

## #VoiceForThePlanet – a perspective on Earth Day 2020

*Today marks the 50<sup>th</sup> Earth Day. Wonderfully millions of people and organisations all over the world, are already taking positive action for the planet. But the truth is that this is insufficient, and we remain bang on track for catastrophic nature loss and climate change. We are winning battles but losing the war. And losing the war will mean hundreds of millions of all living creatures, including humans, dying. Strangely we know how to win this war – we must tackle climate change and restore nature. The path is straightforward. We just need to choose to do it. But doing so requires a massive shift in the will of global leaders to do the right thing for the planet which is sadly almost completely absent today. So we now need to need to unify today's excellent but disparate campaigns, to collaborate and help a billion people raise their #VoiceforThePlanet. Please join with us to build a massive, collective voice that political leaders simply cannot ignore.*

### **Winning battles but losing the war**

In helping WWF UK build their new strategy in 2018 we heard Tanya Steele, the newly arrived CEO, say, “the trouble is, we are winning battles but losing the war”. Indeed. WWF, with China, have arguably saved the Panda from extinction. And they are doing wonders to protect other iconic fauna. Elsewhere and thanks to myriad of conservationists and their supporters, the Humpback Whale has been saved from near certain extinction and you are now far more likely to see 20 of the 21 species of Albatross gliding over the waves that hide them. These and many other examples like them are the triumphant battles in an otherwise bleak and foreboding war.

Since the first Earth Day, 50 years ago today, the abundance of nature on our planet has decline by 60%<sup>1</sup>. In human terms, this is the equivalent of every human dying in North America, South America, Africa, Europe, China and Oceania. This is something that would be deemed wholly unacceptable and barbaric were it human populations being lost, but when it only concerns nature, we seem to look the other way. Similarly, since 1970 atmospheric carbon dioxide levels have grown from 325 ppm to 411 ppm. Even in the last decade they have continued to grow by an average of 1.5% per year. To reach the Paris target of limiting global warming to 1.5 degrees we would need to reduce levels by 7.6%<sup>2</sup> each year over the next decade.

The cause in both cases is our human activity, which has beyond scientific doubt, caused climate change, nature loss and grotesque pollution of our air, water and land.

### **Catastrophic nature loss and climate change**

Humans, are able to live on this planet only because it provides the right habitat for us to do so - air, food, water and appropriate warmth. The UN's Sustainable Development Goals, arguably the best shared definition of the world we desire in 2030, when cleverly ordered<sup>3</sup> show that the biosphere-oriented goals underpin society, which itself underpins the economy. Put simply, if we destroy our habitat, then we won't have society. And without society we will not have an economy.

And if this weren't enough on its own, there are other questions and lines of argument for action. What is our moral responsibility to the life of other forms of life? Can we survive without the mental and spiritual benefits of nature? Nature also protects us. As Time magazine put it succinctly earlier this month, “want to stop the next pandemic? Start protecting wildlife habitats<sup>4</sup>”.

<sup>1</sup> WWF / ZSL Living Planet Report - [https://www.wwf.org.uk/sites/default/files/2018-10/LPR2018\\_Full%20Report.pdf](https://www.wwf.org.uk/sites/default/files/2018-10/LPR2018_Full%20Report.pdf)

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2019/nov/26/united-nations-global-effort-cut-emissions-stop-climate-chaos-2030>

<sup>3</sup> Prof. Johan Rockstrom - <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=e-dwko8L1E8>

<sup>4</sup> <https://time.com/5817363/wildlife-habitats-disease-pandemics/>

And yet we stubbornly remain on track for catastrophic nature loss and climate change. Many say we are already living in the earth's Sixth Mass Extinction<sup>5</sup> event. Each of the previous five in the Earth's 4.5Bn years were caused by climatic events triggered by meteorites or volcanoes, yet this extinction is both impressively and depressingly caused by us in the brief period since industrialisation. According to the UN<sup>6</sup>, humans are transforming Earth's natural landscapes so dramatically that as many as one million plant and animal species are now at risk of extinction. 'Unless nations step up their efforts to protect what natural habitats are left, they could witness the disappearance of 40 percent of amphibian species, one-third of marine mammals and one-third of reef-forming corals. More than 500,000 land species, the report said, do not have enough natural habitat left to ensure their long-term survival.

Climate change and nature loss are interconnected. Lose the forest and the oceanic algal blooms soaking up carbon dioxide and our climate warms at a faster rate. If the climate warms, as was published in Nature and reported in the New York Times<sup>7</sup> earlier this month, then "wildlife collapse from climate change is predicted to hit suddenly and sooner." The scientists say we are on a cliff edge which comes within the next 10 years. So will we be lemmings or not?

### ***A straightforward solution – just choose to do it***

The solution to avoid going over the cliff is straightforward. This may sound trite but in many ways it is true. The science is done. We know what we need to do to halt human induced climate change and nature depletion. Halting climate change fundamentally requires us to consume less fossil fuels (travel, heat, light and in our consumption habits) and to eat a more balanced diet. Reversing nature's loss requires us to make better choices about land use (e.g. don't cut down the Amazon to plant soy), to stop over-exploitation of natural resources (e.g. don't eat cod to extinction) and to stop the illegal wildlife trade and transfer of invasive species around the world. At a local level, these aims can be translated into a few phrases that can be interpreted by any individual (e.g. Change my energy, change what I eat, change how I travel, change what I buy, etc). But individual change is hard and so we need to make it far easier for individuals to do the right thing.

