

Twilight of the treasure

The most comprehensive survey of the natural world ever undertaken confirms that we are destroying the Earth's biodiversity at an astonishingly rapid pace.

Are we the greatest criminals in all of history? As absurd as that sounds, it is precisely what generations to come may think of us. Exhibit A in the

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future's case against us may be the newly-released "Ecosystems and Human Well-being: the Biodiversity Synthesis Report". It is one of a series of reports from the UN's Millennium Ecosystem Assessment, a huge five-year project involving 1,360 leading scientists in 95 countries.

In just the last 50 years, according to the report, we have committed the worst environmental destruction in all of human existence. We have bulldozed, netted, burned, poisoned, chopped down and left homeless an immeasurable amount of life. Today, 20 percent of all corals are dead and 35 percent of all mangroves destroyed. A fifth of all mammal species, a third of all amphibians, and an eighth of all bird species are near extinction due to human activity. More than 90 percent of all large predator fish are gone. Even more disturbing is the fact that we don't even know what we are killing. Scientists estimate that probably more than 90 percent of the species on Earth today are still unknown to us. We also might consider the morality of one species blindly wiping out millions of others.

This report should be the final nail in the coffin filled with claims touted by anti-environment critics who say that concerns about nature are based on exaggerations or the outright lies of fundraisers crying wolf. This report ends



LOST WORLD. Photo of Grand Cayman bird: Guy P. Harrison

all debate over whether or not there is a serious problem. To deny it now can only be the worst form of misguided selfishness. After all, the CEOs and government heads who lead the destruction of nature have children and grandchildren too. They may not understand it or think about it, but they depend on the microbes and insects necessary for agriculture just like everyone else. They too need the estimated \$30 trillion worth of services that nature provides free of charge. Gated communities will not hide a dying world from their eyes forever.

Those who still can't summon up any concern for flattened rainforests and empty oceans might reflect on the suffering that biodiversity loss inflicts on the world's poor. They feel the decline faster and harder than anyone. So the next time someone tells you they don't care about extinctions,

pollution or deforestation, explain to them that it also means they don't care about the more than one billion mothers, children and fathers who struggle to survive in extreme poverty every day.

Once we reach the point of no return, no amount of money can buy back the Amazon Rainforest or fill the oceans with fish again. We inherited a treasure of life that was more than three billion years in the making and we are blowing it like some pathetic loser in Las Vegas with no tomorrow to live for. Forget worrying about all those end-of-the-world scenarios popularized by books, films and religions. The big one is already here. It's happening right now and it's us. We are the six-mile-wide asteroid from space. We are the plague. We are the apocalypse.

Despite the scale of this historic crime, most people don't care. Just look at the

priorities of the BBC and CNN. They usually give 30 seconds to an environmental story, regardless of how important it is, and then devote endless hours reporting on the struggle for Iraq's soul, terrorism fears, missing women and political squabbles. These relatively trivial events may dominate our daily news diet, but environmental problems take a far greater toll on human life today and will have far greater repercussions for tomorrow. Historians in the future will not spend much time analyzing the things most people think are important today. They will be too busy trying to figure out how we—primarily the citizens of wealthy nations—came to the conclusion that destroying the Earth's biodiversity was a smart way to do business. A thousand years from now, our brief moment in the sun is likely to be notable for only three things: the Apollo space program, the rise of the World Wide Web and the destruction of the Earth's natural wealth. As for the latter, I suspect tomorrow's generations will find it difficult to understand our behavior and impossible to forgive us.

"Greatest criminals in history" may be too harsh a verdict to pin on average people just trying to hold down jobs and raise families. Maybe it's not completely off the mark, however. We are, after all, the ones who tolerate and enrich the corporations that ravage nature to satisfy stockholders. We are the ones who continually vote people into power who cannot or will not find a way to derail this runaway train toward environmental ruin. At the very least, then, we are all accomplices to the greatest crime in history.