



**ANALYSIS
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THE GREAT ECOLOGY CHALLENGE

Since the Earth Summit in Rio in 1992, the environment has become a major concern for people across the world. Climate warming, the pollution of freshwater reserves, the destruction of habitats and the disappearance of many living species have made us realise that far from freeing humankind from nature, our extraordinary economic growth has given us an unprecedented responsibility towards it.

We can no longer ignore the evidence of environmental erosion : the destruction of the primary tropical forests, home to over half of the planet's species; the shrinking of the natural habitats due to demographic and urban growth; the slow demise of coral reefs, nearly one-third of which have already disappeared or suffered serious damage; the sharp decline in the numbers of large wild mammals.

The staggering pace of scientific and industrial progress over the last two centuries has placed us on a direct collision course with biodiversity, the product of millions of years of evolution. Species have always disappeared as a result of the natural renewal of ecosystems. Yet the current rate of extinction is estimated to be up to a thousand times higher than normal. Today, we know that nearly 16,000 known species are directly endangered, and some scientists fear that modern societies may be triggering the sixth great wave of extinction since life first appeared.

Our generation is probably the last with the power to stop this destruction before we reach a point of no return. The international community has done a great deal of work since the Convention on Biological Diversity came into force in 1993. Yet it is fair to question how effective it has been, since biodiversity continues to recede. The goal set by the international conference in The Hague in 2002 of stopping the decline of global biodiversity by 2010 looks unattainable unless we act now.

We know enough to start taking action. Yet we do not yet have a gauge of all the potential consequences of the degradation of biodiversity. That is why I suggested at the international conference Biodiversity : Science and Governance, organised by France at UNESCO headquarters in January, that a



global network of biodiversity experts be set up. I am pleased to see that the world's leading scientists have since backed my proposal.

The aim of the network would be to increase our knowledge of biodiversity and establish a scientific basis from which we can help the international community meet its responsibilities. This means mobilising all the scientific disciplines concerned, and calls for broad-based international co-operation, which could be achieved under the aegis of the United Nations Convention on Biological Diversity. This effort would focus on the need to reinforce global environmental governance, something France tirelessly campaigns for, in particular with its proposal to create a UN Environment Organisation, which will be discussed by the world's heads of government at the UN summit in New York this September.

The global network of biodiversity experts should work on a number of points. The first is to extend the inventory of life on Earth. Barely 1.5 million species have been identified out of an estimated total of 5 to 30 million. This shows just how little knowledge we have. The second task is to understand the dynamics of ecosystems. Scientists are only just beginning to fathom the extreme complexity of relations between the different species and between species and their environment. This interdependence is the key to the fragile balance of each ecosystem and the entire biosphere. Humans cannot isolate themselves from it. This complexity, knowledge of has been popularised by E.O. Wilson's remarkable work at Harvard University, is one reason why we have taken so long to become aware of the problem. The final task is to study the impact of climate change on biodiversity.

There is a precedent : the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change. This group's work since 1988 has brought about a scientific consensus on climate warming, which many initially refused to accept. An expert consensus such as this is just what political leaders need to justify action on biodiversity.

Protecting biodiversity, like combating climate change, calls for radical changes in attitudes and lifestyles. France is resolutely pursuing this objective with the inclusion of an environment charter in its Constitution this year. This charter establishes biodiversity as a right and a collective heritage. It embraces the precautionary principle, which is vital when dealing with the deterioration of the living environment. To respond to the urgency of the situation, we have to set up the pace of action.

With our growing awareness that we are part of the biosphere and dependent on it as a whole, our civilisation has come to appreciate its fragility. Now is the time to embark on the path of responsible ecology, and to include in our quest for economic and human progress an awareness of our duties to nature and our responsibilities to future generations. We can do this if we all act together.

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