

## More than 570 Experts from 97 Countries Urge United Nations to Strengthen Freshwater Biodiversity Protections

*Humanity Faces Catastrophic Losses of Aquatic Species and Habitats  
World leaders must prioritize urgent and targeted actions  
to protect and restore freshwater ecosystems and respect the rights of indigenous and  
marginalised communities disproportionately affected by these losses*

October 11, 2021

To: Honorable Elizabeth Maruma Mrema, Executive Secretary, UN Biodiversity Convention  
Honorable Francis Ogwal and Honorable Basile Van Havre,  
Co-Chairs of Post-2020 Global Biodiversity Framework Working Group  
Delegates to the Conference of the Parties to the Convention on Biological Diversity

As scientists, engineers, researchers, practitioners, and indigenous and community leaders with expertise in ecology, hydrology, engineering, agriculture, fisheries, energy, economics, environmental planning, public health, law, and indigenous rights, we the undersigned 573 signatories from 97 countries write to highlight the alarming loss of freshwater biodiversity and urge you at the Fifteenth Meeting of the Conference of the Parties to the Convention on Biological Diversity to take actions to protect and restore inland waters, freshwater flows, and aquatic habitats and species that are vital to humanity and planetary health.

The Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD) recognises and clearly establishes that biodiversity is fundamental to human well-being and a healthy planet, and that biodiversity is deteriorating worldwide at a rate that is projected to worsen. Yet, the Post-2020 Global Biodiversity Framework for action and other cross-cutting multilateral agreements and related programmes fail to adequately recognise and prioritise the specific goals, targets, and implementation guidance necessary for protecting freshwater ecosystems as distinct from those for protecting life on land and sea. **We urge you to treat freshwater ecosystems with the same respect and attention given to terrestrial and marine systems.** Indeed, meeting the terrestrial and marine biodiversity goals in the Post-2020 Framework depends on protecting freshwater resources that play critical roles in sustaining these ecosystems.

It is often said that water is life. Our rivers, streams, lakes, and wetlands are teeming with an amazing array of aquatic life. Covering less than 1% of the Earth's surface, freshwater ecosystems are home to more than 10% of all species, and they are also vital to terrestrial and ocean life.<sup>1</sup> However, we have managed freshwater systems primarily to provide for human needs, resulting in highly manipulated and degraded aquatic systems. We have dammed and diverted rivers, filled and converted wetlands, eroded shorelines, polluted water, over-harvested freshwater fish and waterfowl, and introduced invasive species.

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<sup>1</sup> Balian, E. V., Segers, H., Lévêque, C., & Martens, K. (2008). The Freshwater Animal Diversity Assessment: An overview of the results. *Hydrobiologia*. Springer Netherlands. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10750-007-9246-3>

The catastrophic declines from these activities are well documented.<sup>2</sup> According to the Ramsar Convention on Wetlands, wetlands are being lost three times faster than forests,<sup>3</sup> with 64% of them lost globally since 1900.<sup>4</sup> Of the world's long river systems, two-thirds have been fragmented, and only about one-quarter continue to flow to the sea, breaking the connectivity that supports ecosystem functions.<sup>5</sup> In only the last fifty years, freshwater vertebrate populations have declined by 84%, which is more than twice the declines observed for either terrestrial or marine species, according to UN - Water.<sup>6</sup> Since 1970, migratory fish species have declined by 75%, and iconic large fish like sturgeon and catfish have declined by 91%.<sup>7</sup> Today, freshwater species are more endangered than life on land or in the sea, with nearly one-third of freshwater fish species facing extinction.<sup>8</sup>

The damage is accelerating. The remaining free-flowing rivers and wetlands are threatened by thousands of dams and development projects that will modify and degrade aquatic systems, as well as the interdependent riparian systems that also support a wealth of terrestrial biodiversity and ecosystem services. These problems are projected to worsen in the face of climate change and continued overexploitation and pollution, further exacerbating poverty, food insecurity, and threats to the health of communities. The disregard for freshwater resources, habitats, and species represents a global failure of society to act on the evidence documenting the grave consequences for human life and planetary health from losing aquatic ecosystems.

The science is clear: a sustainable, healthy, just, and resilient future depends on protecting and restoring our freshwater ecosystems and the ecological and human diversity they support. Conservation and restoration of our global freshwater resources must become a

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<sup>2</sup> Albert, J.S., Destouni, G., Duke-Sylvester, S.M. *et al.* Scientists' warning to humanity on the freshwater biodiversity crisis. *Ambio* **50**, 85–94 (2021). <https://doi.org/10.1007/s13280-020-01318-8>

<sup>3</sup> Global Wetland Outlook: State of the world's wetlands and their services to people, Ramsar Convention on Wetlands. (2018) <https://www.global-wetland-outlook.ramsar.org>

<sup>4</sup> Wetlands: a global disappearing act, Fact Sheet 3.2, Ramsar Convention on Wetlands (no date) [https://www.ramsar.org/sites/default/files/documents/library/factsheet3\\_global\\_disappearing\\_act\\_0.pdf](https://www.ramsar.org/sites/default/files/documents/library/factsheet3_global_disappearing_act_0.pdf)

