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Humans are changing the planet so rapidly that 1 million species are now at risk of disappearing forever. Can we survive without them?

By Chrisanne Grisé and Laura Anastasia

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Humans are changing the planet so rapidly that 1 million species are now at risk of disappearing forever. Can we survive without them?

By Chrisanne Grisé and Laura Anastasia
A few years ago, ecologist Brad Lister walked through the Puerto Rican rainforest. He was looking for insects. But something was wrong. He wondered: *Where are all the butterflies?*

It had been 35 years since his last visit. Back then, hundreds of butterflies had flown through the air. And his traps had quickly become covered in all kinds of bugs.

Now Lister caught only a few insects in each trap, if any. He saw almost no butterflies. The scientist could hardly believe it.

“It was clear there had been a catastrophic collapse of the insect population,” Lister recalls.

He decided to investigate. In time, his research showed that 98 percent of the area’s ground insects had disappeared since the 1970s. Scientists studying insects in different locations worldwide have discovered similar losses. One report published last year included a warning. It said insects as a whole might “go down the path of extinction in a few decades.”

As it turns out, insects are not the only living things in trouble. As many as 1 million plant and animal species are now at risk of extinction. That is according to a recent United Nations report. Scientists say that people are to blame.

Farming, logging, and other activities have put more species at risk than ever before in human history. Scientists warn that without intervention, many of those species could die out within decades. Such losses could have a devastating effect on the planet—and on us. Earth’s wide variety of species and ecosystems is essential. It affects the food, clean water, and breathable air that people need to survive.

“We’re at a really important crossroads right now,” explains ecologist Pamela McElwee. She is an author of the U.N. report. “The world will be more or less the same as it is today. Or it could be different. It is up to everyone to decide.”

**WHAT YOU NEED TO KNOW**

**ECOSYSTEM** A community of plants, animals, and other organisms that interact with each other and their physical environment, including things like rocks and weather. Each part depends directly or indirectly on the other parts.

**ENDANGERED SPECIES** A plant or animal species that is at risk of extinction in all or most of its natural range. There are three levels: vulnerable, endangered, and critically endangered. Of those levels, vulnerable species are at the lowest risk of dying out completely and endangered species face the next highest risk. Critically endangered species face the greatest risk of all.
Comeback Creatures

These three species almost vanished—but their populations rebounded once humans stepped in to help.

**BALD EAGLE**

In 1963, only about 400 nesting pairs were left in the wild. Why? Use of a pesticide called DDT had poisoned the bald eagle’s food supply. The U.S. government passed protection laws and banned DDT. As a result, 14,000 nesting pairs now live in the contiguous U.S.

**GRAY WOLF**

Decades of hunting nearly killed off the American gray wolf. In 1975, only about 1,000 remained in the contiguous states. The gray wolf received endangered species protections that same year, shielding it from hunting. Its numbers have since grown to about 6,000.

**SEA OTTER**

Trappers hunted sea otters for their fur for centuries. By 1911, when an international treaty was signed to protect the species, fewer than 2,000 of the animals were left. Today, the sea otter population has rebounded to about 125,000, but the animals are still endangered.

Earth’s wide variety of species is essential to the food, water, and air that people need to survive.

As the human population has grown, so has its reach. People have made major changes to about 75 percent of the world’s land area. That is according to the U.N. report.

Nearly every ecosystem has been affected. That includes savannas in Africa and rainforests in South America. Roads and cities have replaced wetlands. Overfishing, tourism, and pollution threaten coral reefs and other marine life. Illegal hunting has endangered animals such as rhinos, tigers, and elephants.

Global warming is making the problem worse. That is the rise in Earth’s average temperature. Longer periods of drought, melting sea ice, and rising ocean levels are changing habitats around the world. Those changes are making it harder for plant and animal species to survive in the natural habitats that still exist.

A lot of damage has already been done, scientists say. Global populations of mammals, fish, birds, reptiles, and amphibians have declined by 60 percent since the 1970s. That is according to a 2018 report by the World Wildlife Fund.

