

The Destruction of Biodiversity

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The publication in Paris of the Global Assessment Report on May 6th, 2019, confirmed that we are now living in the sixth largest extinction in 3.8 billion years. The 1,800-page study shows that we and future generation of species are seriously at risk, unless firm action is taken to reverse this trend. The last time such a major extinction of life happened was 65 million years ago when an asteroid crashed into the Yucatan area of Mexico and caused such destruction globally that half the species on earth became extinct.

More than 450 scientists worked on the document over a three-year period. It is the largest and most comprehensive assessment on the health of nature ever published. Reading the document is a chilling experience as it spells out the appalling damage humans have caused to the earth during the past four decades. It also tells us the kind of world we are leaving for future generations of humans and other species to live in.

The report states that the human footprint on our planet is so large now that it is not allowing sufficient space for other species to exist or flourish. The authors believe that one million species are at risk of extinction in the next two to three decades. Consequently, the annihilation of wildlife by human activity is eroding the very foundations of human civilization. The abundance of native species in most major land habitats has fallen by a fifth since 1990. Frogs and amphibians have suffered an horrendous 40 per cent decline. The biomass of wild animals has fallen by a staggering 82 percent.

In recent years, natural ecosystems have lost about half of their area, mainly to create farmland. During the 1980s and 1990, I watched the destruction of the tropical forests in Mindanao in the Philippines. Destroying the forest made enormous profits for rich local loggers and provided cheap timber for us in rich

countries in order to build houses or furniture. It opened land for farming as the population grew, however, because of typhoons and monsoons, good soil was washed away in storms in a few years, leaving barren hillsides.

The report found that the impact of the meat industry is huge. The grazing area for cattle accounts for 25 per cent of the world's ice-free land. It also accounts for 18 per cent of global greenhouse gas emissions.

In the oceans, nearly a third of coral reefs around the world have been destroyed in four decades. Incredibly, a third of marine mammals are also threatened. At least 680 vertebrate species have been driven to extinction in the past 400 years. Even species that humans' value as sources of our food are also threatened. The lack of genetic diversity within species is providing less protection against diseases. It is also affording fewer options for breeding plants and animals that will be better able to adapt to our changing climate.

Fishing is devastating the oceans. Only 3 percent of the world's oceans are free from human pressure. Industrial fishing takes place on huge scale, globally. One third of fish populations are overexploited.

Plastic rubbish has risen tenfold since 1980. This affects 86 per cent of marine turtles, 43 per cent of marine mammals and 44 per cent of seabirds. Along with climate change, the authors warn that this is pushing the world into a more hostile state.¹

In the encyclical, *Laudato Si' On Care For Our Common Home*, Pope Francis tells us that "the earth's resources are also being plundered because of a short-sighted approach to the economy, commerce and production, the loss of forests and woodlands entails the loss of species which may constitute extremely important resources in the future, not only for food but also for curing diseases

¹ Jonathan Watts, 'Academic to report on natural world's value but campaigners demand action,' *The Guardian*, May 7th, 2019, page 8.

and other uses.” (Ls. 32). The pope goes to write that “because of us, thousands of species will no longer give glory to God by their very existence, nor convey their message to us. We have no such right.” (Ls 33). Pope Francis makes an extraordinary statement that “all creatures are moving forward with us and through us towards a common point of arrival, which is God.” (Ls 83). As Christians need to educate themselves about this new teaching, advocate for policies which protect other species and take action to stem the tide of extinction.

As religious people we need a Requiem ritual for those creatures which are facing extinction. That liturgy should create the space where we can express our pain, sadness and culpability for the loss of these wonderful creatures which God has created over millions of years. It would also invite religious people will to take the destruction of biodiversity much more seriously.