As with any 'choice' there are of course trade-offs to be made, things that will require change and difficulties to overcome. But let's make no mistake. There is a straightforward solution available, we just need to choose to do it.

But we are currently failing as a species to make the right choice, for the planet and for ourselves. As Stanford ecologist Paul Ehrlich simply puts it: "In pushing other species to extinction, humanity is busy sawing off the limb on which it perches." Our failure to do so is an example of the irrationality of human behaviour, our willingness to 'discount the future'. Today we do not care enough and are, as Greta rightly tells us, passing the buck to future generations. We are placing individual or national self-interest above the very visible 'tragedy of the commons'. Similarly, today what we collectively hold as valuable is wrong. Mark Carney, formerly the Governor of the Bank of England shared in the Economist this month "Increasingly, to be valued, an asset or activity has to be in a market. For example, Amazon is one of the world's most valuable companies, yet the Amazon region appears on no ledger until it is stripped of its foliage and converted to farmland. The price of everything is becoming the value of everything".

### ***If people care, global leaders will make the right choice***

Making the right choice for the longer term requires bold courageous leadership. It is being willing to say "this is the right thing to do, for us and the planet because otherwise there will be catastrophe that makes COVID 19 look like a walk in the park".

But how to encourage global leaders to do the right thing? There are many brilliant campaigns out there, from those like Earth Day and WWF and Greenpeace who were the early canaries in the mineshaft to the new kids on the block such as Greta's School Strikes and Extinction Rebellion. While helpful, there is also a challenge.

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<sup>5</sup> [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Holocene\\_extinction](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Holocene_extinction)

<sup>6</sup> <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/05/06/climate/biodiversity-extinction-united-nations.html>

<sup>7</sup> <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/04/15/climate/wildlife-population-collapse-climate-change.html>

The campaigns, however independently brilliant and inspiring, are atomised and as a result are fragmenting audiences (e.g. active activists from the mainstream) and often fragmenting topics (e.g. solving an aspect of climate change while, inadvertently, harming nature). Self-interest and survival also plays a part. For example, while all of the climate and environmental focus and action groups ultimately want the same thing, they also need to attract ‘their’ audience and preserve ‘their’ organisation to the detriment sometimes of the real purpose. From a campaign perspective, perversely, it is easier to continue to win the occasional battle – and survive – rather than come together to win the war once and for all.

The result is that global leaders, both individually and collectively, are unlikely today to choose to do the right thing for nature and the planet because they are not yet hearing the collective cry of their people demanding them to do so on their behalf.

### ***A powerful #VoiceForThePlanet***

#VoiceForThePlanet brings together the atomised campaigns under one umbrella or chapeau. As #MeToo has so successfully achieved with another pervasive and atomised challenge, sexual harassment, #VoiceForThePlanet will do for planetary and therefore human health.

The #VoiceForThePlanet coalition was neutrally convened by the Global Shapers and Future Agenda and launched quietly at the World Economic Forum in January 2019. The coalition now represents over 225 civil society NGOs in 115 countries and continues to grow. As ever, it is the result of the efforts of many.

#VoiceForThePlanet will harness the global voice of individuals and subsequently share that with global leaders at a series of key conferences. These were expected to take place in 2020 but will now likely go-ahead in 2021. The major decision points are the UN CBD (the Convention on Biological Diversity which will take place in Kunming, China), the UN Climate COP (Glasgow, Scotland) and before them both the 75<sup>th</sup> UN General Assembly (New York, US). These conferences really matter because they will set worlds ambition and trajectory to 2030. Most scientists are in agreement that if we miss this opportunity, we will then be too late to avert our very own mass extinction.

At VoiceForThePlanet.org individuals are asked to Join, Act and Share. Joining to support the following statement, taking responsible action individually and sharing to encourage others to do the same:

***We need an ambitious new deal for nature and people that sustainably manages our planet, limits global warming to 1.5°C, protects at least 30% of the planet by 2030, and safeguards our natural spaces & species***

Beyond supporting global leaders to do the right thing, the most impactful Individual action usually falls within making choices across 5 broad topic areas:

- How/what I eat – e.g. more plant-based diet, locally and sustainably sourced, etc
- My energy mix – e.g. using less energy; buying from renewable suppliers
- Restoring nature – e.g. cleaning up local areas; ‘wilding’ my garden; community action
- How/what I buy – e.g. buying less, upcycling, reducing waste, sustainably sourced
- How I travel – e.g. more public transport and ‘people power’

The ecological crisis we face is more than climate alone. Key additional aspects like restoring nature and dealing with pollution are neither as firmly on the agenda nor as well understood by many as climate change. This is a huge worry given how poorly humans have (not) responded to climate change thus far. We need to act on each aspect of the ecological crisis now – with passion and with urgency.

If you agree, please choose to join and add your own #VoiceForThePlanet at [VoiceForThePlanet.org](https://VoiceForThePlanet.org).

Thank you.

Written on behalf of #VoiceForThePlanet / if you've any questions and want to get involved please get in touch:

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