

UN meeting on saving species opens in Japan

October 18 2010, By MALCOLM FOSTER , Associated Press Writer



In this undated photo provided by arthowardphotography.com, a deep sea coral reef is seen from a four-man submersible more than 1,000 feet down in the Atlantic Ocean about 50 miles off the southeastern coast of the United States. An international conference gets under way Monday Oct. 18, 2010, in Japan that aims to preserve the diversity of plants and animals in the face of pollution, habitat loss and overexploitation of resources. (AP Photo/arthowardphotography.com)

(AP) -- Delegates from more than 190 nations kicked off a U.N. conference Monday aimed at ensuring the survival of diverse species and ecosystems threatened by pollution, exploitation and habitat encroachment.

But the two-week marathon talks of the U.N. Convention on Biological Diversity face some of the same divisions between rich and poor nations over what actions to take that have bogged down global climate

negotiations.

Scientists warn that unless we start doing more to protect species, extinctions will spike and the intricately interconnected natural world will be damaged with devastating consequences.

"We're on the verge on the major extinction spasm," said Russ Mittermeier, president of Conservation International and a field biologist who has spent decades studying primates. "Healthy ecosystems are the underpinnings of human development."

If one part of the complex network of [living organisms](#) disappears - like bees, which perform the critical role of pollination and whose numbers are falling - the whole system can collapse, scientists argue.

Delegates gathering in Nagoya, 170 miles (270 kilometers) west of Tokyo, for the convention's 10th meeting since it was born at the Earth Summit in 1992 will be asked to set 20 measurable targets for the next decade to try to slow or halt these trends.

"We are now close to a tipping point, that is, we are about to reach a threshold beyond which biodiversity loss will be irreversible, and may cross that threshold in the next 10 years, if we do not make proactive efforts," said Ryu Matsumoto, Japan's minister of environment, in a speech to open the meeting.

One of the most attention-getting issues is a proposal to set aside vast tracts of land and ocean as protected areas, although developing nations don't want this to undercut their prospects for economic development.

Another contentious issue will be trying to create a legal structure to equitably share access and benefits from genetic resources, such as plants that have medicinal value - long a sore point among developing

countries.

For example, the rosy periwinkle, a plant native to Madagascar, produces two cancer-fighting substances. Western drug companies have grown the plants and profited from them, but little of the money has returned to Madagascar. Developing countries argue they should receive a share of the benefits.

The biodiversity convention doesn't have a particularly good track record. It has failed to reach global goals set in 2002 to make improvements in protecting biodiversity by this year.

Scientists estimate that the Earth is losing species 100 to 1,000 times the historical average. They warn that's pushing the Earth toward its sixth big extinction phase, the greatest since the dinosaurs were wiped out 65 million years ago.

Mittermeier said that in his field, of the 669 different kinds of primates, 49 percent are threatened, largely because of habitat destruction and hunting.

"That's indicative of a real extinction risk," he said.

Under one of the 20 proposed goals for 2020, delegates will seek to agree on a percentage of land and ocean to be designated protected areas, which can range from a strict nature reserve to an area managed for sustainable use of natural resources.

The draft text of the final agreement calls for the land percentage to be raised to 15 or 20 percent, up from about 13 percent now. But no specific target has surfaced for oceans, of which less than 1 percent are currently protected.

But even if governments agree on a global figure, implementing the plan is bound to encounter plenty of hurdles, including businesses who don't want to give up access to resources.

Some 193 governments have joined the biodiversity convention. Only three have not ratified it: the United States, Andorra and the Holy See.

Host country Japan, meanwhile, will be looking to this conference as a chance to portray itself as a protector of biodiversity after helping kill off many of the measures at the CITES, or Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species, meeting earlier this year that would have limited the trade in tuna, sharks and other marine species. Tokyo has also come under harsh criticism by environmental groups for its whaling program.

"It's a chance for the Japanese government to show that Japan can play a leadership role in marine and biodiversity issues," said Wakao Hanaoka, an ocean campaigner for Greenpeace.

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Citation: UN meeting on saving species opens in Japan (2010, October 18) retrieved 15 July 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2010-10-species-japan.html>

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