

Biodiversity: More than half of vertebrates wiped out since 1970

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The number of vertebrates (mammals, birds, fish and reptiles) declined by more than 60 percent between 1970 and 2014, according to a report released by the World Wildlife Fund (WWF) and the Zoological Society of London.

Complex multi-cellular life has existed for around 500 million years. Palaeontologists say that, in that time, there have been five mass extinction events – “mass” events being those in which more than 75 percent of species disappear.

We’re all familiar with at least the Cretaceous-Paleogene extinction event (the one that killed the dinosaurs), which occurred 66 million years ago. The other four all occurred more than 200 million years ago, when life was much less complex. Save for the odd asteroid collision, mass extinction events are usually the products of major geological phenomena.

We are now in the sixth mass extinction. It is unprecedented because it is the first caused by the social organisation of one species – homo sapiens. However, it’s not that humanity is the enemy of the environment. The capitalist system – ruled by a tiny minority of our species – is destroying both people and the planet.

For almost the entire existence of modern humans (approximately 200,000 years), we lived in harmony with the natural world. Although some earlier human societies damaged their environment, the global impact bordered on negligible.

Compare this to the levels of destruction that commenced with the birth of industrial capitalism 200-300 years ago. Capitalist society is not organised to benefit humanity (or to protect the natural world that sustains us). It is all about exploiting people and the environment to make capitalist profits.

But the rampant exploitation of capitalism now has even NGOs like the WWF (a business-friendly organisation) sounding the alarm that this extreme destruction of animal life – which we rely on for everything from food to medical treatments – is also threatening our own existence.

The WWF’s Living Planet report demonstrates how. Here are two alarming statistics: approximately 87 percent of all flowering plant species are pollinated by animals, which means the huge loss of animal life is already affecting plant life. And crops that are partially pollinated by animals account for 35 percent of global food production.

The principal reasons for wildlife loss cited in the report are land clearing, unsustainable agriculture and chemical pollution, particularly of the oceans. Unfortunately though, the WWF says the consumption habits of ordinary people are to blame.

But since when do working class people (who always bear the brunt of environmental destruction)

have any say over what land gets cleared, what gets produced or how society's energy is generated? When do the bulk of people get a say over any of the major decisions that impact our world?

In the last 40 years, ever more power has been put in the hands of huge corporations - agribusiness, oil and gas, urban developers - that make decisions behind closed doors with no input from the rest of the population.

And with the rise of the global far right, their authoritarianism and rampant science denialism, capitalism is taking an even more destructive turn. There's never been a more pressing time to build a radical alternative to capitalism.

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P.S.

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