principles would commit the authors to limits to growth, which they are unwilling to do. Instead, they emphasize *human* rights, particularly the right to “a clean, healthy and sustainable environment,” as proclaimed this year by the United Nations General Assembly (pp. 60-62). The report simply assumes such a right will benefit biodiversity. “Although not legally binding,” it states, “the UN resolution is expected to accelerate action to address the global environmental crisis, just as UN resolutions on the right to water in 2010 turbocharged progress in delivering safe water to millions of people” (p. 62). Of course, providing safe drinking water to people is important. But our success in doing so for billions more people is not unrelated to the 83% decline in freshwater vertebrate populations since 1970 lamented in the report.

Rights, essentially, are legitimate claims on limited resources. Restricting rights to human beings means treating other species as mere means to our ends, to be displaced at our convenience. So the report talks about what biodiversity losses will cost *people*, but finds it hard to talk about people taking less in order to leave room for other species. Such a framework makes it impossible to acknowledge the zero-sum reality of life on Earth, where organisms compete for limited resources and more people equals less wildlife.

Bottom line: if we cannot talk about limits, we cannot think clearly and honestly about the ethical issues with which massive biodiversity loss confronts us. In particular, we cannot ask whether it is unjust to crowd other species off the Earth to accommodate more of us.

## Harmony with nature?

On the back of *Living Planet Report 2022*, we find the WWF mission statement:

*Our Mission is to Stop the Degradation of the Planet’s Natural Environment and to Build a Future in which People Live in Harmony with Nature.*

Harmony with nature is a noble idea. The UN's Biodiversity Convention also speaks of such harmony as its ultimate goal. But harmony does not exist if *my* note is deafeningly loud while *yours* is barely audible. Harmony does not exist if I increase my group, the baritones, a million-fold, while we exterminate the basses and the altos, put a few sopranos in cages and a few more on a small reservation, and then ask everyone to sing a happy song.

There is no harmony when it is all about us. Ask the baiji dolphin, the nearly blind, echolocating cetacean who lived well for countless millennia in the Yangtze River, driven extinct by the cacophony of too many people.



Figure 4. Qiqi, the last confirmed baiji (*Lipotes vexillifer*), who died in 2002. Photo courtesy of [Roland Seitre](#).