Future losses could be even worse, the U.N. report warns. Forty...
percent of amphibian species and one-third of marine mammals are in jeopardy. So are one-third of reef-forming corals and about 10 percent of insects. In addition, more than 500,000 land species do not have enough natural habitat left for long-term survival, scientists say.

**A Chain Reaction**
Losing even just a few species can throw off entire ecosystems. Each plays a role, such as predator or prey. Each role affects other species. For example, a food source for many creatures could become extinct. Then those animals may struggle to find food. Or they may even starve.

Extinctions would also have a serious impact on humans, scientists say. “There are a lot of things ecosystems do that humans are utterly dependent on,” says McElwee. Trees and other plants remove pollutants from the air. Wetlands filter and purify drinking water. Tropical plants and corals are used to make important medicines, including for diseases like cancer.

Large-scale plant and animal losses could also jeopardize humans’ food supply. More than 75 percent of food crops worldwide rely on pollination by animals, such as bees and bats. Many of the animals that people use in agriculture are also threatened. That includes some types of sheep and cattle. And the number of crop species is shrinking. That is worrisome, scientists say. One or more of those species could get wiped out by pests or disease. Then our food production could be devastated.

“Life on Earth is an intricate fabric,” ecologist Sandra M. Díaz has said. She is another author of the U.N. report. “We are threads in that fabric. If the fabric is getting holes and fraying, that affects us all.”

**Saving the Species**
Avoiding extinctions will require a global effort—from both countries and individuals, scientists say. Governments can do their part by cracking down on illegal logging, hunting, and fishing. World leaders also can make a difference by taking steps to limit global warming, the report says. Meanwhile, farmers can contribute by finding more environmentally friendly ways to grow larger amounts of food on less land.

All people can help. That includes kids and teens. People can help by wasting less food, water, and natural resources. Individuals can also use their voices to make a difference, McElwee says. They can demand that governments enact greener policies for how energy is produced and consumed. They can push restaurants to offer smaller portions so less food is wasted. And they can buy from companies that produce goods sustainably.

There is hope, experts say. Past conservation efforts have managed to save some species from the brink of extinction (see “Comeback Creatures,” p. 9). And more than 15 percent of Earth’s land and 7 percent of its oceans are already set aside as nature reserves and wilderness areas. That protects them from certain human activities.

Many experts are urging that such protections be expanded. For example, some conservation groups have called for world leaders to protect 30 percent of land and 30 percent of the oceans.
Tropical plants and corals are used by ecosystems to provide food and other goods. Scientists say, “There are a lot of things that affect us. If the animals struggle to find food, those animals may struggle to find a habitat. If the habitat disappears, the creatures could become extinct. Then, the impact could be devastating. For example, a food source for many farmers, such as bees and bats. Many plants could be devastated. Life on Earth is an intricate fabric, and we are threads in that fabric. If the thread is cut, it affects us all.”

“We are threads in that fabric. If the thread is cut, it affects us all,” McElwee says. “It’s really happening,” McElwee says. “It’s really important to do this fast. We need to take steps to limit global warming, the report says. Meanwhile, there is a lot that can be done on all fronts. And it has to be done fast. “We need to take steps to prevent that final extinction from happening,” McElwee says. “It’s really up to us.”

Write About It! Why should people care about plant and animal species facing extinction? Write an argument essay that encourages people to help protect Earth’s species. Support your reasons with evidence from the text.

They want this to happen by the year 2030. The groups calling for this include the World Wildlife Fund and the United Nations Foundation. Basically, scientists say, more has to be done on all fronts. And it has to be done fast. “We need to take steps to prevent that final extinction from happening,” McElwee says. “It’s really up to us.”

1. Which region is home to the highest number of critically endangered species?
2. The Atlantic Ocean is home to how many critically endangered species?
3. How many addaxes remain in the wild?
4. In which region is the Tulipa akamasica found?
5. Where does the cao-vit gibbon live?
6. Why is the indigo-winged parrot dying off?
7. Which region has more critically endangered species than Oceania but fewer than South America?
8. Which region includes southern Mexico and Central America?
9. How do the numbers of species shown for North America and Oceania compare?
10. How many critically endangered species are found in Asia?
Recent hostilities between the United States and Iran have threatened to spiral into a war. What caused the crisis—and what will happen next?

