**Biodiversity crisis**

BY J A M I L A H M A D 2021-03-12

FOR millennia, humans have benefited from nature`s generosity without caring much for it. Now, this one-sided relationship has become untenable, especially with an economic paradigm that treats nature with disdain. Human actions are destroying nature and causing biodiversity loss at an alarming rate. Thisis double trouble for a planet already under assault from a ferocious climate crisis.

However, unlike the visible climate devastation, biodiversity loss is silently gnawing at the fabric of life`s support systems.

Nature`s elaborate arrangement of interdependence among and between species makes earth habitable by providing indispensable ecosystem services. There are two main types: `provisioning services` such as food, fuel, timber and drinking water, etc, and `regulating services` like pollination, air/water filtration and prevention of natural hazards.

A global assessment by the Intergovernmental Platform on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services, covering the period between the 1970s and 2050, revealed that in the last 50 years, the pace of change has been unprecedented. More than 85 per cent wetlands have been lost, while 75pc land and 66pc oceans have been significantly altered.

Consequently, up to a million species of animals and plants face extinction, leading scientists to fear a sixth mass extinction.

The World Economic Forum`s Global Risks Report2020listsbiodiversitylossasoneof the top four global risks in likelihood and impact.

Changes in land usage have had the biggest impact as habitats and forests are converted for agricultural purposes. Meanwhile, the loss in forest cover affects pollination patterns lowering yields of dependent crops.

On the other hand, the frequency and intensity of floods, landslides and wildfires keeps surging with the weakening of biodiverse ecosystems that act as nature`s shields against environmental hazards. Moreover, expansion of infrastructure contributes to encroachment and fragmentation of wildlife habitats, creating room for the transmission of diseases from animals to humans.

Outbreaks of zoonotic diseases such as like Ebola, SARS, and coronavirus highlight the link between health and environmental conditions.

The United Nation`s 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development focuses on coordinated action that considers the impact of biodiversity loss on other socioeconomic sectors. The biodiversity-specific SDG-14 addresses `life below water` and SDG-15 `life on land`, but these SDGs are interlinked so failure in one, for example poverty or climate, will affect progress in the rest. A number of countries have devised national action plans under the UN`sConvention on Biological Diversity, while the UN Environment Programme regularly produces evidence-based reports for bridging the gap between science and policy.

Despite these arrangements and scores of related international agreements, poor implementation has marred progress in biodiversity conservation. The Strategic Plan 2011-2020 of the Convention of Biological Diversity failed to achieve its targets. This may be because in developing countries, biodiversity conservation remains low on the list of national priorities. More often than not, a lack of cross-sectoral dialogue and effective coordination mechanisms hamper mainstreaming biodiversity into social and economic policies. Harmful subsidies in agriculture, fossil fuels and fishing add to the complexity of the crisis.

But hope for turning the tide is kept alive by various biodiversity-friendly initiatives.

Africa`s Great Green Wall is an example of political will, partnership and innovation.With 20-plus partner countries, the initiative is steadily moving towards its 2030 target of restoring 100m hectares of degraded land, generating around 10m jobs and stabilising economies.

The huge swathe of green cover will serve as a carbon sink for up to 250m tonnes of emissions.

Meanwhile, Chinahas imposed a 10-year ban on fishing to restore biodiversity in Asia`s longest but depleted Yangtze river. California`s rice fields are flooded with water after harvesting instead of burning, converting them into seasonal wetlands covering an area of 300,000 acres, providing respite to migratory bird species. Such cheap, nature-based and innovative solutions are needed as they are sustainable and give high returns.

Pulling the planet back from the brink of devastation will require long-term collaborative action. The UN General Assembly has declared 2021-2030 to be the Decade of Ecosystem Restoration. The Food and Agricultural Organisation and UNEP are collaborating with governments and other stakeholders to develop plans and strategies for preserving nature. In this battle of existence or extinction, our destructive relationship with nature must end swiftly if we desire a healthy, safe and resilient human society.  The writer is director o f intergovernmental affairs, United Nations Environment Programme.