<sup>5</sup> Grill, G., Lehner, B., Thieme, M., Geenen, B., Tickner, D., Antonelli, F., Babu, S., Borrelli, P., Cheng, L., Crochetiere, H., Ehalt Macedo, H., Filgueiras, R., Goichot, M., Higgins, J., Hogan, Z., Lip, B., McClain, M. E., Meng, J., Mulligan, M., Nilsson, C., Olden, J., Opperman, J., Petry, P., Reidy Liermann, C., Sáenz, L., Salinas-Rodríguez, S., Schelle, P., Schmitt, R., Snider, J., Tan, F., Tockner, K., Valdujo, P., van Soesbergen, A., Zarfl, C. (2019). Mapping the world's free-flowing rivers. *Nature*, 569 (7755), 215–221. <https://doi.org/10.1038/s41586-019-1111-9>

<sup>6</sup> UN-Water input on Freshwater-Biodiversity Linkages: Response to the Zero-Draft Document from the Open-Ended Working Group on the Post-2020 Global Biodiversity Framework. (February 2020) <https://www.unwater.org/publications/un-water-input-on-freshwater-biodiversity-linkages-response-to-the-zero-draft-document-from-the-open-ended-working-group-on-the-post-2020-global-biodiversity-framework/>

<sup>7</sup> Deinet, S., Scott-Gatty, K., Rotton, H., Twardek, W. M., Marconi, V., McRae, L., Baumgartner, L. J., Brink, K., Claussen, J. E., Cooke, S. J., Darwall, W., Eriksson, B. K., Garcia de Leaniz, C., Hogan, Z., Royte, J., Silva, L. G. M., Thieme, M. L., Tickner, D., Waldman, J., Wanningen, H., Weyl, O. L. F., Berkhuisen, A. (2020). The Living Planet Index (LPI) for migratory freshwater fish - Technical Report. World Fish Migration Foundation, The Netherlands. [https://worldfishmigrationfoundation.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/07/LPI\\_report\\_2020.pdf](https://worldfishmigrationfoundation.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/07/LPI_report_2020.pdf)

<sup>8</sup> Hughes, Kathy, (lead author). (2021) "The World's Forgotten Fishes," published by World Wildlife Fund and 15 organizations and alliances.

[https://wwfint.awsassets.panda.org/downloads/world\\_s\\_forgotten\\_fishes\\_report\\_final\\_1.pdf](https://wwfint.awsassets.panda.org/downloads/world_s_forgotten_fishes_report_final_1.pdf)

prominent driver in governance decisions as well as the policies that guide those decisions, while centering the rights, participation, and needs of indigenous and marginalised communities that are disproportionately impacted by environmental and climate injustices. As stated in the CBD's Global Biodiversity Outlook 5, areas of necessary action include: protecting free-flowing rivers and critical habitats, restoring habitat connectivity and ecological water flows, improving water quality, halting over-exploitation of freshwater species, and preventing the spread of invasive species.<sup>9</sup>

In addition to the ample scientific evidence supporting our position, there are viable, practical, and innovative solutions that are proving successful in prioritising watershed health and are ready to scale-up, such as indigenous and traditional knowledge and practices, regenerative agro-ecology, ecological cities, wastewater treatment and water conservation technologies, community-led management and development, and fisheries cooperatives, among many others.

**As the Executive Secretary, Co-Chairs, and delegates to the Fifteenth Conference of the Parties to the Convention on Biological Diversity, we respectfully ask that you ensure that the targets, indicators, and associated monitoring framework that define the objectives of the Post-2020 Global Biodiversity Framework adequately represent the needs of freshwater protection, restoration, and sustainable management to secure freshwater benefits for nature and people. Moreover, we ask that you provide the necessary leadership at international, national, and river-basin levels for implementation of these objectives to explicitly safeguard freshwater ecosystems in perpetuity.**

**Please adopt a Post-2020 Global Biodiversity Framework that incorporates explicit and distinct goals, milestones, action targets, and implementation support mechanisms that equally and appropriately integrate freshwater systems along with marine and terrestrial ones, rather than including them implicitly under plans to protect land. This may include adding inland waters explicitly to the top-line “land and sea” goal. The new Framework must also acknowledge and address the specific and clear threats that contribute to the continued decline of freshwater biodiversity.**

Through your support, based on sound science recognizing the breadth of societal risks and benefits that hinge specifically on protecting freshwater, a new ethic and stronger implementation support mechanisms can be adopted to safeguard freshwater species, habitats, ecosystems and their functions for the well-being of all.

Thank you for your consideration.

*Signed by 573 individual experts from 97 countries who are community and traditional ecological knowledge leaders, freshwater scientists, ecosystem and resource management practitioners, indigenous rights advocates and environmental lawyers, and other thought leaders. Signers are listed in alphabetical order. Institutional affiliations are listed as provided by signers for identification purposes only, and do not imply endorsement of the letter by those institutions.*

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<sup>9</sup> Secretariat of the Convention on Biological Diversity. (2020) *Global Biodiversity Outlook 5*. Montreal. <https://www.cbd.int/gbo/gbo5/publication/gbo-5-en.pdf>

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