BY STEPH SMITH

As You Read, Think About: How do past actions influence current events?

Last month, hostilities between the United States and Iran reached a crisis point. The situation became explosive after President Donald Trump ordered the killing of Major General Qassim Suleimani. He was Iran’s top military leader. The two nations are longtime foes. The move brought them close to war.

In January, the U.S. killed Suleimani with a missile fired by an American drone. At the time, Suleimani was leaving an airport in the neighboring nation of Iraq. Iran vowed to take “forceful revenge” for his death. The U.S. then sent 3,500 troops to the Middle East. Tens of thousands of U.S. soldiers were already stationed there.

Days later, Iran fired missiles at military bases in the Middle East that house U.S. troops. No one was killed. Afterward, both U.S. and Iranian leaders said they wanted the clashes to end. But the crisis made people around the world worry: Could the two countries be on the brink of war?
brink of war? Experts say tensions could escalate again.

Why have the U.S. and Iran long been at odds? What set off the recent clashes? And what could it mean for Americans? Keep reading to find out.

**What events led to the current crisis?**

Tensions between the U.S. and Iran go back decades (see “Key Moments,” p. 17). Hostilities increased this past December. That was when a militia aided by Iran fired a rocket at a military base in Iraq. An American who was working there was killed. (Iran provides weapons and money for militias and terrorist groups across the Middle East.)

The U.S. responded by launching airstrikes on an Iranian-backed militia in Iraq and elsewhere. The airstrikes killed 25 fighters and wounded many others. Leaders in Iraq and Iran were outraged. So were many of Iran’s allies in the region. Iraqi protesters then broke into the U.S. embassy in Iraq’s capital. Most of the protesters were members of militias supported by Iran. They burned part of the building. After that, Trump ordered Suleimani’s killing.

**Why did the U.S. target the Iranian general?**

Trump and his supporters say killing Suleimani was necessary to save American lives. The general led a part of the Iranian military that supports militias and terrorist groups in the Middle East. Through those organizations, he planned and...
carried out deadly attacks on enemy forces in the region. That included attacks on U.S. troops.

After Suleimani’s killing, Trump tweeted that the general had “killed or badly wounded thousands of Americans over an extended period of time.” He also said the U.S. had evidence that Suleimani had been planning new attacks on Americans in the Middle East. Trump said Suleimani “should have been taken out many years ago.”

How have people reacted in the U.S.?

U.S. foreign policy experts and officials disagree about whether it was wise to kill Suleimani. Some experts and members of Congress applauded Trump’s decision. The world is safer without “its most accomplished and deadly terrorist,” wrote Michael Doran. Doran is a national security expert. He worked for former President George W. Bush.

But many other experts and U.S. officials disagree. They say targeting the general was extremely risky because Suleimani was highly respected in Iran’s government—and that taking him out was not worth the chance of sparking a war. A top Iranian official called the killing “an act of war.” He vowed to avenge it.

Also, many members of Congress say that the Trump administration has presented little evidence supporting its claim that Suleimani was planning attacks on Americans in the near future.

Most people in the U.S. say they do not want armed conflict with Iran. That is according to a 2019 poll. But after the general’s killing, “the threat of war was real,” says Kelsey Davenport. She is an expert on the U.S. relationship with Iran.

The majority of Americans also believe Suleimani’s killing has made the U.S. less safe. That is according to a separate poll conducted in January.

Why are the U.S. and Iran enemies?

The U.S. and Iran have a history of distrust. That is in part because the U.S. helped overthrow Iran’s democratically elected leader in 1953. Another reason is that the U.S. has long suspected Iran of developing nuclear weapons. That would make Iran a huge threat to U.S. allies in the region.

In 2015, the U.S., the European Union, and five other nations reached a major deal with Iran. Iran agreed to limit its nuclear program. In exchange, the U.S. and its allies lifted sanctions that had devastated Iran’s economy.

Many experts believed the deal was working. But in 2018, Trump pulled the U.S. out of the agreement. He said Iran could not be trusted to uphold it. He reimposed sanctions against Iran. And he later ordered additional economic penalties. Trump’s goal was to force Iran to change its behavior in the Middle East and to make a better deal over its nuclear program. Those actions made Iran’s leaders furious. They insist they had been honoring the agreement.

