

Born at Rio 1992: The Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD)

What achievements have the last 20 years brought?

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A convention for all life on earth

The Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD) was agreed at the Rio Earth Summit in 1992 as a response by governments to the alarming and accelerating extinction of the world's species and ecosystems, and to ensure that our use of genetic resources is carried out in a safe and fair manner. It covers all life on Earth, from forests and mountains to deserts and seas, plants, animals and microorganisms alike. The Convention has acquired 193 Parties. Missing from the list are Andorra, the Holy See, South Sudan and the USA.

Mission accomplished?

So have governments managed to stop the global biodiversity-crisis?

No, absolutely not.

Despite the fact that governments have fully recognised their responsibility to halt the destruction of nature, and committed to the conservation and sustainable use of biodiversity, the mass extinction of species and ecosystems has continued unhindered and completely uncontrolled. Since 1992, biodiversity has declined dramatically, particularly in the tropics due to high deforestation rates of primary forests and transformation into agricultural land and pasture¹. Corporate interests – ranging from the intense logging and industrial fishing industries to mining and oil companies – have stalled the negotiations, and governments have often prioritised their own short-term financial interests over the long-term interests to protect life on Earth.

Over the past few hundred years, humans have increased species extinction rates by as much as 1,000 times background rates that were typical throughout Earth's history². Many scientists believe we are now facing the sixth mass extinction in history. Confronted with this grave fact, governments made a commitment at the Johannesburg Summit in 2002 to significantly reduce the loss of biological diversity by 2010. However, by 2010 – when it was clear that they had failed to achieve that target – governments decided to give themselves another 10 years, and adopted the Aichi Biodiversity targets for 2020 instead.

So has the Convention been a complete waste of paper?

Even though governments have failed to solve the biodiversity crisis, the CBD has resulted in some significant steps forward.

- The CBD's global Programme of Work on **Protected Areas**, adopted in Kuala Lumpur in 2004, kick-started an increase of funding and political action to establish more and better managed nature reserves. Since 1992 protected areas have increased by more than third, altogether now covering a land area as large as the Russian Federation. However, only 7% of world's coastal waters and 1.4% of oceans are protected.³
- Recognising the unique risk posed by genetically engineered organisms to the conservation and sustainable use of biological diversity, governments adopted the **Cartagena Protocol on Biosafety** in 2000, supplemented by the Nagoya-Kuala Lumpur Protocol on liability and redress in 2010.
- The adoption of the **Nagoya Protocol** on Access and Benefit Sharing was a significant leap forward in the fight against "**biopiracy**", a term referring to corporations patenting and profiting from genetic resources used in, for example, pharmaceutical or cosmetic products without permission from the peoples or nations who are the rightful owners of those resources. However, since many governments have not yet ratified the Protocol, it still has not entered into force – a problem that governments must deal with urgently by ensuring rapid ratification.

- **The Aichi Biodiversity targets for 2020** are an important roadmap for political action on biodiversity, and include crucial steps such as the establishment of a global network of protected areas on land and sea, elimination of harmful subsidies, halving the destruction of natural habitats, putting an end to overfishing and destruction of marine ecosystems, halting the extinction of known species, and sustainable management of forests and agricultural landscapes.
- The CBD has repeatedly recognised the urgent need to ensure that measures to combat climate change (such as biofuels) do not harm biodiversity, and that measures which protect both the **climate and biodiversity** (such as protection of intact forests) are given priority. Unfortunately, the recommendations of the CBD have so far largely been ignored in the climate change negotiations.

It is clear that without any efforts to protect biodiversity, the situation today would be even worse than it is. But the convention is still far from implemented. If governments decided to fulfil their obligations under the CBD, it would among other things mean protection of our intact forest landscapes, healthy oceans, substantial reductions of greenhouse gas emissions, fair and safe use of genetic resources and sustainable use of natural resources.

From scientific warnings to political action

With the formal establishment of the Intergovernmental Science-Policy Platform on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services (IPBES) this year (also known as “the IPCC of biodiversity”), the delivery of scientific assessments of the state of nature and the need for action will be much more systematic in the future. Parties to the CBD must commit to taking on the IPBES recommendations and importantly, to taking the required political action to halt the biodiversity crisis.

Time to save life on Earth!

The CBD is a central forum for negotiations on protection of nature. With the ongoing mass extinction of species and ecosystems, great challenges lie ahead.

Therefore, at Rio+20 and beyond, governments must:

- Ensure the funding and political action needed to achieve the Aichi Biodiversity targets by 2020.
- Agree to increase their effort to implement the target for marine protected areas and marine reserves, including through the identification and protection of ecologically and biologically significant areas (EBSAs).
- Ensure the rapid ratification and entry into force of the Nagoya Protocol and develop a Global Multilateral Benefit-Sharing Mechanism under the protocol to ensure new and additional funding for biodiversity based on utilisation of genetic resources for which there is no clear ownership.
- Respond urgently and adequately to the recommendations from science, as delivered through the Intergovernmental Science-Policy Platform on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services (IPBES), by taking the necessary decisions in the CBD and ensuring a solid and urgent implementation at the national level.
- Start creating a solid international system for sustainable use of nature in order to put an end to the over-exploitation of biodiversity and ensure responsible corporate behaviour and accountability for impacts on nature.
- Ensure that measures taken to combat climate change do not harm biodiversity and that win-win solutions for climate and biodiversity are given priority.

The ungraspable cost of inaction

Biodiversity is not only the beauty of life and nature, but also the very basis of all human life on earth. The water we drink, the food we eat and the air we breathe originate from the very ecosystems that are now suffering from our over-exploitation. Diversity of life gives us new medication, new raw materials and forests full of inspiration for new inventions and solutions. It is meaningless to claim that we cannot afford to save life on Earth. How can we afford not to?

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¹ WWF Living Planet Index 2010. (Cited also by the UNEP report “Keeping Track”, 2011.)

² Millennium Ecosystem Assessment (2005). Ecosystems and Human Well-being: Synthesis. Island Press, Washington, DC.

³ UNEP (2011). Keeping Track. Pg 47.

http://www.unep.org/geo/pdfs/Keeping_Track.pdf