

Radical plan needed to save Earth's biodiversity

The warning bells are clanging as studies released last week reveal that the Earth's wild creatures and wilderness areas are under severe threat from encroaching human development, writes **Legalbrief**. Efforts to preserve nature are way off what is required, and a 'global deal' in the mould of the Paris climate agreement is needed to bring it back from the brink, the first study, released by the World Wildlife Fund (WWF), warns. A report in **The Independent** notes that populations of mammals, birds, reptiles, amphibians and fish have dropped by 60% in just more than 40 years. To combat this, WWF said there must be a dramatic re-think of the status quo, as conservationists could no longer afford to merely recommend 'more of the same' nature reserves and programmes to save individual species. In its latest *Living Planet* Report, the environmental group singles out over-exploitation of the planet's resources and the food system specifically as the biggest issues that must be addressed. 'Right now the destruction of nature is seen as the price of development, and we cannot continue like that,' Tony Juniper, WWF's executive director, said. **'We are the first generation to know we are destroying our planet and the last one that can do anything about it,'** said Tanya Steele, CE at WWF. 'The collapse of global wildlife populations is a warning sign that nature is dying. But instead of putting the world on life support, we're using a sticking plaster.' However, Professor Ken Norris, director of Science at Zoological Society of London, who helped compile the report, said despite the shocking figures 'all hope is not lost'. 'We have an opportunity to design a new path forward that allows us to co-exist sustainably with the wildlife we depend upon,' he said. 'We need a new international agreement, a new global deal for nature, to enable countries to get at the root causes of this,' said Juniper.

Australia's east coast has been compared to the Amazon as a 'deforestation front' in the new report, that underscores the threat to populations of koalas and other native species. A report in **The Guardian** notes that the *Living Planet* report, produced by WWF every second year for the past 20 years, says global populations of vertebrate species have declined 60% since 1970. **But koala numbers have disappeared at a much faster rate – more than 20% a decade – to the extent they could disappear from the wild in New South Wales by 2050.** The report assessed 11 deforestation hotspots, where broadscale clearing had occurred at problematic levels since 2010, and where deforestation was expected to continue in the next decade. Eastern Australia was the only location in the developed world to make the list. 'It is a wake-up call for our east coast to appear alongside notorious forest destruction hotspots such as the Amazon, Congo basin, Sumatra and Borneo,' said the CE of WWF Australia, Dermot O'Gorman. 'The plight of koalas is matched by alarming declines for many other uniquely Australian species who are losing their forest homes.' 'Stronger forest protection laws are crucial,' the report quotes him as saying.

More than 70% of Earth's last untouched wilderness lies in the territories of just five countries, most of which have alarmed environmentalists with their lukewarm response to climate change. According to a **Mail & Guardian Online** report, this is according to the second study released last week, which found that nearly three-quarters of the wilderness that's left is in Australia, Brazil, Canada, Russia and the US. True wild spaces – land and sea areas mostly unaffected by humanity's explosive expansion and appetite for food and natural resources – now cover just a quarter of the planet. These places are refuges for thousands of endangered species and provide some defences against the devastating weather events brought about by climate change. **'A few countries own a lot of this untouched land and they have a massive responsibility to keep the last of the wild,'** said James Watson, professor of conservation science at the University of Queensland and the lead author of the new research. Russia is vague about its conservation commitments and President Vladimir Putin suggested last year that climate change was not caused by humans. President Donald Trump has said the US was leaving the Paris deal on climate change, and Brazil last week elected a right-winger who has pledged to rescind legal protections for the Amazon rain forest. Scientists called for greater legislation and reform at global finance initiatives to protect unspoilt areas.

A plan to turn a huge tract of pristine Antarctic ocean into the world's biggest sanctuary has been rejected, throwing the future of one of the Earth's most important ecosystems into doubt. According to a report in **The Guardian**, environmental groups said Russia, China and Norway had played a part in blocking the proposal, with the other 22 members of the Commission for the Conservation of Antarctic Marine Living Resources (CCAMLR), the organisation set up to protect Antarctic waters, backing the proposal. The 1.8m km² reserve – five times the size of Germany – would have banned all fishing in a vast area of the Weddell Sea and parts of the Antarctic peninsula, safeguarding species including penguins, killer whales, leopard seals and blue whales. **Experts said it would also have played a key role in tackling climate change, as the seas around the Antarctic soak up huge amounts**

of carbon dioxide from the atmosphere. But following days of talks in Tasmania, the CCAMLR rejected the plan, which needed unanimous agreement to pass. Frida Bengtsson of Greenpeace's Protect the Antarctic campaign said: 'Twenty-two delegations came here to negotiate in good faith but, instead, serious scientific proposals for urgent marine protection were derailed by interventions which barely engaged with the science.' The failure to create new protected zones in the Antarctic Ocean comes amid increasing evidence of humans' devastating impact. Last week leading scientists warned that people have wiped out 60% of wild animal populations since 1970, with potentially devastating consequences for the future of humanity. Last month, the UN warned there were only 12 years left to prevent climate catastrophe.

On a more hopeful note, scientists launched a vast project last week to map the genetic code of all 1.5m known species of complex life on earth, aiming to complete the work within a decade. According to an **SABC News** report, they described the Earth BioGenome Project (EBP) as 'the next moonshot for biology' after the Human Genome Project, a 13-year \$3bn endeavour to map human DNA which was completed in 2003. The EBP is expected to cost \$4.7bn and **'will ultimately create a new foundation for biology to drive solutions for preserving biodiversity and sustaining human societies,'** said Harris Lewin, a professor at the University of California and chair of the EBP. 'Having the roadmap, the blueprints ... will be a tremendous resource for new discoveries, understanding the rules of life, how evolution works, new approaches for the conservation of rare and endangered species, and ... new resources for researchers in agricultural and medical fields,' he told a briefing in London. This plan will draw in major research efforts from across the world, including a US-led project aiming to sequence the genetic code of all 66 000 vertebrates, a Chinese project to sequence 10 000 plant genomes, and the Global Ant Genomes Alliance, which aims to sequence around 200 ant genomes.

The world must thrash out a new deal for the environment over the next two years or humans could be the first species to document their own extinction, the UN's biodiversity chief has warned. Ahead of a key international conference to discuss the collapse of ecosystems, Cristiana Pa[■]ca Palmer said people in all countries need to put pressure on their governments to draw up ambitious global targets by 2020 to protect the insects, birds, plants and mammals that are vital for global food production, clean water and carbon sequestration. A report in **The Guardian** notes that Pa[■]ca Palmer is executive director of the UN Convention on Biological Diversity – the world body responsible for maintaining the natural life support systems on which humanity depends. **Its 196 member states will meet in Sharm el Sheikh, Egypt, this month to start discussions on a new framework for managing the world's ecosystems and wildlife.** This will kick off two years of negotiations, which Pa[■]ca Palmer hopes will culminate in an ambitious new global deal at the next conference in Beijing in 2020. Conservationists are desperate for a biodiversity accord that will carry the same weight as the Paris Climate Agreement. But so far, this subject has received scant attention even though many scientists say it poses at least an equal threat to humanity.