What does all this mean for the U.S.?

Within days of Suleimani’s death, Iran declared that it would start taking steps that could allow it to produce a nuclear weapon. France, Germany, and the United Kingdom are three of the nations that were part
of the 2015 deal. They have been trying to convince Iran to stick with its original promise. They also want Iran and the U.S. to negotiate a new nuclear agreement.

Iran’s leaders have said their main goal is to get all U.S. forces out of the Middle East. In recent years, American troops have been stationed in Iraq. They are there to help defeat a terrorist group known as the Islamic State, or ISIS. After Suleimani’s killing in Iraq, Iraq’s government voted to kick U.S. troops out of the country. The government said the U.S. should not have launched the strike there. But it is unclear whether U.S. troops will leave Iraq—or when.

For now, the risk of armed conflict with Iran appears to be over. Iran has said it is done retaliating. And Trump has said he is “ready to embrace peace.” However, he did impose additional sanctions on Iran.

Still, the situation remains volatile. Iranian-backed militias in the Middle East could launch attacks of their own. And experts say Iran is likely to take part in cyberwarfare against the U.S. It has done so in the past. In 2013, for example, Iran hacked into the computer systems of some American banks. It caused their services to temporarily shut down. Also, tensions between Iranian and U.S. leaders could easily come to a boil once again.

“Iran has risen,” a top Iranian general declared in a televised address. “The whole world has seen our power,” he said. “We do not consider the conflict with the United States over.”

**Write About It!** Summarize the history of tensions between the U.S. and Iran since 1953. Explain how at least three events have contributed to recent hostilities.

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### KEY MOMENTS

#### Iran and the United States

**1953**

The United Kingdom (U.K.) and the U.S. stage a coup to remove Iran’s democratically elected leader and install a new ruler, known as the shah. The shah lets U.S. and U.K. oil companies access oil in Iran. Later, the U.S. helps Iran develop nuclear power for peaceful purposes.

**1979**

Iranians violently protest the shah’s dictatorial rule. The shah is overthrown in what becomes known as the Iranian Revolution. Religious leaders then form a new government based on strict Islamic values. After the U.S. offers the shah protection, militants seize the U.S. embassy in Iran’s capital, Tehran. Dozens of Americans are taken hostage and held for 444 days. As a result, the U.S. breaks off diplomatic ties with Iran.

**1995**

Concerned that Iran may be building nuclear weapons, the U.S. imposes economic sanctions on Iran. Several years later, the United Nations and the European Union do the same.
Meet four young women who challenged injustice in their communities—and whose actions made lasting impacts on the country.

BY BROOKE ROSS

Alice de Rivera was a math whiz. In 1969, the 13-year-old skipped a grade. She also had earned one of the highest scores on a region-wide math exam. Yet the New York City ninth-grader longed for greater challenges. She wanted to go to nearby Stuyvesant High School. It was known as one of the country's best public schools. Stuyvesant offered a specialized math and science program. However, the school accepted only boys. That was true of many of the top U.S. high schools and universities at the time. Alice knew she had the grades to attend the school. So she asked for an application anyway. She was promptly denied by the school's principal.

With a lawyer's help, Alice filed a lawsuit against the state of New York's Board of Education. The suit claimed that Stuyvesant High School was discriminating against Alice because of her gender. The trial lasted several months. Just as the case was about to be decided, the Board of Education repealed the school's gender restrictions. Stuyvesant High School was founded in 1904. For the first time, it would accept girls!

In the fall of 1969, 13 girls enrolled there. But Alice, who is now a doctor in Maine, was not one of them. That is because her family moved away soon after the trial. Still, Alice's case had a historic impact on education in the United States. Across the country, male-only schools began accepting girls and women. That included some top universities such as Princeton and Yale. And today, more than 50 years after the lawsuit, nearly half of Stuyvesant students are female.
Meet four young women who challenged injustice in their communities—and whose actions made lasting impacts on the country. By Brooke Ross

1969 | Alice de Rivera
She fought against gender discrimination in schools.

