

# Mass extinction of species has begun

23 February 2006

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On March 9, world-renowned environmentalist Professor Norman Myers will deliver a lecture at Macquarie University in Sydney, announcing the beginnings of the largest mass extinction in 65 million years and discussing what can be done to prevent it.

Myers argues that we are destroying the Earth's biodiversity so rapidly that we are witnessing the opening phase of a mass extinction of species, one of only six such events in the Earth's entire history.

Moreover, a grand-scale loss of species will not be the full story, Myers says. The current biotic crisis is grossly depleting the capacity of evolution to generate replacement species within a period of less than five million years. The ecological costs and hence the economic costs could prove to be profound for a period of at least 20 times longer than humans have been humans.

Fortunately there is some better news in the form of a conservation strategy that prioritises "biodiversity hotspots" - areas with exceptional concentrations of species found nowhere else and facing exceptional threat of habitat destruction. Some 33 such hotspots - including two in Australia - contain the last remaining habitats of at least half of Earth's land surface. We could safeguard the hotspots for as little as \$1 billion per year. To put this sum into perspective, recall that the commercial value of plant-based medicines and pharmaceuticals totals at least \$60 billion per year.

Professor Norman Myers is a visiting fellow of the Green College at Oxford University. He has been a senior advisor to organisations such as the United Nations, the World Bank, the US White House, scientific academies in a dozen countries, and numerous Japanese corporations. Myers has publicised his work in more than 250 scholarly papers, plus 300 popular articles and 17 books (sales of these books, over one million copies).

In the late 1980s, Myers controversially estimated

the rate of species extinction to be 50 species per day, compared to the "natural" extinction rate of roughly one species every 3-5 years. Although his findings were severely criticised at first, most scientists have eventually come to accept them.

Professor Norman Myers' 2006 tour on biodiversity conservation is supported by Humane Society International's 'Extinction Denied' program and the Australian Government.

Source: Macquarie University

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