



IUCN  
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## Planet at the crossroads

We live in a time of tremendous change, the nature and extent of which is the subject of intense debate and attention around the world. At the heart of this debate is the clash of immediate human needs with their long-term impacts on the planet's capacity to support life.

With a timeframe of 15 years, the world has committed to deliver the Sustainable Development Goals – an ambitious agenda for improving human living conditions for all. There is a real sense of urgency in this call to action, as many believe that current trends are not sustainable and that there is a closing window of opportunity to effect meaningful change in Humanity's trajectory. Our future will be decided by the choices we make now.

Today we are some 7.3 billion people on Earth and the UN estimates that, under a medium growth scenario, we will be more than 8.4 billion by 2030. Over half the world's population is already living in urban areas, increasingly disconnected from the complex systems of Nature and the biodiversity that keep us all alive.

Shifting patterns of global wealth and economic growth over the past 15 years have led to important increases in economic wellbeing, lifting hundreds of millions of people from poverty. However change is complex. In addition to the type of progress we all applaud, such as poverty reduction and improved maternal health, other problems persist or grow steadily worse. The benefits of development are not shared equitably, the gap between rich and poor is widening, and economic growth is occurring at the expense of ecological integrity. We can expect more of this to happen over the next 15 years, in ways that simultaneously bring hope yet further strain the planet's biodiversity and its capacity to support human needs and expectations.

IUCN believes that a steady increase in global wellbeing can only be achieved through an enhanced understanding of the planet's complex life support systems and the predominant global trends currently acting upon them – urbanisation, economic growth, burgeoning consumption, disappearing biodiversity, wealth inequality, climate change, population growth, and so on. Time is running out for humanity to find ways of progressing that safeguard and reinforce the natural world that sustains us. In one form or another, Nature will most likely go on, so the relevant question is: to what extent will healthy, prosperous and secure societies continue to be a part of the story, and how much of the greater community of life will persist?

The current debate is framed by two competing narratives. One is a pessimistic view of our future which claims that it is already too late to avoid catastrophe,



and therefore we must now focus on survival and recovery. This leaves people in despair. The other is a stubborn optimism arguing that Humanity has faced and overcome many great challenges in the past and will continue to do so. This risks indifference and denial.

There is, however, an emerging viable alternative – one that embraces the reality that we live in a world of complex, interdependent systems and acknowledges that changes to these systems can either enhance resilience or result in greater instability and uncertainty. This alternative future has been given expression by the international community through various declarations, including The World Charter for Nature, Agenda 21, The Earth Charter, and the U.N. General Assembly resolutions on Harmony with Nature. Collectively, they point to the need for profound transformations in our patterns of production and consumption, and recognition that every form of life has value regardless of its worth to human beings.

The alternative approach stresses that nature conservation and human progress are not mutually exclusive. Facing tremendous forces of transformation such as climate change and dramatic socioeconomic inequality across the world, there are credible and accessible political, economic, cultural and technological choices that can promote general welfare in ways that support and even enhance our planet's natural assets.

To inform these choices, IUCN has been aligning conservation efforts all over the world around three solid lines of work: valuing and conserving Nature's diversity, advancing effective and equitable governance of the use of Nature, and deploying Nature-based solutions to climate, food and development challenges. The approach that is emerging from our collective efforts demonstrates that Nature is not an obstacle to human aspirations, but rather an essential partner, offering valuable contributions towards all our endeavours.

For the alternative path to be credible and viable, we need new partnerships across the planet, between governments, NGOs, conservationists, scientists, consumers, producers, urban planners, entrepreneurs, grassroots and indigenous organisations and financial backers. Each partner holds a vital piece of the puzzle – the knowledge, the tools, the resources. We need to bring these pieces together, and collectively complete the greatest puzzle ever attempted: to secure Nature's support systems so that Humanity and the greater community of life may continue to prosper on Earth. This is our collective challenge for the next 15 years, and this is the invitation that the 2016 IUCN Congress is offering to the world.