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In 1955, Rosa Parks famously refused to give up her bus seat to a white passenger in Montgomery, Alabama. Several months earlier, a 15-year-old high school student took the same brave stance first.

Claudette Colvin had had enough of the racist Jim Crow laws that segregated black people from white people in the South. At the time, African Americans could not eat at most restaurants. They were forced to drink from separate water fountains. And in Montgomery, they had to give their seats to white passengers on public buses.

On March 2, Claudette was sitting on a crowded bus. The driver demanded that she give her seat to a white woman. Claudette refused. She said that it was her constitutional right to sit there. The driver called the police, who arrested her.

Black people in Montgomery had been mistreated like that for years. But Claudette’s rebellion signaled a new spirit. When Parks refused to give up her bus seat later that year, the act sparked the Montgomery bus boycott. African Americans refused to ride city buses until the laws were changed.

Parks’s story is better known today. But Claudette continued to play a huge role in the desegregation of Montgomery’s buses. She was one of the plaintiffs in Browder v. Gayle, a federal court case that challenged the city’s bus policy. The case included Claudette’s testimony. In 1956, it made its way to the U.S. Supreme Court. The Court declared segregation on all public buses unconstitutional.

Today, Claudette is a retired nurse’s aide living in New York City. She is proud of her role in the U.S. civil rights movement.

Tatyana McFadden was born in Russia with a condition that left her paralyzed from the waist down. Her mother was unable to care for her. She left Tatyana at an orphanage when she was just a baby.

In 1994, when Tatyana was a young girl, she was adopted and brought to Maryland. She was underweight and in poor health. Her adoptive mother enrolled her in wheelchair sports. That was to help build her strength. Tatyana took part in everything from basketball to ice hockey. But she found her true talent and passion in wheelchair track and field.
2010 | Constance McMillen
She pushed to expand LGBTQ rights in American schools.

Constance McMillen grew up in Fulton, Mississippi. She dreamed of attending her prom. By the time she was a senior at Itawamba Agricultural High School in 2010, the 18-year-old had come out as gay. She wanted to take her girlfriend to the dance. There had never been an openly gay couple at her public school. Constance asked the principal for permission to go with her girlfriend.

He told Constance that the girls could go to the dance, but not together. He also said they would be thrown out of the event if they were caught slow-dancing or holding hands. In addition, he refused Constance’s request to wear a tuxedo.

Constance knew she was being discriminated against. She turned to the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) for help. The legal rights group sent a letter to Constance’s school. It demanded that same-sex couples be allowed to attend prom. A week later, the Itawamba County School District canceled the dance altogether.

In response, the ACLU sued the school district. The suit argued that the school had violated Constance’s First Amendment right to freedom of expression. The judge in the case agreed. The Itawamba County School District had to pay Constance a settlement. It also created a district-wide policy that protects students from discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation.

Constance did not get to attend her own prom. But she ensured that countless other students after her could attend theirs—with whomever they choose. She strengthened the rights of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and questioning (LGBTQ) students everywhere.

By the time Tatyana was 15, her racing skills had qualified her for the 2004 Paralympic Games. They were held in Athens, Greece. She won two medals at the games.

Back home in the U.S., competing was not so simple. Tatyana went to Atholton High School, in Columbia, Maryland. Officials at her school would not let Tatyana race in track meets against able-bodied runners. They said her racing wheelchair created a safety hazard. They also said it gave her an unfair advantage.

Tatyana was fed up with being blocked from participating. She sued her school district for the right to compete with fellow student athletes. She won.

Her lawsuit paved the way for the 2008 passage of a statewide law that guaranteed all Maryland students with disabilities the right to take part in school sports. And, thanks in part to Tatyana’s lobbying, that legislation became federal law in 2013.

The athlete is now 30 years old. She has won dozens of world championships and marathons. She also has won 17 Paralympic medals. But Tatyana says her greatest achievement is helping ensure that students with disabilities can take part in school sports nationwide.

Write About It! Choose one of the teens from the article to research. Tell her life story in a written biography, graphic novel, movie script, or podcast episode. Include any challenges she faced in her fight for equality.