



Press Release

Our global food system is the primary driver of biodiversity loss

A new Chatham House report launched today, in partnership with UNEP and Compassion in World Farming, calls for an urgent reform of our food systems.

- A new Chatham House report highlights that the global food system is the primary driver of biodiversity loss.
- Biodiversity loss will continue to accelerate, unless we change the way we produce food. Further destruction of ecosystems and habitats will threaten our ability to sustain human populations.
- The new report calls for an urgent reform of food systems, suggesting three interdependent actions: changing global dietary patterns, protecting and setting aside land for nature, and farming in a more nature-friendly and biodiversity-supporting way.
- Policy makers are urged to take a system-wide approach to account for the impacts of food systems, develop global guidance for change, and translate this to national targets.

London, 3 February, 2021 - *Food System Impacts on Biodiversity Loss*, the new Chatham House report, supported by the UN Environment Programme (UNEP) and Compassion in World Farming, describes three actions needed for food system transformation in support of biodiversity, and sets out recommendations to embed food system reform in high level political events over the coming UN 'Super Year' for Nature.

Our global food system is the primary driver of biodiversity loss, with agriculture alone being the identified threat to 24,000 of the 28,000 (86%) species at risk of extinction. The global rate of species extinction today is higher than the average rate over the past 10 million years.

In the last decades our food systems have been following the “cheaper food paradigm”, with a goal of producing more food at lower costs through increasing inputs such as fertilizers, pesticides, energy, land and water. This paradigm leads to a vicious circle: the lower cost of food production creates a bigger demand for food that must also be produced at a lower cost through more intensification and further land clearance.

The impacts of producing more food at a lower cost are not limited to biodiversity loss. The global food system is a major driver of climate change, accounting for around 30% of total human-produced emissions.

According to the new report, a reform of food systems is a matter of urgency and should focus on three interdependent actions:

- Firstly, **global dietary patterns need to move towards more plant-heavy diets**, mainly due to the disproportionate impact of animal agriculture on biodiversity, land use and the environment. Such a shift, coupled with the reduction of global food waste, would reduce demand and the pressure on the environment and land, benefit the health of populations around the world, and help reduce the risk of pandemics.
- Secondly, **more land needs to be protected and set aside for nature**. The greatest gains for biodiversity will occur when we preserve or restore whole ecosystems. Therefore, we need to avoid converting land for agriculture. Human dietary shifts are essential in order to preserve existing native ecosystems and restore those that have been removed or degraded.
- Thirdly, **we need to farm in a more nature-friendly, biodiversity-supporting way, limiting the use of inputs** and replacing monoculture with polyculture farming practices.

Dietary change is necessary to enable land to be returned to nature, and to allow widespread adoption of nature-friendly farming without increasing the pressure to convert natural land to agriculture. The more the first action is taken up in the form of dietary change, the more scope there is for the second and third actions.

The findings and recommendations of the new Chatham House report were presented today, during an online event which included speakers from UNEP, Chatham House and Compassion in World Farming, as well as Jane Goodall, PhD, DBE, Founder – the Jane Goodall Institute & UN Messenger of Peace. An inspiring panel discussion followed with Louise Mabulo, a chef, environmentalist and UN’s Young Champion of the Earth from the Philippines, and Lana Weidgenant, Vice-Chair of Shifting to Sustainable Consumption Patterns at the UN Food Systems Summit and Deputy Director of Zero Hour International.

Susan Gardner, Director of UNEP’s Ecosystems Division, said:

“Our current food system is a double edged sword – shaped by decades of the “cheaper food” paradigm, aimed at producing more food, quickly and cheaply without taking into account the hidden costs to biodiversity and its life-supporting services – and to our own health. Reforming the way we produce and consume food is an urgent priority – we need to change global dietary patterns, protect and set aside land for nature and farm in a more nature-friendly and biodiversity-supporting way.”

Professor Tim Benton, Research Director, Emerging Risks; Director, Energy, Environment and Resources Programme at Chatham House, said:

“The biggest threats to biodiversity arise from exploitative land use – converting natural habitats to agriculture and farming land intensively – and these are driven by the economic demand for producing ever more calorie-rich, but nutritionally poor, food from fewer and fewer commodities grown at scale. These commodities underpin a wasteful food system that fails to nourish us and undermines biodiversity and drives climate change.”

Philip Lymbery, Global Chief Executive at Compassion in World Farming, said:

“At a time when so much of the world continues to battle the Covid-19 pandemic, it’s never been more obvious that the well-being of people and animals, wild and farmed, are intertwined. As this new report shows, the future of humanity depends on us living in harmony with nature. We need to work with nature, not against her. Never has it been so timely for us to realise that protecting people means protecting animals too. The future of farming must be nature-friendly and regenerative, and our diets must become more plant-based, healthy and sustainable. Without ending factory farming, we are in danger of having no future at all.”

Jane Goodall, PhD, DBE, Founder – the Jane Goodall Institute & UN Messenger of Peace, said:
“The intensive farming of billions of animals globally seriously damages the environment, causing loss of biodiversity and producing massive greenhouse gas emissions that accelerate global warming. The inhumane crowded conditions not only cause intense suffering to sentient beings but enable the transfer of pathogens from animal to human risking new zoonotic diseases. On ethical grounds it should be phased out as soon as possible.”

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Notes to Editors

1. UNEP is the leading global voice on the environment. It provides leadership and encourages partnership in caring for the environment by inspiring, informing and enabling nations and peoples to improve their quality of life without compromising that of future generations.

For more information, please contact:

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2. Founded in 1920, [Chatham House](#) is a world-leading, independent policy institute based in London. Our mission is to help governments and societies build a sustainably secure, prosperous and just world. We engage governments, the private sector, civil society and our members in open debate and private discussions about the most significant developments in international affairs. Our research and policy ideas involve rigorous analysis of critical global, regional and country-specific challenges and opportunities. We do not take institutional positions on policy issues.

For more information, please contact:

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3. Compassion in World Farming was founded in 1967 by a British dairy farmer who became horrified at the development of intensive factory farming. Today Compassion is the leading farm animal welfare organisation dedicated to ending factory farming and achieving humane and sustainable food. With headquarters in the UK, we have offices across Europe, in the US, China and South Africa. To find out more about Compassion in World Farming visit: www.ciwf.org

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